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Journalism, National Development and Social Justice in Malaysia

Commentary

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> “A factor built into the journalistic fraternity is the hierarchical nature of Malaysian society where there is so much respect and deference given to political leaders by Malaysians, particularly journalists, that they inadvertently abandon the responsibility of asking the hard questions for the benefit of their readers. This explains why veteran journalists were ‘*takut-takut*’ (‘afraid’ in the Malay language) to ask questions when they faced the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed. It is therefore not an exaggeration to suggest that at times media conferences organized by the former prime minister and other cabinet ministers were often transformed into a ministerial lecture with very few searching questions, if at all.”

Journalism as a field of study and profession in Malaysia still commands a substantial following among university students for various reasons, among which are a passion for writing, an interest in politics, a stepping stone to public relations, and, as if not to be outdone, the opportunity to rub shoulders with the powerful and the glamorous.

From the government's viewpoint, journalism courses offered at the university level should be geared towards promoting the state's policies for 'national development'. Put another way, this implies that journalism in Malaysia ought to be taught and practised with the government's socio-economic development objectives in mind. Such an approach to journalism runs parallel with the view of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed that journalism 'should be constructive, consensual and development-oriented' (Loo, www.rthk.org.hk/mediadigest/md9810/oct_05.html).

The government's perception of journalism as one of the state's apparatus dates back to the 1960s. The Malaysian media were, and still are, perceived as vital agents of social change and national development – or "modernization" as conceptualised by political communication scientists in the United States such as Wilbur Schramm and Daniel Lerner in the 60s. They propelled the notion that the mass media were an important tool to stimulate people in developing countries to change their attitudes and traditions, which were perceived to hinder socio-economic progress. The people of the developing world were therefore encouraged to emulate, nay empathise, with the economic ethos and lifestyle of the industrialised West.

Such was the importance accorded to the mass media, and by extension journalists, that most leaders of the newly independent countries justified their control of the media - via a combination of ambiguous media regulations, political patronage, threats of defamation suits - in the name of socio-economic development and political stability. In addition, the perceived power of the media to influence the public conscience provided Malaysian political leaders with grounds to regulate the media – the common one being if the media fell into 'the wrong hands' they could tear a nation apart, especially one that is multiethnic and multicultural. In reality, though, what this means is that the ruling elite would periodically monitor and exert control of the mainstream mass media to ensure that their vested interests can be served by the media particularly during political crises. For instance, following the massive political clampdown of October 27, 1987 when more than 100 prominent leaders and activists were detained, the Mahathir government banned three newspapers: English-language daily *The Star*, Chinese-language daily *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, and Malay-language biweekly *Watan* (Means, 1991: 213). It was widely believed that the ban was executed because these newspapers had exercised some degree of 'journalistic independence' in questioning the detention, a media move considered to be an affront to the government.

A recent example of state interference in the affairs of the media industry is one that involves the sudden 'resignation' of two top editors of the Chinese-language *China Press*. This occurred soon after the Ministry of Internal Security, which is responsible for the issuance, revocation or suspension of publishing permits, demanded a show-cause letter from the daily. Earlier, the daily's evening edition was the first to run a story about an incident where a woman, whom *China Press* identified as a Chinese national, was made to do the so-called 'ear squat' in the nude by a policewoman while she was under policy custody. As it turned out, the woman was identified

by a commission of inquiry as an ethnic Malay. This misreporting had earned the daily the wrath of the powerful Ministry of Internal Security that had threatened to suspend at least temporarily the daily's evening edition. It appeared that some bargaining was struck between the ministry and the newspaper, and the two editors were subsequently made sacrificial lambs while the daily was let off the hook after publishing a public apology on its front page for having committed the 'cardinal sin' of misrepresentation. The government insisted that such misreporting 'had affected national interest', which, in this case, meant that tourism from China was adversely affected. There was also a diplomatic flap between Malaysia and China at the initial stage of the controversy (*Malaysiakini*, Jan. 5, 6, and 7, 2006).

Controls are administered in various ways. The common ones are practised via the ownership structure, security-related laws, annual licensing and the nurtured culture of fear of political instability (Zaharom & Mustafa, 1998: 9-17; Mustafa, 2000: 97-114; Loh & Mustafa, 1996: 96-131). Equally important is the politics of developmentalism that took roots in the country particularly in the early 1990s when Malaysia experienced double-digit growth rates. This is to say that the national emphasis on socio-economic development imperatives often precludes the equally crucial need to promote important issues of social justice and participatory democracy (Loh, 2002: 21).

It is generally assumed that the primary function of the mass media in Malaysia is to help the government impart information and disseminate its policies for the betterment of the population in general. This functionalist perspective is problematic as it assumes that the media, like any other social institutions, play their respective roles and also compete with each other on an equal footing without any one of them pre-dominating. The unequal power relations in most societies doesn't square with this simplistic assertion or expectation.

