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Asian Media Freedom of Information: Freedom from What
And for What

By

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"I am all for a free press - it is the newspapers I can't stand" - Chief Emeka Anyaoku, Commonwealth Secretary-General, quoting a character in Tom Stoppard's play "Night and Day." - 1996

Introduction

This paper discusses the concept of Asian Media Freedom of Information from the Malaysian perspective. Press freedom in Asia is nothing new and even the discussions is not of recent concern. The idea of press freedom has been debated in the past, and because of its importance, the issue will be debated in the coming years. There do not seem to be an answer or an easy solution on media freedom in Southeast Asia or even in Asia.

Press freedom is associated with the country's press system which in turn is affected by the political system. Changes in the political system affects the press system which eventually influences press freedom. But over the years, some countries have made changes by giving more freedom to the press. A notable example is Indonesia which saw the replacement of Soeharto with a new president, Abdurrahman Wahid or Gus Dur. The institution of presidential voting has changed the old system of government in Indonesia. The new political system appears more tolerant on press freedom than the regime before. The new administration among others, dismantled the Department of Information when it came to power. But it is early to say whether the new regime will continue to allow the press to have more freedom than the previous regime over the years to come. Problems facing the country might make the administration to reconsider the freedom that it has given to the press.

Other countries in the region have their share on press freedom but their position has differed little than what was evident from the decade before. India and the Philippines are examples where press freedom prevails in Asia. There is tolerance on press freedom. The philosophy of the governments, the history, and the commitment of political parties and the people contribute to the level of press freedom exercised in the two countries.

There are many factors as there are also various constituents that make up press freedom, such as the press institution itself, the government and the general public and audience. The press as an institution is also made up of several components. It is not only the media per se but also media ownership, the professional editors and reporters with the level of education, the training and the welfare of the journalists themselves. The prestige of journalism may also be a constituent in the press institution.

The government factor has also many dimensions. The laws and regulations, the policy of the government towards the press, and the nature of the political parties towards the notion of press freedom constitute government. The judiciary and legislature are included to understand the pressures they place or their custodial act they exercise on press freedom.

The general public is also an important constituent in the press freedom arena by playing the role as voters, citizens and as audience members of the audience. The values of society would also promote or inhibit press freedom. If people are concerned with
freedom then that itself would be a strong support for the press to exercise its professional role.

In short, press freedom mirrors the freedom in the country or it is used as a vehicle to achieve freedom for the other institutions in society.

Often times, different actors ask varied questions. The non-governmental sector demands more press freedom, saying that the press should be free from governmental or from the systems control, be it covert or overt. Their concern is for alternative views to be made available to members in society. A press that is not free conveys the picture of the media carrying predominantly government or systems views. Alternative view points, interpreted as politically unpalatable to state authorities, risk being ignored by the press.

But the government would ask that the demands for press freedom be tempered with caution. The government that exercises control over the press, would provide its rationale on why press freedom cannot be given, because, it says, the consequences might be disastrous. Its reasoning is that the country needs development and too much press freedom is not too healthy for the wellbeing of society. Malaysian ministers are quoted as saying that the press should not sensationalize their reports as this would jeopardize the country's development and racial harmony. Menteri Besar (Chief Minister) of the state of Selangor was quoted to have told the press that freedom of the press is not a license or weapon to be used indiscriminately to jeopardise the development of the nation. (NST, April 24, 2000).

The systems control as under the capitalist system or an authoritarian system would argue that since they own the media they would act in their own best interests. Hence certain information and news are displayed while others are also ignored. (Herman & Chomsky, 1988; Chomsky, 1989). The owners also may determine what goes in and out and what is to be widely displayed or not.

Two contrasting views permeate discussions on press freedom. On one hand there is demand for press freedom from government control. From the supply side, there is demand that the press should be cautious in carrying out their work. We can rephrase the equation on the press and freedom as: Freedom from what (from the government/systems control) and from the other side is Freedom for what?

