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Orientalism in reporting religion: Approaches to teaching journalism and Islam as a civilization



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After years of discourse on the distortion of Islam by the media, this paper suggests that the link in understanding the (mis)representation of Islam is in the corpus of Orientalism. It argues that reporting on religions, or reporting on Islam, be adopted as critical components in the curricula of journalism education. It notes that in Malaysia, despite a proliferation of journalism/communication schools over more than three decades, there is no course on the reportage of religions/Islam. Such a course could be embedded in the historical contexts of encounters between the West and Islam and the assumption that the language of news and the language of religion are two incompatible paradigms. This paper calls for overcoming this incompatibility. In what has been neglected as an important component in intellectual production having spiritual and emotional ramifications, this paper argues for re-examining the conceptual and ontological aspects of the reportage of Islam/religion, the journalism curriculum and the intellectual production process in the university.

Introduction

This paper addresses an old problem – the coverage of Islam by media in the West. However, the problem lies not mainly in the coverage but on how the profession and institution of journalism should cover religion. This paper posits that biases in the reportage of Islam have epistemological and historical roots, and these are not merely due to the orientation and strategies of the journalistic profession and the news media. It assumes news and religion as incompatible paradigms. Then, from a theoretical position, it probes the difference, and suggests some arguments for the reportage of religion, repositing it under journalism education as part of the university curriculum.

In understanding the problems and prospects of reporting religion, we must first come to terms with the idea of news as a category in the conceptual and popular sense. To scholars of news, a news story is a self-contained ‘reality’ of an event produced by the conventions of journalism. This leads us to the thinking on how the nature of news defines reality; and how that nature reflects reality. Conceptually, the news, which operates as a media apparatus, becomes a built-environment based on the assumption that the externalized environment stands between the individual and the world beyond. News therefore can be seen as a product, a form, a medium, or a technology, mediating between man and his extended environment. News therefore constructs and deconstructs reality – the entity that governs and is governed by modern day life.

But how is religion reported if that paradigm that we call news, remains a product of modernity, unchanged as a remnant of the Industrial Revolution, premised upon the secular nature of cultural and political life, as defined by the European Enlightenment? As James Carey (1984) argues, journalism has been watered down from an ideational art to an industrial art. The inverted pyramid, the 5Ws and 1H lead, and associated techniques are products of industrialization, as tin cans or any mass-produced consumer goods. The methods, procedures and canons of journalism were developed not only to satisfy the demands of the vocation but also to meet the needs of the industry to turn out mass-produced commodities. These canons are enshrined in the profession as rules of news selection, judgment and writing. The techniques of journalism define what is considered to be real, what can be written about and how it can be understood. The techniques of journalism determine what society can think. And therefore, if something happens that cannot be packaged by that industrial formula dominated by the news genre, then, in a fundamental sense, an event, or a process has never happened. The reason being that events and processes that do not fall into the news net cannot be framed as news – hence becoming non-events. The pandering to the exception (Tuchman, 1978, 1977); to the timely, perishable (Park 1940); saleable, superficial, simple, and objective (Breed, 1956) still is the order of the day.

Orientalism and popular reproduction of Islam

This paper argues that the root problem in the reportage of Islam as a religion is historical and epistemological, and that feeds on the political dimension. We are guilty of producing and reproducing orientalism. Muslim journalists are themselves captives of the news paradigm in the coverage of their society, of other religions, and of Islam. The Islam that floods our news and popular daily diet appears in the formula we

consume to be correct. And ironically, we too reproduce the 'orientalist' thinking of the 'news of religion,' of Islam.

The proper noun 'Orientalism' is contentious and problematic. Made popular by Edward W. Said (1979) through the now classic book, which bears the same name, Orientalism essentially refers to Western scholarship on the East. In critically examining the manner in which Orientalist discourse produced the Orient, Said brought forth the Occident-Orient divide in which Western societies, cultures, religions, and languages are superior to non-Western ones. Orientalism, as theorised by Said, is a "style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction between the 'Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident' (Said, 1979: 2). Reading Said's work is instrumental in bringing to focus the discursive dimensions of colonialism (Alatas, 2006: 43), and by extension the neo-colonialist impulse of globalization. And by extending the dominance of the West over history, it deals with a complex construction of a body of knowledge configured by interests and power, apart from a desire to carry out an intellectual inquiry on its subject. For Said, Orientalism is largely a colonialist, imperialist project, sustained by a false image of scientific objectivity (Mohd Hazim Shah, 2005).