The amicable, if not compromising, relationship between the Malaysian media and the state is couched under the blanketed concept of 'development journalism', which took roots in other developing countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia in the 70s (Lent 1979). Jakob Oetama (1989:144) founder and publisher of Indonesia's highest circulated daily, *Kompas,* points out that development journalism involves the reporting of both the successes and failures of government projects. The reporting of failed projects, for instance, is to help the state and the people concerned reassess the realities so that the same mistake does not recur and unnecessary wastage of public funds averted.

Over the years, however, this normative concept of development journalism has been corrupted to serve the interests of the ruling elites, thereby giving rise to news reports that only present a glowing picture of the state, while steering clear of in-depth analysis of failed government projects or public corruption.

Teaching Journalism, Building Nation

The traditionalist's view on mass media's role in Malaysia informs not only the management of the mainstream media but also the way journalism curriculum is designed in public institutions of higher learning. Formal journalism education (and communication studies) at the tertiary level in Malaysia began in the wake of the

1969 ethnic riots. The consequent New Economic Policy of 1970, which had a two-pronged strategy to (a) eradicate poverty irrespective of ethnicity; and (b) restructure society so that ethnic division of labour is reduced if not eliminated, emphasised on socio-economic development as a means to achieving better ethnic relations and national integration. The media were identified as a vital instrument in this grand scheme of a restructured social economy.

Hence, media and communication departments established during that period framed its journalism curriculum within that political economic context, which remains to a large extent to this day. The Communication Programme of the Universiti Sains Malaysia started in 1970; the School of Mass Communication at the Mara Institute of Technology (i.e. predecessor of the Universiti Teknologi Mara) began in 1972, and the Communications Department at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 1975. It was envisaged that these mass communication departments would be able to produce the required media professionals to serve the larger national agenda of a re-structured socio-economy, albeit along racial lines.

Journalism education is also offered in the newer universities in the country, such as the state-run Universiti Sarawak Malaysia and Universiti Sabah Malaysia, and the private Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman. Like the journalism curriculum of yesteryears, the ones designed by the later generation of universities also emphasised on the practical and professional aspects of journalism. In this regard, over the years there is an apparent shift in emphasis as the communication departments or schools in the country have been made to see the importance of meeting the 'needs' of the media industry. But, in an era of media commercialization, this change has often been couched in a language that mistakenly and dangerously equates industry 'needs' with those of the nation. To be sure, these are the 'needs' of an industry whose incumbent editorial staff are either members of component parties of the ruling coalition or economic allies of the state; the 'needs', or at least some of them, may contradict or even suppress the democratic rights and needs of the ordinary citizens.

Hence, imbued by the desire to produce competent media professionals (who would presumably be absorbed by the mainstream media subsequently), most journalism programmes at the tertiary level emphasize on the mechanics of news production, news values, the rudiments of reporting, and techniques of interviewing, and editing. As part of their practical training, students run their laboratory newspapers in their respective campuses, with restrictions and various shades of censorship on student publications by the campus authorities, which has become part of the process and realities of journalism in Malaysia.[1] Students take on a variety of roles of editors, sub-editors, journalists, photographers – but often under the shadow of being watched by the campus authorities. For example, a Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) student, Ali Bukhari Amir, was directed in December 2004 to get clearance from the university authority before publishing his news reports or articles in the media. Ali, a journalism student, was investigated by a university's investigation committee on the allegation that his articles that were published in the campus' student newspaper, *Berita Kampus*, and the organ of opposition party PAS, *Harakah*, smeared USM's image (SUARAM, 2005: 82-83). This exposure to journalism via the production of a laboratory newspaper on campus is apart from the seasonal practical internship that was, and still is, made compulsory for the students to be attached to various media organizations.

Journalism as a course offering in the public institutions of higher learning is still popular in the sense that there is still demand for it from students, although the experience of USM's School of Communication shows the trend has seen a moderate decline over recent years in students taking up journalism as a major. One of the reasons is that the pull has been towards other 'glamorous' courses such as broadcasting and film, and public relations. In the case of broadcasting and film, its practical components that require one to twiddle with the knobs and other instruments easily excite students. Nonetheless, these students are still required to do elementary journalism because it is felt that writing should be the essential skill for all media communication students.

'Values' in the Malaysian Newsroom

As in the classroom, the newsroom culture generally also recognizes the fact that political leaders in the ruling party and captains of industries, among other prominent people, make news. This dominant news value has effectively marginalized those considered to be not so important in society, such as the poor, the downtrodden, the critics, and the dissidents. In short, these groups of people radiate outside the radar of the media organizations and therefore become almost 'invisible', although they have equal and legitimate stakes as citizens of the country.

Not only do the so-called prominent people and groups whose interests closely align with the state get prioritized by the media, they also become the 'untouchables'. This is especially so when journalists work for media organizations where its editors and publishers are directly or indirectly associated with incumbent politicians or corporate leaders. It would hurt the pockets of the media owners and managers if their media were to investigate and expose the wrongdoings of people in power and business. For example, in the privatization of the supervision of medical examination of commercial vehicle drivers, the government has given out a contract to one particular company. This induced monopoly and privatization was not covered by most mainstream media, with the exception of the business weekly, *The Edge*, (www.theedgedaily.com), whose brief coverage appeared on Dec. 12, 2005. Another instance involves the plan to privatise the nation's healthcare system, which has not been covered by the mainstream media critically and substantially, if at all.