Background
It is not often that we do not discuss the idea and concept of freedom and the relevance of freedom to the press. Early writers on international communication would stress press freedom and media presence with the political development of countries. The idea as often stated in the communication books is that media presence and with it press freedom corresponds to political maturity. The higher the presence of media and freedom that is given to the press the higher would be the political maturity in society. Among the early writers who came out with this idea of a correlational media presence and political maturity was Daniel Lerner (1958), who said that the mass media played an important role in society. The mass media could spread literacy, and with that people would be kept aware of current affairs and this would make them politically conscious given the presence of media that would bring to them information on current events. Subsequently, people would be most likely to exercise their rights by voting in the ballot boxes, an act of political maturity (Lerner, 1963). This is indeed an ideal picture on the
The idea on media presence, press freedom and the exercise of voting rights can also be stated in a different way by linking press freedom with democratic institutions. The belief that democracy is tied to a free press system has been echoed often enough in recent years. In his address at the Opening of the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association General Conference, the Commonwealth Secretary General, Chief Emeka Anyaoku (1996) said "... a free press and media is the lifeblood of democracy... involving voters; shaping opinions, floating ideas; probing bureaucracies, telling the unpalatable or the inconvenient, seeking the truth whatever the cost, letting the light in on the darkness. The role of the press is seen to be educating, cajoling, putting a different view across, changing assumptions and bringing in hope..."

The mass media is also said to be an indicator or barometer of modernity. The more people are exposed to the media, the more modern they would be. And one of the characteristics of modern man is his ability to vote. It is thus evident that the early concerns and also the concerns at the present day is that media are correlated with political consciousness.

The early scholars did not see beyond the immediate constraint of a curbed press. They mainly saw the press as operating within the confines blessed by the state authorities. If there were control, they only saw the political control, oblivious to other forms of control which include the legal and the economic controls imposed on the press. The simple picture hides a complex scenario where the press may appear to be free from legal controls but other forms of controls are instituted that make the press, the professional press, unable to perform its functions well. The constituents against press freedom are numerous: censorship, harassment of journalists, banning of the newspapers, economic influence, or where there is a concentration of media in the hands of owners close to state authorities, low professionalism, and even public apathy.

Concept of freedom
What we speak of freedom of the press we would recall the might of the state. It is always a concern of freedom from the state. In cases where the press is state owned, the idea of a free press does not arise. The state owned press is not free from the state, but becomes instead a direct state institution disseminating information to the people on matters and manner that the state deems it relevant. So in the first instance, freedom of the press is relative distance, being distant from state control. The farther the distance of control, the higher would be freedom be for the press. The press would be able to report on matters that might be inimical to mainstream thinking.

Another aspect of press freedom is being free indirectly from state control. We are talking about the party that controls the press. Evidence of this type of control is in the Communist state system where party controls the appointment of the editorial staff and interprets news from the perspective of the Communist ideology. Control by party or through people associated with the party might also be in the form of investments in media organizations. Those with the majority shares would then be able to dictate the
appointments of editors and other senior officials. It is happening in Asia as well as in other Western democracies.

What is the rationale that the press should be free from state control? Why must the press be a special institution in society that should be free? The idea is that the press is the fourth estate in society coming in after the executive, the legislative and the judiciary. The press is supposed to be a watch dog acting on behalf of the people on the three estates, keeping tab so that they would not exceed their power, that they, the press would be able to protect the people against the excesses of the legislative, the executive and the judiciary. It could also be that the three estates would be used to curb press freedom.

One of the early books on the four theories of the press, conceptualizes the relationship of the four institutions in society. Western scholars often stress the relationship between a free press and an open society (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1973). An example of an open society will be Western democracies but in a controlled state, the legislative and the executive prevails over the press.

Besides relative freedom, there is another aspect of freedom. It can be called comparative freedom. There might be an instance where there are two political systems practising two different forms of press systems. Both states may be controlling their press, but one state sees it that the other society is actually controlling the press while its own society is said to be free. The Libertarian System say that under the Communist System the press are being controlled by the party, while the Communist System say that the capitalists are controlling the press under the Libertarian System.

Freedom of the press is a symbol of the freedom of expression in society. If the press is free then members in society would be free to express themselves, to have their own opinion and to exercise their restraining power on the state. The higher the level of press freedom, the higher would be the level of free expression. What is therefore a debate on the freedom of the press is also a debate on the total freedom that exists in the state.

