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Philosophical And Theoretical Perspectives
On The Role Of Newspapers In Society

By

Sharifah Mariam Ghazali
PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES ON THE ROLE OF NEWSPAPERS IN SOCIETY.

By Sharifah Mariam Ghazali, principal lecturer, School of Mass Communication, Institut Teknologi Mara, Malaysia.

The dissemination of knowledge through writing, history tells us, must have begun around the year 3500 B.C. when the Egyptians developed hieroglyphics, then papyrus, then introduced the first book to the world. For a long time, in medieval Europe, learning and books were the province and privilege of the church and the monasteries had a monopoly on literacy. The few books which were available were painstakingly hand-copied for the education of those who wished to join the clergy. The year 1450 marked the most significant development when writing became print thus heralding in the era of the mass media. This was the year when Gutenberg of Mainz Germany introduced moveable type to Europe.

Although the first publication to have come out of this press was the bible, the need of the rapidly growing commercial class was for news -- regarding shipping, financial transactions and political events which might affect business. Governments began to publish pamphlets and weekly newsletters. Later, newspapers were produced mostly by private printers operating under the tutelage of the government in power, which kept a close watch over the press through licensing, prior censorship and patronage. The early press system was characterised by authoritarianism. By the mid-17th century the power of the monarchy slowly waned and
parliament became more vociferous for greater freedom of the press. The belief in the ability of man to reason things for himself was very lucidly and poignantly expressed by poet John Milton who called for "liberty to know, to utter and to argue freely according to conscience". For him this is the most fundamental of all liberties, for in a free marketplace of ideas, truth will triumph over falsehood, says he in his "Areopagitica". But libertarianism was soon to show the worst side of itself when the tradition gave way to muckraking and sensationalism in an effort to beat the competitor. And so it was inevitable that there would be growing demands to curb the excesses of the press. Notable in this development was the Hutchins Commission which in 1947 published its Report on a Free and Responsible Press, maintaining that the press ought to exhibit a sense of responsibility and that if it was not able to do so, then the government may be forced to make them meet these obligations.

The brief introduction to the development of the press was described not only to provide a historical perspective but also to show the evolution of press systems from the early authoritarian form, to a developing stage with rampant libertarian practices to a more mature or developed stage, which is the social responsibility type, within a political and economic context with its attendant philosophical and theoretical perspectives.

In this paper, I propose to discuss some relevant philosophical concepts in relation to journalism, followed by press theories born out of such concepts. The paper ends with a
discussion of some basic issues which plague the journalistic profession and are a constant bone of contention between the press and the government.

PHILOSOPHICAL PERSPECTIVES

Philosophy put simply is the science of science. It is knowledge about the ultimate nature of the universe. It is also the method under which such knowledge is to be found.

Any discussion which relates to philosophic thinking cannot avoid a discussion of the great philosophers who have influenced the thinking on the nature of man, of knowledge and truth and of God. The early Greek philosophers looked for an explanation of life and creation through observation, analysis and deduction. Through the use of Reason, they would critically analyse the phenomenon to be studied. Among the great thinkers, names such as Socrates and his disciple Plato ring prominent. It is believed that the philosophical base for authoritarianism which advocates that the state should be ruled by a few wise men, an aristocracy of the best, was created by Plato. He believed that the state was everything and man without the state was nothing. Thus, anything and everything which furthered the interest of the state was good and moral. Translated in terms of the world of the media, this meant that the mass media must do all it can to strengthen the power elite who know what is best for the masses. They must do everything to promote national stability and national aspirations and social harmony. The media should only reveal things that the power elite feel that the masses should
know for to allow freedom of speech is to assist in the propagation of error. The ruling minority have a right to suppress rival and harmful opinions for they are the purveyors of the truth. Others who share similar philosophical stands are Hegel, Marx, Trotsky, Sartre, Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Hitler.