The image of the East, in the Saidian sense, predominantly that of Arabs and Islam, was not only depicted through the scholarship of Orientalism but also by popular orientalism expressed daily in the media and consumed by millions of readers and viewers across the Occidental/Oriental divide. The predominance of the Orientalist perspective has led to a particular mode of consumption transmitted by the information and cultural producing apparatus. Hence, the religion of Islam has been produced (or reduced?) by the media "politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-enlightenment era" (Said, 1979:3). Although Said's thesis was confined to the systematic, academic study of the non-European world, which produced an archive of knowledge of much about Islam and the Muslims by Orientalist scholars, it is only quite recently realized that their works have implications for the lives of contemporary Muslims and the rest of the world.

Certain Orientalist ideas common in the 19th century have contributed to current stereotypes about Islam. One of these preconceptions is the idea that Oriental cultures are animated fundamentally by religious and spiritual impulses. Ernst (2004: 23) refers to the concept of the 'mystic East' which came from European Romanticism, contributed to a tendency to disregard more mundane factors such as technology, economics, and society. What is important about Orientalism as a discourse is that it is founded on stereotypes and distortions that play a role in the cultural and political life of the West (Alatas, 2005), and self-imposed within popular, academic and professional consciousness of the non-Western world. It is not only a thing of the past, it is present in many ways through both print and broadcast news media, documentaries, the internet, fiction, fashion, advertisements, tourism, and architecture. Both in scholarship and in popular culture, there is abundant discourse illustrating that the exception proves the rule.

Hence, Islam as news as reported by the media has been measured against the criteria of timeliness, currency, novelty, and the 'nowness' in relation to the geographical, cultural and the political. The media tends to adopt the prevailing Western terminology when it talks about Islam and the problems of extremism and terrorism. These terms are not originally used by Muslims.

Most newspapers, radio and television stations, continue to view Islamic, and Western civilizations as monolithic, homogenous entities. Such views have a long history. For more than a thousand years, Islam as a religion has been reviled within sections of European scholarship and popular literature. Tracing prejudiced references to Islam from the eighth century onwards, – prejudices which were later transmitted through the writings of reformers like Martin Luther, playwrights and poets such as Shakespeare and Dante, and historians like Gibbon (Muzaffar, 2004).

In *Covering Islam* (1981), Said advanced this argument:

For the general public in America and Europe today, Islam is ‘news’ of a particular unpleasant sort. The media, the government, the geopolitical strategists, and – although they are marginal to the culture at large – the academic experts on Islam are all in concert: Islam is a threat to Western civilization. Now, this is by no means the same as saying that only derogatory or racist caricatures of Islam are to be found in the West. I do not say that, nor would I agree with anyone who did. What I am saying is that negative images of Islam are very much more prevalent than any others, and that such images correspond, not to what Islam “is” (given that Islam is not a natural fact but a composite structure created to a certain extent by Muslims and the West in the ways I have tried to describe), but to what prominent sectors of a particular society take it to be. Those sectors have the power and the will to propagate that particular image of Islam, and this image therefore becomes more prevalent, more present, than all others (Said, 1981: 36).

What then is objectivity in the reportage of religion? Are facts perceived and facts about religion uncontaminated by ideology and values? Is objectivity itself non-ideological and the embodiment of value neutrality? The process of journalism cannot assume a pristine world of facts. And by this we may mean, for example, the ‘moderate Islam–extremist Islam’ dichotomy (Alatas, 2005), factualized in the minds of many, including our own [Malaysian] society. The dichotomy does not have an empirical referent. But journalism, working in cohort with the political and power elites, have used the dichotomy to ‘educate’ the public that moderate and, by extension, less strict Muslims are the good Muslims while extremist and, therefore, stricter Muslims are the ones prone to evil. In other words, moderate Muslims do not necessarily pray and follow the obligatory tenets of Islam, are ‘flexible’ in their religious practices and relations with other non-Muslims. Extremist Muslims, on the other hand, strictly follow what is obligatory, are fundamentalists and are hostile to non-Muslims.

Journalism (and journalists) in non-Western societies, in particular, in Muslim countries, need to comprehend the various dimensions of Eurocentric prejudice against Islam. In the same way, journalism and journalists in Muslim societies who use Islamic religious language against the West should be seen as an ideological response against colonialism. Here we must understand that religious language expressed on a mass scale is essentially rhetorical. We should caution ourselves that sweeping religious statements of extreme opposition should not be accepted on face value, especially since they generally have immediate political consequences (Ernst, 2005: 8–9). In statements that attribute political differences to fundamental religious positions, the implicit conclusion is that there is no possibility of negotiation, because religious positions are eternal and unrelated to passing events. In a sense, it dismisses dialogue.