The events over the Soviet Union towards the end of the 20th century was an instance of how the lack of freedom would not be in the best interests of society. The proponents of the Soviet System (the Communist Press System) termed the Libertarian Press System as being "irresponsible" as the unchecked criticism and conflict in the media represent a weakness in the national armour. Proponents of the Libertarian System said that such media discussions are their greatest strength (Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1973 : 146). The downfall of the Soviet Communist system and with it its controlled press has made proponents of the Libertarian Press System to feel that their System is the better alternative. Citizens are better off with alternative views than just to be drummed in with party news and propaganda.

At the heart of the discussion on the freedom of the press is a host of other questions. One is on the issue relating to political expression and at the ability of the citizens to participate in running the affairs of the state. The political expression of the state is the ability and willingness of the citizens to provide openly alternative ideas and also be willing to open other channels to receive alternative viewpoints. Citizens would question the authorities if there is monopoly or near monopoly in the dissemination of information. Is the polity only concerned to allow only the dissemination of politically correct statements and therefore deny the existence of other statements? Is the state
unable to allow for pluralistic viewpoints aimed to make the citizens decide the various options before they make up their minds at the ballot boxes?

When Lerner (1963) said that the media was able to carry modern messages or to make traditional society modern, he did not foresee modernity separate from plurality of viewpoints. Or when Alex Inkeles (1967) talked about the index of modernity and that media would form part of the index, he assumed a media system that would channel diversity of views and not cause the "spiral of silence" among the non-state supporters. Were laws then be introduced aimed to protect the state against the threat of instability that plurality would bring?.

Parts of Asia would be at odd with the others in Asia and also with the Western thinking on the plurality of ideas. The premise of the Western thinking is the free market of ideas. Varying ideas are welcome for discussions because from the discussions among members in society therein would emerge the "truth". Hence media is an important part of the Western philosophy on the emergence of truth. The discussions must be free and uninterrupted to allow for truth to emergence. The premise of the Libertarian Press System is a rational man who is different from the lower animals because of his ability to speak and think.

Western thinking allows for greater tolerance of conflict within and among members of society because of the premise of the rational man. Conflicts are allowed and are welcomed because from this conflicting discussion comes agreement at a later stage. But in the Asian society the emphasis seems to be on consensus. But consensus appears again to be decided. It is the authority who decides what is good for others and others in need for consensus agrees. If they disagree on this consensus model then the model of conflict would be introduced and that would be negative for the Asian model. The Muslim notion of syurah, or building of consensus is through discussions and debate. No one has the mandate to decide except through proper deliberations. Conflicting ideas are welcome as this would emerge some common understanding later. Would the Asian model, supposedly based on consensus perpetuate arguments against press freedom as freedom of the press is associated with discussions and debate that Asians are supposed not to have? Or has this Consensus Model been introduced for weightage against press freedom? The Consensus Model can be the end product, a product that comes after serious debate and discussions rather than it is a means to another end namely a Model of No Discussion.

The Press Institution

The press is a social institution or a business concern or a combination of both. It is seen as a service provider that champions the rights of the people, but it also seen as an entity aimed to maximise profits. In the Asian context, the national press has been with the ordinary people fighting for independence, but it is today seen also as a business organization owned by the rich and the powerful to spread their ideas and also to be financially sound. The perspective is significant when it is related to freedom. Does the press freedom refers to the people's right to know or the right of the powerful and the rich to spread their agenda? (Faruqui and Ramanathan, 1998).

The press institution mirrors the institutions in society. The newspapers in Malaysia printed in various languages reflect the multilingual members in society in
Malay, Indian, Chinese and in English. Programmes on TV and radio are in the various languages. Besides the local programmes, Malaysians also receive programmes from other countries. In fact the majority of programmes on TV are foreign-originated as local programmes are expensive and are difficult to obtain.

The print media has always been in the private hands, but the electronic media, radio and television, have been under governmental control. The Malaysian government has a Ministry of Information that runs two channels, RTM1 and RTM2, and other radio programmes. It was only recent that the government has allowed for the privatization of TV and radio. Under the Privatization Policy, the country has now a private TV channel, TV3 and NTV (or TV7) and a digital TV channel, ASTRO.

The penetration of media is high in Malaysia. Over 90 percent of households have access to television and over 70 percent of adults (over 21 years) read the newspapers everyday or nearly everyday.