The basis for libertarian thinking were originated by men like John Milton and John Locke, John Stuart Mill, Thoreau, Voltaire, John Adams, Edmund Burke, and Thomas Jefferson. Basically they believed that all men have an innate capacity to think and therefore all kinds of information should be made available to them. When ideas are allowed to flow in a free marketplace of ideas, there will be a natural self-righting process and truth will prevail. These then are the basic tenets in a democracy in which the role of the media is to provide sufficient information on which citizens may base their decisions.

A line of philosophy which grew up during the medieval period was one which attempted to unite reason and religion and where Reason and the Revelation came into conflict, the Revelation took precedence. Much of this trend of philosophy which later on became incorporated as scholasticism was attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas. Many Christian, Jewish and Arabic scholars also subjugated philosophy to religion.

Modern philosophy began with the beginning of the Renaissance or the Age of Enlightenment with names like Bacon, Hobbes, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. In England the philosophical tradition was one of empiricism which based truth on observed facts of experience, sense perceptions and impressions. In Europe, philosophers like Descartes, Spinoza and Leibniz and later on
Kant developed a tradition based on Rationalism i.e. that truth may be deduced from first principles and through logical analysis. The post-Kantian period saw a development towards Idealism which postulated that reality was more in thought rather than in any material form.

The most recent trend in modern philosophy was the rise of a new kind of thinking called Logical Positivism, which was initiated by the Vienna Circle around 1924. Proponents of this concept believe that the structure of language and the meanings of words affect the validity of philosophical concepts. Wittgenstein argues that all that philosophy can do is to test whether statements are valid in terms of their factual content and whether they can be verified in terms of experience.

In terms of scope philosophy deals with subjects like (a) logic or the principles of sound reasoning, (b) the scientific method and the nature of causation, (c) ethics or examination of standards of right and wrong, moral obligation and duty (d) social philosophy or the examination of the social purposes and values of institutions (e) political philosophy examines the meaning of various political ideologies (f) aesthetics examines the concept of beauty in things, the human spirit and in the scheme of things (f) metaphysics deals with theories about the universe, the meaning of life, the ultimate purpose of creation. It probes on questions regarding reality or what really exists (ontology) and the nature of truth or knowledge (epistemology).

Knowledge of philosophy helps us to understand the nature & constraints of press systems and journalists within certain political and social contexts.
THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Theory put simply is a set of propositions purported to explain some aspect of human or institutional behaviour. Communication theories for example try to explain a wide array of behaviour from intra-personal individual-level behaviour to small-group, community level, organizational level, national level, to international level types of communication behaviour.

The difference between philosophical and theoretical perspectives is that the philosophy establishes the premises or the principles underlying the the theories being postulated. Thus we have a number of press theories all of which stem from broader philosophical concepts and beliefs about the nature of man, the nature of the state, the nature of truth and reality, the concept of right and wrong and so on.

Recalling our discussion of the basic philosophical traditions which have developed over the years, four major theories of the press have evolved as illuminated by Fred Siebert Theodore Peterson and Wilbur Schramm in the Four Theories of the Press.

According to the authors, press systems fall into four types: (a) authoritarian (b) libertarian (c)communist (d) social responsibility. Each of the four theories have different concepts regarding the nature of man and the state, the nature of truth and therefore the press.

Under the authoritarian system, the state is the highest expression of institutionalised life and man can reach his full
potential only through the state. Since the state is ruled by a small power group who is the best judge of what is for the public good, truth is therefore what the power elite regards as good. Thus the press system has to be controlled through licensing, prior censorship and other modes of control so that it may function as educators and propagandists for the state.

The libertarian theory originated with the concept that placed a basic trust in man as a rational being, capable of making intelligent decisions on his own without guidance from those in authority. Since truth is derived from a pluralism in voices, the press must be free to operate unfettered by any form of external control.

The communist theory which grew out of the ideas of Marx and Hegel maintains that the socialist state and the communist system must be perpetuated for the good of the people. Since the masses are regarded as too fickle and too ignorant to make decisions on their own, they must be guided by the state. Thus the role of the media is to serve as the information arm of government and its job is to educate the masses on the communist ideology and the virtues of the socialist state.