Another factor built into the journalistic fraternity is the hierarchical nature of Malaysian society where there is so much respect and deference given to political leaders by Malaysians, particularly journalists, that they inadvertently abandon the responsibility of asking the hard questions for the benefit of their readers. This explains why veteran journalists were '*takut-takut'* ('afraid' in the Malay language) to ask questions when they faced the former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed (Loo, 2005:57). It is therefore not an exaggeration to suggest that at times media conferences organized by the former prime minister and other cabinet ministers were often transformed into a ministerial lecture with very few searching questions, if at all.

And this is despite the fact that the National Union of Journalists in Malaysia has certain guidelines for the journalists. For instance, one of its Code of Ethics states that 'respect for truth and for the right of the public to truth is the first duty of the journalists'. Another code states that journalists should "recognize in professional

matters, the jurisdiction of their colleagues only" and "exclude every kind of interference by governments or others" (www.ifj-asia.org/files/malaysiareport04.pdf). The legal provisions that govern the media industry and the ownership structure of the mainstream media, however, make a mockery of these ideals so that the canons of journalism in Malaysia are known more for their breach than observance of ethical professional practice.

Possible Solutions

Given the dire situation, what needs to be done to improve the morale and professional credibility and dignity of the Malaysian journalistic fraternity? For one thing, the campaign for a repeal of repressive media laws must be sustained by all concerned in the profession and the civil society in a more concerted and systematic fashion. Any attempts by the state to further erode press freedom must be resisted by journalists and other civil society groups and concerned Malaysians.

At the same time, working journalists need to be sensitized to the importance of human rights via workshops or training sessions that can be conducted by the National Union of Journalists and other groups (www.nujm.org/aboutus/aboutus.htm). This would help correct the misleading notion that only 'prominent' people and groups matter in media reportage. Furthermore, to correct the misconception that leaders must be treated with deference to the point of making them appear as if they can do no wrong, and that they are unaccountable for their actions. Also, this goes a long way towards promoting social justice and democracy for all Malaysians irrespective of their stations in life.

The same goes with public institutions of higher learning. A human rights content must be incorporated into the journalism curriculum so that students are well equipped to confront issues of social injustice and violations of democratic rights in society, apart from being exposed to the rudimentary of news reporting. Moreover, the news value of prominence can then be tempered with the notion of social justice and fairness to the disadvantaged, the poor and the dissidents. For such an inclusive perspective of journalism would also mean promoting national development in the widest sense of the term – as well as democracy.

Raising awareness about ethical journalism, social justice and democracy can be conducted during, say, a post-mortem of a student newspaper. While discussing the technicalities of news reporting, editing and newspaper layout, journalism educators should highlight issues of press freedom, justice and democracy as and when the need arises. For instance, if the editor of the student newspaper made a slip-up of not permitting space for an aggrieved party to respond to a report in the newspaper, the editorial team should be reminded of the ethical and political import of the right of reply. Another scenario is when student journalists unwittingly disregarded the need to get views and feedback of a group of construction workers in an issue that concerns safety at the workplace. Interviewing only university authorities and officials from local labour department is tantamount to marginalizing workers and their interests and concerns. For this is about more than just attempting to achieve journalistic balance; it concerns social justice.

In this regard, journalism educators in Malaysia can and should re-evaluate some of the so-called 'news values' that have been taught in classroom all this while, particularly the one that stresses on prominent individuals and groups in society as necessarily news worthy, so that marginalized individuals and social groups are fairly and accurately represented. (See, for instance, Mustafa, 1994: 200-212.)

To do this, the teacher of journalism will first have to make the students aware of the multi-faceted realities that will influence their function as journalists in newsrooms that are dominated by editors who are affiliated with the government, or the social inequality and unequal power relations that arise from such a social setup. The same goes with the political economy of the mainstream media which can give rise to a situation where the media treat different groups in society differently and unjustly. This basic social and political awareness among students of journalism is crucial because without such awareness they will not be able to have a good grasp as to why there is a need to change things in society. Moreover, in this way, one would avoid teaching journalism and ethics of journalism in isolation of its social context. Students need to be impressed upon that journalism education is more than just teaching them with the necessary skills to get a job. It should aim at graduating educated journalists with a set of attributes and ideals that they can make a difference to the way journalism is currently practised in the Malaysian newsroom.

Endnote

1. Malaysiakini.com's reports pertaining to conflict between students and their respective universities are: 'Campus polls: 24 UTM students face disciplinary action' [Nov. 26, 2004]; 'USM student rapped over choice of words' [Feb. 23, 2005]; 'USM student to face music over articles' [Dec. 10, 2004]

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