There are many characteristics of the print media that are evident in the country. While the electronic media has been mainly under government control since independence (and even before that), the print media has been in private hands from the beginning. Till the present time, Radio Malaysia and TV1 and TV2 are under the direction of the Ministry of Information. It was recently that the government allowed private organizations to run TV3, the country's first DTH ASTRO and, of late, NTV. The implications on the creation of these private TV stations are tremendous for the media industry but for one thing they compete for audience attention with the print media. Sistem Televisyen Malaysia (TV3) for one has expressed its hope to be the biggest media conglomerate, again posing a challenge to the other media organizations in the country in terms of competition.

Malaysia's print and media industry was vigorous and was fast expanding. In recent years, the print media has become highly profitable due to the advertisements collected, and also, for some newspapers, there has been an increase in their circulation. But beginning 1998, the private TV stations and the print media have been hit by the economic downturn. Contract workers were terminated and overtime hours were curtailed. Big plans have been kept on hold.

There are certain characteristics of Malaysian journalism that should be noted:

* Malaysia has one of the earliest practices of journalism in the region; beginning under colonialism to the days of independence till today.

* Malaysian media organizations have developed from being mere producers of newspapers to the selling, distribution and printing of dailies, weeklies and periodicals. Some have become big by venturing into the electronic media. For example Sistem Televisyen Malaysia owns part of the New Straits Times Group is poised to become one of the biggest media conglomerate in the region.

The print media are available in various languages, namely in Malay, Chinese, Indian, and English. While the audience for the newspapers are general, the weeklies and the monthlies and magazines are more focused, either in terms of age groups, the gender, or the interests of the audience. Gila-Gila, a monthly, is for the young, Jelita and Nona,
Her World are for women, while URTV, Roda-Roda are meant for specific interest groups.

The market is fragmented for the magazine audience, but with the increase in the number of newspapers there would soon be factors that would require that newspapers too be meeting the specific interests of its readers as competition hots up.

At present there are 41 dailies (including their Sunday editions) in Malaysia, 17 of which are in the Chinese language, 14 in English, nine in Bahasa Malaysia and three in Tamil. There are 24 dailies that are published and printed in Peninsular Malaysia, 17 are printed in Sabah and Sarawak.

The dailies in Sabah and Sarawak are mainly smaller in circulation than those printed in Peninsular Malaysia because of the smaller market there. Peninsular-printed dailies have been penetrating the Sabah and Sarawak market because of the good printing system. The Peninsular-based dailies such as the New Straits Times, Star, Berita Harian are printed and have found their market in Sabah and Sarawak.

Besides the newspapers that are printed and distributed daily, there are others that are printed weekly, fortnightly or even monthly. There are also newspapers that are political in orientation. Again we can divide them into two types, those that are in control or affiliated to political parties and those that are controlled by individuals but the reports they carry are political. The Harakah and the Berita Sabah are affiliated to political parties to cater for the specific needs of the supporters. Harakah, produced by the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party, (PAS) has a wider circulation than Berita Sabah, but its circulation is mainly limited to Peninsular Malaysia. It is available to non-party members. It reports on activities related to the Pan Malaysian Islamic Party, a party that is much in opposition to the dominant government party, UMNO. PAS is now in control of the state government of Kelantan.

Non-political party controlled (political-oriented) newspapers are Bacaria, Media, Warta K.L, and Bebas. They report on political activities but their analyses of political events lack depth. Their circulation figures shoot up whenever there are controversial political issues, but slide again to their low circulation at other times. With political issues being relatively low in Malaysia, except during by-elections and election times, political newspapers that are not published by political parties have to find their own audience to sell. The weekly issue of MASSA (30,000 circulation) a publication by Utusan Melayu Group, has more in-depth reporting of current issues. Other publications reporting on current issues are Mastika, another publication of the Utusan Melayu Group, and Dewan Masyarakat, from Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka.

The press as an institution is closely allied with the political institution as is in the case of Malaysia and Indonesia. The politicians early fight for independence was supplemented by the support provided for by the journalists. After independence the journalists valued the support of the politicians and likewise the politicians preferred the journalists to be always by their side and not to be stacked against them.