The social responsibility theory which was a product of the Hutchins Commission of 1947 held that the press has a responsibility to society. Implicit in the recommendations of the Commission is the hypothesis that freedom of the press has to be curtailed if it is to serve the public good and that moral and ethical considerations are paramount in responsible journalism. It
went further to stress that if the press is unable to regulate itself then it must accept regulation by external bodies.

Questions have been raised whether or not the social responsibility theory can be regarded as a theory on its own since all the other theories see their own concepts of press performance as being socially responsible.

The typology further does not take into consideration modified press systems which may not fall into any of the four systems thus classified. The third world countries feel that the development system of the press is a valid press theory based on the premise that the qualitative development of a nation will not be possible without the total participation of its citizens. The role of the media is therefore to act as catalyst or agent for change.

Further developments in developing press theories appropriate to the Asian situation were achieved when AMIC in cooperation with the East West Centre and the World Association for Christian Communication organized a seminar which focussed attention on an Asian perspective on communication theory. Papers on the Chinese perpective, the Indian perspective, the Buddhist viewpoint and the Islamization of Communication theory established that there is a clear need, as stated by Wimal Dissanayake, "to pay more attention to concepts of communication formulated by non-western societies as well."
The Journalist and his Role

The foregoing discussion has delved at length into the nature of press systems within larger political systems. The role of the newspaper is clearly seen as being contingent upon the political system under which it exists. If the system of government is one that is characterised by liberalism and democracy, then the newspaper system is likely to exhibit characteristics of autonomy and libertarianism. Conversely, a closed authoritarian or autocratic system tends to reflect a tendency towards the imposition of controls, regulation and censorship to ensure that "the public interest" is served.

(a) Of Reality and Objectivity

As a media system, newspapers are characterised by their own structure, rules of conduct, norms and values. The journalist must function within this social system, fulfilling the job functions for which he has been hired, observing the necessary reportorial hierarchy as well as the appropriate patterns of behaviour and values which are upheld by the organization. He is a member of a team with its own work ethics and its own values. At the same time he has an allegiance to his profession and what it stands for.

To the audience that looks to newspapers to provide the most current information on the events and issues of the day, the journalist is their gateway to the reality that is beyond their physical perceptual dimensions. The philosophical question is "What is the nature of the REALITY that is painted for the reading public? Is the picture of reality representative of the
real world outside?

Even journalists would agree that journalists too are constrained by their visual, auditory and other physical limitations. Their perception of events are also likely to be coloured by their own allegiance to ideologies, group norms or other systems of beliefs, which in turn would affect their choice of news sources, slant of stories, and selection of content out of all the available facts in hand. Then again, he has to consider the political, social, and personal consequence of the way he has handled the story. All these factors will eventually determine the kind of reality which the newspapers have presented for the audience, a reality which is nothing more than an image that is in the minds of the men who write the stories and their superiors on whose decisions the final product depends.

Advanced societies, it has been asserted, want the news media to report events objectively. Objectivity it seems is the cornerstone of sound and responsible journalism. By the same arguments, can journalism be said to be objective in the sense of being factual, detached and empirically verifiable? The answer seems to be that given the nature of the journalist as a human being, screening and selecting the perceptual stimuli confronting him, given his own needs and aspirations, his personality structure, the type of newspaper organization he belongs to, his group allegiances, and the gatekeeping processes within the newspaper organization, objectivity is just a word full of sound and fury signifying nothing.