The coverage of Islam in the Western media has been inundated with stereotypes. These anti-Muslim stereotypes are repugnant to reason and justice. As is available in much of the literature since the 1960s (see for example Suleiman, 1965; and Terry, 1975) these stereotypes of Islam and Muslims have a history deeply embedded in the psyche and the self-images of Euro-American societies. The vision of the world has drastically been transformed when “Islamophobia has succeeded anti-Semitism as a form of acceptable racial and religious prejudice” (Ernst: 29).

The American response to an Islamic world perceived, as noted by Said (1981) in the introduction of *Covering Islam*, was immensely relevant and yet antipathetically troubled, and problematic. Said’s treatment of the subject, perhaps the most incisive, intense and ‘angry’ thus far, was nevertheless precise. On the outset, Said explained the semantics of the term ‘Islam’ as it is used:

“One of the points I make here and in *Orientalism* is that the term ‘Islam’ as it is used today seems to mean one simple thing but in fact is part fiction, part ideological label, part minimal designation of a religion called Islam.”

One must be cognisant and logically sound in reasoning that there is no significant direct correspondence between the ‘Islam’ in common Western usage and the enormously varied life that goes on within the world of Islam.

More than two decades hence, Shamsul Amri Baharuddin (2005) echoed Said’s reasoning – in that the world as encapsulating the 99 percent of peace loving Muslims in their midst as destructive violent demagogues resulting from the one percent who behaved in that manner. This observation has vast ramifications on the cultural and information producing apparatus, which include the mass media, the institution and profession of journalism, journalistic genres and in particular the news as to its criteria of selection. In this context, the media and journalism cannot regard itself as an extension of the Enlightenment, and as a commodity resulting from the collusion of ideology, industry and the market. The news as a construct may be unique but not universal. News structures and narratives are culture bound. Is the non-Occident side of the divide bounded by its unthinking use without transforming its epistemology?

Study and practice of journalism in the dialogue of civilizations

‘Dialogue’ refers to a conversation between two people. What we have in mind are more than just that. We envision a conversation on a subject of common interest between two or more individuals or parties, whose beliefs are informed by differing worldviews. The ultimate aim of the dialogue is to inculcate an attitude founded on appreciation, understanding, interest and compassion for the cultures and worldviews of the other. The science and art of journalism have a role – as a public discourse as well in formal education that facilitate the dialogue.

2001 was the United Nation’s Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, but all we saw in the world’s media were war and conflict. This situation was conditioned and determined by a multitude of forces, among them, the commodification of news and information, the conceptualization and practice that journalism is a profession

intertwined to the needs of industry and capital; and that journalism and media are seen as strategic elements in power relations.

As such, I propose that the teaching of journalism embrace the tradition of alternative discourses – conscious of the problems of Eurocentrism and academic colonialism. Using a personal account, I will illustrate the concerns with non-Western scholarship in journalism studies with my teaching of journalism, and moving towards introducing an alternative module.

The problem with teaching journalism in Malaysia's universities offering the subject (for example at University Malaya, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Universiti Teknologi MARA, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Putra Malaysia, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak and Universiti Utara Malaysia) is that its starting point is American journalism (to be precise New York journalism), resonating objectivity, liberalism, democracy and the public good. The texts are American, with lately, some bias toward British publications as can be seen in the books from London-based social science publishers, Sage and Routledge. Why teach *only* these to Malaysian, Southeast Asian, or generally Asian students? Why *only* recall names and deeds in the likes of John Milton and his *Aeropagittica*, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Paine, Horace Greeley, Charles Dana or Melville Stone, and teach them to non-Western students? We are not advocating a dualistic mode of journalism education. This paper is responding to the dominant mode of expression, and seeing that journalism education as conceived and practised need not necessarily be universalistic in foundation and outlook.