The relationship between the press and the state can take three forms: the adversarial, cordial and the critical. Politicians would like the press to take the cordial role. In this role, the press would provide support and loud cheers to any pronouncements made by politicians, whatever the circumstances of the events. The adversarial role is seldom preferred by the state authorities which do not accept criticisms and critical comments. The role of the press is said only to be interested in
finding fault with the state system. The critical role makes the press to act responsibly, criticising the government and other institutions in society yet offering comments aimed to improve matters in society. The press is manned by a professional outlook.

The rationale for the support of the press towards the politicians and the state have been given by several journalists and scholars in Indonesia and Malaysia. (Krisna Harahap, 1996; Sumono Musatoffa, 1978). Editors saw the government in power as their allies in fighting for independence. This situation was accepted in Malaysia and in Indonesia although this was not accepted in the case of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Where the press in Southern Asia has taken an adversarial and a critical role against the state, the relationship can best be described as cordial in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Political reporting is often times coloured by politically correct arguments of dominant political parties which may be at the expense of alternative viewpoints. The Non-Governmental Organizations criticise the press for being too mild in reporting events which may appear to be negative for the government. Content analyses of media during general elections indicated reports favouring the ruling party over the opposition parties (Idid, 1995). In recent years there has emerged on the Malaysian scene newspapers that have taken an adversarial role. The party newspaper of PAS, Harakah, and independent party, Eksklusif, have been carrying reports that are critical of the ruling party. There has also been one shot publications that have surfaced that are critical of the government.

The present relationship between the government and the press has not been well accepted by the international community who describes the press has being dominated by the government.

On World Press Freedom Day, CPJ announced it was putting Prime Minister Mahathir on its list of the 10 Worst Enemies of the Press in 1999. CPJ cited state's stranglehold on the mainstream media, as well as the government's efforts to stifle the handful of opposition organs that are allowed to publish.

On May 3, World Press Freedom Day, 581 journalists presented an unprecedented petition to Deputy Prime Minister and Home Affairs Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, calling for an end to publishing restrictions. The action by the journalists in representing the petition caught many by surprise. At the heart of it is that the several actions by the government has made readers to question the credibility of the press in providing an objective report of what is happening in society. Members in society see the press as being suppliant because of the recent actions of the governments.

Despite the picture given, one finds it difficult to give a general relationship between the government and the press. Politically oriented press like Harakah, Detik, Tammadun, and even Eksklusif can be termed having an adversarial role with the government but many more publications still maintain a cordial relationship with the government. But recent events have shown that there have more publications that have surfaced that are openly critical of the government.

Laws and Regulations
Every country has laws and regulations that affect directly or indirectly the operations of the press. In Malaysia, scholars, the press, politicians, non-governmental organizations and the legal practitioners have their own views on the effects the presence of these laws have on the press. (Awad, 1999). Some are of the opinion that laws and regulations do
not inhibit the press from carrying out its work responsibly while others say that the mere presence of certain laws and regulations have placed reporters and editors in an uncertain position to carry out their work.

Faruqui and Ramanathan (1998) view the media laws in Malaysia from two perspectives. They say that media laws can be seen either to regulate access to information or that they can be seen to impose restraints on publication of information. See from either perspective, the public would not have freely the information.

Examples of laws affecting directly the operations of the press are the Printing Presses and Publications Act which requires owners of the press to obtain a permit to print. They must renew the permit yearly. Even then the Minister of Home Affairs can cancel permit without assigning any reason thereof or he impose conditions even if a permit was given. On 21 March, 2000, Detik, a popular magazine, but critical of the government could not continue to be published when the Minister of Home Affairs did not give permission for the owners to have a licence to do so. The Ministry of Home Affairs informed the owner that permission to a permit was not given. Recently Eksklusif issued a press statement that it has yet to receive permission to continue publication.

The Ministry of Home Affairs has also reduced the frequency of Harakah, the official newspaper for the opposition party, PAS (Islamic Party of Malaysia). Previously it was allowed to print twice a week, but beginning from March its frequency was reduced to twice a month.

Political parties have sought permission to have a daily newspaper. One such party is KeAdilan (The Justice Party). Given by past experience it is quite doubtful whether it is in line with the government's policy to provide licenses to political parties to have their own daily newspapers.