Newspapermen claim that all news is objective, meaning that
it is free of bias, of personal perspectives and other influences, the implication being that all facts gathered are in fact "infallible". Can this be so? How detached can the journalist himself be? Does he not have conscious choices to make in the sources he wants to interview, in the selection of facts, in the order and arrangement of facts. Even if it were possible for him to control for objectivity at the personal level, can he ensure that the same kind of objectivity operates at subsequent stages of the story's progress towards the printing machines? Editorial policies dictate what stories will be played up, which will be played down and which ones will be spiked. On these decisions will depend what stories will go on the front page and which will be hidden in the most inconspicuous corners of the inside pages, if at all; which stories will have banner headlines and large illustrations and which will disappear into single-column oblivion. No matter how profound and loud is the claim for objectivity and despite the protestations that news is always separated from views and is thereby free from bias, the epistemological foundations of such a concept ought to be seriously analysed.

(b) Responsibility and the Public Interest

Yet another issue is one that revolves around the notion of the public interest or the issue of the people's right to know. Both the government and the media believe that they are serving the public interest. The press believes that the investigative stories they write, the probes they make, the exposes they reveal are their response to the people's right to know and in that
sense, they are serving the public interest.

Public interest is differently defined by government. More often it has to do with the maintainence of the status quo and the government in power. Any kind of reportage which has the tendency to or the probability of causing instability to the status quo may be regarded as against the public interest and therefore irresponsible.

When the outcome of such noble sounding creeds as "responsibility" and "public interest" is so differently defined and interpreted by government and the press, the public must indeed be very confused. To the media, for as long as the public needs all the information for decision-making, to that extent must they persevere to get a plurality of views that will serve this need.

We now return to the word "responsibility". The press in many countries including in these parts are often admonished for being irresponsible, for distortion of facts, exaggeration and for trying to reap a bundle of profits for cheap sensationalism.

When a presidential candidate's indiscretions are exposed sufficient to cause him to withdraw the presidential race, was the press responsible? To my mind, there can never be a definitive answer to this question because the fact of coverage was right. A person who aspires to be the leader of a nation has in fact to be above such indiscretions. What is perhaps irresponsible is the way that it was done. There is such a thing as ethics and human decency and by ignoring this in the pursuit
of a sensational story, the press has put a big question mark on its concept of responsibility.

(c) Pluralism in Media

So we come to the notion of pluralism. Does pluralism lead to a better informed society? Not necessarily because more newspapers in the market does not entail a wider array of voices. The reality in the first world countries as well as here in our parts, is that while new media companies are established, they are soon wiped up by the competition from the more established media which continues to gain strength through the expansion of their current activities and in some cases, the acquisition of the more powerful competitors. The end result is not greater plurality of views but a strain towards consensus in the events that are covered, the way they are covered and interpreted for the consuming public. Says Dennis Brown (1967), "There is an increasing paucity of intellectual wares hawked by a diminishing number of vendors."

(d) Journalism and Ethics

How many times have we heard of journalists who plunge headlong into a story without a reflection of consequence? The unfortunate tale of a journalist fabricating a story in order to win a coveted journalism award; a journalist so desensitised to another's personal tragedy, to have the heart to chase after an interview at the moment of despair; a journalist in complete disregard for a person's privacy and self-respect, and hoaxes just to boost newspaper circulation. To be sure that there are
not everyday incidents, but the very fact that they exist point to a sickness and a failure to live by a strong philosophy.

All religions enjoin upon us to do good and to avoid evil, to respect truth and to despise lies, to be kind and charitable, not mercenary and cruel, to pursue a livelihood that is "halal". In the final analysis man’s final responsibility is to God. The conscious choice to obey the voice of conscience will ultimately be the most binding code of ethics, for stronger than any that could be imposed by any external body.

The issues that have been discussed are by no means exhaustive but they do point to the fact that roles and responsibilities of newspapers differ according to the nature of the society, the political and cultural system that it is placed in. Much of the way that we interpret and judge media performance depends largely on our own philosophical and theoretical perspectives. As people of the media we should always be aware of the philosophical and theoretical perspectives of the larger political and social system that we are in. At the same time we should examine our own perspectives, develop and build upon a strong philosophical foundation so that the profession of journalism will remain the noble, guilt-free and fulfilling vocation that it is meant to be.