What I have done is to explore the possibility of whether theorising journalism can be done outside the boundaries of Euro-American perspective. A question asked is that: Is journalism, both in concept and practice, a Western intervention in the non-Western world? Is there a corpus? I have been experimenting with various approaches entailing the ways in which journalism can be taught based on searching a corpus in response to its present mode of teaching in Malaysian universities *hegemonized* by 'hearsay' and techniques.¹ I have been teaching the subject Principles of Journalism from 1988 through 2003. Essentially the course is on the sociology of journalism. It is an introduction to the idea, concept and practice. Its components involve forms and genres, history, behavior, ethics and international journalism. Some of the changes involved were increasing the space for the conception of journalism. But much of the position toward journalism education and the journalism curriculum has seen it located in a communication school associating it with skills and techniques.

Journalism was theorised to have been ingrained in man and Creation. The Angels, Jibrail (Gabriel) and Prophet Muhammad were embraced and incorporated with the framework of the study of journalism. The term 'messenger' took a sociological turn. Ontologically, the institution of the transmission of Hadith; and of the phenomena of distributive information and knowledge in Islamic cultural history and geography were imbued within the concept of journalism. One way to understand this approach is to study the concept of messenger in all the revealed religions as in Judaism, Christianity and Islam; as well as in Islam, the methodologies of Hadith transmission and the transmission chain as to the sustainability of messages from one transmitter to another.

The embedded journalistic process in scholarship as happened in premodern China and Japan was an added dimension; so also with the introduction of names like Gandhi, Tagore, and Munsyi Abdullah – all exist along the continuum of writer-

journalist. In Malaysia, the project of reformer Syed Shaikh al-Hady in colonial Malaya was discussed. So also the journalism of Syeikh Muhammad Abduh, Jamaluddin Al-Afghani and Rashid Ridda. These were intellectuals who knew the value of writing and journalism. They had a philosophy and corpus. What is important to learn is that these figures used journalism in the form of newspapers and periodicals to spread their message. And in order to internalize how and in what context they have used journalism as a mode of expression, we have to trace their proximity to the Occident and to European history and civilization. Apart from the study of revelation and the distribution of knowledge and spirituality in its various contexts, one has also to trace the emergence of Europe in world history and civilization.

Journalism education in Malaysia and other parts of the Muslim world (and also in Western universities) should have a universal bent. At the university level, the journalism curriculum must be embedded in the need to educate students (people) about the divine/prophetic origins of the production, transmission and reception of messages, the multicultural origins of modern civilizations, the contribution of Muslims, Indian and Chinese civilizations to modern Europe, the difference between the utilitarian modernistic language of (modern) journalism to the transcendent language of religion, the definitions and conceptions of religion (historically and sociologically), great works of literature, Literature, Semantics, the diversity of the Muslim world and Muslim history and civilization, the cultural and rational science and their sources of origin. This is different from a double major. I am pursuing for a singular journalism program incorporating and reorganizing the corpus.

Emphasis should be given to the Orientalism and colonialism and what it does to the rest of the world. The journalism program should incorporate contemporary problems and structure such themes as modernity, development, Islamic fundamentalism, imperialism, Islamic revivalism, terrorism, and democracy. These are themes that can itself be a single course having its subject matter and components from a diversity of perspectives and traditions. Hence, such courses should be mitigated as universal in its perspective, allowing for multiple and peculiaristic dimensions. But of course, the idea and overall objective is to produce good journalism. It falls back to the the fraternity of journalists and the ethos of the society in which they reside and represent.

The proposal outline

An important theme essential to my paper is a proposal for a course – *Reportage of Religion* – to be offered in universities, absorbed in the social sciences and humanities, or perhaps in a journalism program, or in a communication school. It is strange that we argue *ad infinitum* on the representation of Islam – meaning the coverage of Islam in all its manifestation through various modes of the information and cultural producing apparatus. We train and educate journalists, writers and other media experts in the various modes of reporting and writing, i.e. news, features, editorial; and the various topics and specialisations, i.e., economics, politics, science, and so forth. But we have not encountered any course or program on the *reportage of religion*.

There has been, over the years since the Iranian Revolution 1978/79, a surge of interest in covering Islam. Hence the need for journalism training courses and workshops designed and organized by the fraternity to come to terms in responding to the coverage of Islam induced by the problematic nature of its representation. But

there are no workshops, courses or programs in the universities on reporting religion. There is a difference here. The following is an outline proposal with developing a program beginning with universities in Malaysia.