Besides laws that directly affect the press, there are also laws that indirectly affect the press such as the Official Secrets Act that makes anyone who prints or distributes substance that are considered as official secrets to be guilty of the offence. There is also the Sedition Act which states that any act, speech, words or publication are seditious if they have a *seditious tendency.* Among others, promoting ill-will and hostility between races, to create disaffection against any Ruler or government, constitute seditious tendency. Other laws are related to advertisements, films and the electronic media, cyber laws and copyright (Faruqui & Ramanathan, 1998).

The presence of laws mean two things. On one side, these laws are said to curb freedom of the press. The proponents say that laws curtail free expression and make editors and journalists cautious on what they should and should not write. And they are not able to expose government wrong doings because of the imposition of the Official Secrets Act. The requirement that owners need to have a license to operate make them even more cautious that journalists should not exceed their boundary of not offending the government of the day.

The proponents of the laws, especially the supporters of the party in power, would argue that press freedom is protected with the presence of the laws and regulations. Individuals are protected from the unwarranted reports of the press. The laws would give guidelines on what could and could not be written.

Recently several people were charged with committing offences under the Official Secrets Act and the Printing Presses Act. The printer of Harakah, the official
opposition party newspaper, was charged. One can interpret the action in several ways. The opposition say that their right to provide information has been denied by the act of the government. They have limited channel to provide information about their own party and their criticisms of the government to party supporters and the general public. To them the party in power has more resources and could obtain access through the mainstream newspapers, and the electronic media. To the government, the owners have infringed certain provisions in the law and thus action should be taken against them.

Action taken against the press include that against foreign press too. In recent years, the government has banned the publication of newspapers like the Star, or Watan. In 1986 the government banned the circulation of the Asian Wall Street Journal and the two AWSJ correspondents were expelled from Kuala Lumpur.

Besides the formal legalities, state authorities could also request editors not to play up certain issues that would be classified as "sensitive" or would cause racial hatred. In his press release, the Editor of Eksklusif admitted that he had been advised not to play up certain issues during the period of publication and he has tried his best to heed the advice. Extra-legal directives are taken seriously by media operators because it might have some bearing when the yearly license renewal is processed.

**Media credibility**

Press freedom has also to do with credibility of the press. In order to be credible, the audience or the public wants the press to be, among others:

- to be critical of the authorities
- to be the watchdog of society
- to investigate wrong doings
- to provide balanced reporting of current affairs.
- Be truthful, objective and balanced.

In carrying out this performance, the press is faced with multitudes of problems. In the Asian context, the prestige of journalists is not high. They are seen to be doing work for the benefit of others. The low prestige accorded to journalists is also recorded in other countries. Low prestige of journalists in society conveys many implications. First the occupation will not be able to attract the best and talented people to be in journalism, second if they do join, they will not remain long. Journalism will see a large turnover of staff as serving journalists search for other attractive jobs elsewhere. The long working hours and sometimes the low salaries and facilities among small media organizations will not make journalism a respected occupation compared to the other occupations.

Let us look at other findings about journalism before we can really understand what the thinking and feeling of the people towards the press in society. We conducted a public opinion in January 2000 to find out what people think about the press in Malaysia. A total of 621 people were interviewed in Peninsular Malaysia. We asked what they would think if there was a difference in the report between a mainstream newspaper and the party newspaper, Harakah.

It was found that more people would be likely believe the report in the mainstream newspaper rather than in Harakah.
Table 1: Believe in Media Despite Difference in Report in percentage

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<td>Believe Mainstream</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe Harakah</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Believe neither</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>20%</td>
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N=599

We can interpret the data in Table 1 in different ways. One way is to say that if there were differences in the way the mainstream newspapers and Harakah were to report, many readers would believe the mainstream newspapers. Those believing in the mainstream media would be 29 percent Malays, 22 percent Chinese, and 10 of the Indians placed their belief in the mainstream newspapers. We would also say that 22 percent Malays, 13 percent Chinese, and 5 percent Indians would not believe the mainstream newspapers as they would believe Harakah or would not believe it (and Harakah) as well.

This does not mean that Harakah is not popular as during the election period its circulation shot up to over 350,000 per issue compared to the highest daily circulation, the Star, that saw its daily circulation being up to only 150,000 per day. A study conducted for the Star in October 1999 and in January 2000, found that people used the mainstream media to gain political news but would refer to Harakah for additional information. This suggests that readers want to consider all view points. The fact that people buy and read newspapers do not always mean that they place their full trust on the report contained in the newspapers. The audience would be critical enough to weigh and consider all the facts.

But believe in the media has also its peculiar slant. In the United States where the press is free, where editors can easily criticize their government, the audience still have a low opinion about the press. Their trust in the press is low. So it is quite ironic that where the press is critical, there is low belief in the media but where the press is little free than the United States the people believe the media more than that in Malaysia.

Audience

The lack of press freedom can be seen in so many dimensions. These views come from practising journalists, former editors, from the legal circles, academicians, politicians, and students. No one seems happy with the press and its role in society. If the press is critical its reporting is branded as sensational, if it reports straight it is seen to be timid and is condemned for lacking the capacity for investigative reporting.

The missing equation when discussing press freedom is the audience. Many have made references on the control by the state authorities, the systems itself. The issue against such controls has been taken by non-governmental organizations and concerned academicians, but seldom has the audience or the people or the journalists been brought into the picture. In total sum, the audience is of utmost importance. In one of the internet conversations, MG Pillay, a veteran journalist, questioned one citizen who was asking the press to be critical and to be free. Pillay asked him whether he would be prepared to
say in the open matters that are critical of the government so that the press can report them by quoting him. The citizen was not able to do so.

In preserving press freedom it is the citizens duty to demand that the state should give the press the freedom. It is not the freedom that is demanded by the press as much as it is of the whole community. In the Philippines (during the Marcos era) and in India (during Indira emergency rule), press freedom became a highly debated issue during the campaigns and one of the factors that brought down the two governments. In Malaysia, the opposition parties place press freedom in their manifestos, but during political rallies, press freedom is not highlighted compared to other domestic issues. In the recent general elections in Malaysia, press freedom was not a high issue on the list of concern among voters, nor was it highlight during election campaigns among the political parties. Unless press freedom finds itself in the hearts and minds of the audience or with the general public, the idea that the press should be free will not move very far.

Relevance of Press Freedom in the present millennium

Will the questions asked on press freedom in the last millennium be the same as in the present millennium? This is the challenge that the press will face in the present century. Will there be changes in the political system among Asian countries. Will Asian governments be more confident that they can tolerate dissent? Will there allow more discussions and differences in opinion? Will there be new voters who would determine that the system of government they get is more sensitive to alternative view points? Although the views of Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1973) may be outdated, yet their idea that political systems have much to influence the press system is a guideline for discussion. We have seen this happen in Indonesia. We have also noted this in other parts of the world where politically tolerant governments are instituted by the electorates which in turn allowed for more press freedom than before.

The presence of new Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) in society today may offer competition to the press institution as a provider of information. Authorities are concerned if the press can influence the people. If the press is assumed to be powerful enough to influence people's perception, opinion and behaviour then the authorities would prefer to have a control in the way that the press operates. The idea is to make the press present views that place the authorities in a positive light. But what happens when there are alternative channels that can provide diverse view points which the authorities may not be able to control or influence? The power of the press as an institution providing information is therefore diminished when there are alternative channels. In the present millennium, a new dimension has risen in the dissemination of news and information when the might of the press is being challenged by other forms of information providers.

There is another media that is posing a challenge to the print and the electronic media, namely the internet media. In Malaysia, Harakah has gone on-line, thus allowing readers access to its entire content via the website, the first for a newspaper in Malaysia. Another website, the Malaysiankini.Com is also popular with the audience hitting 50,000 per day on its current coverage on events that are not always covered by the traditional media. Malaysiankini.Com also contains comments on events happening in the
country and allows replies from the audience. In the coming years it is envisaged that
more on-line and other websites will surface to provide Malaysians with other view
points that are not covered by the traditional media. The government is not able to
persecute or control contents displayed on the internet. If the media on the internet has a
bigger audience than the audience in the traditional media, then government control of
the traditional media does not make much sense. Sooner or later the authorities will learn
that controlling the print and the electronic media does not serve the purpose as other
alternative channels can provide the diverse and alternative views. But one should not
estimate the strategy of the Systems Control as they are able to control the alternative
media as well.

Sorting out of roles are being played out now. Reporters for the Malaysiakini.com
are not being accredited as reporters by the Ministry of Information and are thus not
invited to official functions. Ministry officials say they do not operate within the license
given under the Print and Presses Act and therefore do not legally operate any
publication. Hence they are not classified as reporters. In the near future with more
websites, the accreditation process will have to be evaluated. It is conceivable that the
government and opposition parties will communicate more with their constituents via the
net rather than through the traditional media in the future.

The growth of public opinion is another factor to recognize. Many countries have
seen the development of public opinion polling that measure the current thinking and
reflections of the population. In the new millennium public opinion polling or through
other mechanisms with different labels, may pose a challenge to the report that is
contained in the media. If media are controlled by the authorities and they report a certain
slant, but public opinion polls provide a different picture, then the public would be given
another alternative source of information for them to consider.

The controlling authorities have realized that there is an emotional bond that binds
the press and the people. The emotional bond is given many names, but it is best called
"credibility." Credibility is an interpretation given by the people. The press achieves
great credibility when it is perceived to be reporting objectively, balanced and truthfully.
In reporting political and sensitive news, the audience would prefer to have reports that
are balanced. Credibility of the reports and/or the press makes people believe in the press.
This is the emotional bond linking the audience and the press. Take away the credibility
and there is nothing that the press can stand on. Authorities risk taking away that element
called credibility if they continue to impose restrictions, in whatever forms, legal or
otherwise, that may deprive the press of its ability to report in a professional way. This is
the reason why 951 journalists saw it in their best interests to petition the Home Affairs
Minister to reconsider the provisions of the Print and Presses Act so as to reassure the
public on media credibility. Journalists are urging for the setting up of the Malaysian
Press Council that would protect the interests of journalism in the country. With the
formation of a Press Council certain matters can be referred to it rather than be referred
to the government or court. It will also allow for more self-regulation and less say by the
government.

We are coming to another dimension namely that of the professional nature of
reporting. Reporting has developed in Malaysia. More graduates are entering the field
than before and will be making journalism a career. To develop further, the media
organizations must be able to compete with other institutions by offering better facilities
and competitive pay to the journalists. A new corps of professional journalists are expected to emerge. The old ways of reporting will have to make way to a new style catering for a new scenario that people can easily obtain news or information from other sources, where credibility of the media must be fought and won where the general public is more critical and sceptical on whatever reports that are presented. If newspapers were to be more professional than reporting would follow the dictates of professionalism, a kind of style emphasizing on objectivity and balance that would gain the attention and respect of the audience.

The professional growth of journalism in the country may make professional associations vigilant in safeguarding press freedom. Professionalism offers a strong barrier against intrusion by the legislative and the executive in the exercise of professional duties. Press freedom is a concern for professional journalists. The journalists may be asked to be in the forefront in fighting for their legitimate rights to write in a professional manner.

There is yet another concern that journalists must also take note, given the changing values occurring among members in society. As much as journalists want freedom to perform their duties, there is also another concern among the general public, namely the demand for individual privacy from the press. The general public would want personal freedom to be protected from the journalists. In the years to come, separating personal and public personalities in reporting will be an issue to contend with. Questions will arise like: can journalists cover the prime minister/president when he is on leave? Can the press report on purely domestic issue? Can an individual has his freedom protected from the press if he/she does not want the press to report on purely a civil and domestic issue? In this case individuals want to protect their freedom from the press. Freedom for what? Freedom from public intrusion would be their answer.

We are back to the discussion on press freedom. What is it for and from what. Press freedom is the website for societal discussion. It is where citizens and the government have access to understand one another. The has much to offer information and to receive information. In the new millennium, the government cannot treat the press as a feedback mechanism only when other media forms are emerging that is allowing for diversity of coverage and reporting of events. The control by the authorities on the traditional media may result in the media losing its credibility. Credibility is the emotional link with the audience. Taking away credibility from the media means taking away believe and trust from the media. It is like taking away dignity from the people. Freedom means exercising a level of professionalism, and freedom to offer diversity of views. But freedom is never absolute. Press freedom should not end in the destruction of society. It is freedom based on an understanding between the government, the audience, and the press as equal partners made in the best interests of all. Press freedom is for the well being of society.
References


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