Based on the preceding argument, there seems to be much to cover, and much doubt over such a contentious territory compounded by the problems of approaches and perspectives. One objective of the program is to impart knowledge about the contexts of religions, and Islam as a civilization. It is also to understand Europe and the West, and how Islam and Asia informs us about Europe and vice versa. The proposal posits such a program within the social and human sciences. In a significant way, it reverses Eurocentrism via the teaching of journalism and reporting within the social science matrix. To cite Alatas on the teaching of the social sciences:

Clearly, the task for those concerned with the problem of the neglect of ideas emanating from non-Western societies and with the development of a more universalistic approach to knowledge is to counteract Eurocentricism in the social sciences by reversing the subject-object dichotomy, bringing in non-Europeans into the foreground, recognizing them as originators, and turning attention to non-European concepts and categories (Alatas, 2006: 179).

A fundamental category is the term 'religion.' Drawing on the work by Joachim Matthes (2000) on the translation of terms such as religion into social scientific concepts, such (concepts) when brought into social scientific discourse feeds into journalistic and popular discourses. The result is a distortion of the phenomenon that they are applied to. The Latin *religio*, from which the English term religion is derived, was a collective term referring to diverse practices and cults in and around Rome, prior to the emergence of Christianity. When Rome became Christian in about the 2nd century, Christianity became the dominant belief and all other beliefs were absorbed or eliminated. With the emergence of the social sciences as a form of knowledge during the European Enlightenment period, 'religion' came to be used as a scientific concept, referring to belief systems other than Christianity. Hence, when 'religion' is applied to other beliefs, for example, Islam, Hinduism or Buddhism, there is an implicit or explicit comparison with Christianity, which results in an elision of reality.

Matthes uses the logic of comparing, for example, Christianity and Islam. From the perspective of social scientific concepts, both are religions and subsumed under the category of religion. The problem with this is that the characteristics of religion are derived from Christianity to begin with. The overriding context of the proposed program is premised on this understanding – that according to Matthes (2000) the supposedly general scientific concept 'religion' is culturally defined by Christianity, and Islam, or other religions such as Buddhism, are not compared to it in terms of a *tertium comparationis*,² or a general concept of 'religion.' – but rather in terms of the Christian idea of religion. The idea behind the proposal is not to displace journalism as a concept, but to universalize it.

The aim of the program at the baccalaureate level³ called the *Reportage of Religion* is to produce journalists, writers, content producers, cultural planners, and the intelligent men and women who are conscious of the need for alternative discourses in the social and human sciences beyond critique of the dominant discourse moving to new interpretations of history, civilization and society.

The objectives of the program are

1. To develop a consciousness of particularities and universality and the relationship between the two.
2. To view inter-civilizational encounters in terms of intertwining spaces spatial and temporal in acknowledging the multifarious scientific and cultural borrowings between the Muslims, and other Asian civilizations, and Europe.
3. To comprehend modernity as having multiple origins, and not to subscribe to dualism by camouflaging it consciously or subconsciously.
4. To equip with tools of discernment and differentiation in terms of Westernization, modernization and development with regard to values, culture, and religion.
5. To develop the skill of integrating writing and thinking in contextualizing journalistic expression.
6. To impart the practice of using language as tool and meaning.

Upon graduation, the student would have developed the following:

1. Demonstrates an understanding of religion.
2. Demonstrates an understanding of history and society.
3. Synthesises a multitude of sources, opinions and perspectives and mitigate content in its proper context.

The reportage of religion⁴ (reporting religion/covering religion/media writing on religion) would comprise the following themes as courses:

- (1) Epistemology
The foundations, validation and the production of knowledge. The basis for measuring theories, concepts, and categories.
- (2) Meaning, Writing and Transmission
Concerning sources of information and its transmission in different civilizations.
- (3) Time in Civilization and Society
The concept, construct and idea of time in the sacred and secular contexts.
- (4) Orientalism and European history
The idea of Europe, its geography, culture and worldview, contextualized as the Occident with its other, the Orient.
- (5) Eurocentrism and Religion in the Social Sciences
That beginnings of colonialism and the hegemony of European ideas. The structure of modern social science and the location of religion in terms of private and public sphere.
- (6) Comparing Religion to Christianity
An understanding of Christianity and its affinity to Europe which leads the world to subconsciously define religion in Christian terms.

- (7) Islam, Civilization and Society
Islam as a civilization, a practice and as a revealed religion.
- (8) The Language of Religion and the Language of News
Studying the structure of sacred texts in terms of time and context and comparing it to the structure and grammar of journalistic news language. The themes of time and timelessness are central.
- (9) Factuality and Objectivity: Religion as News
Examining the structures of factuality, objectivity, subjectivity and precision as features in modern life.
- (10) Contemporary Politics and Culture
The study of modern behaviour in terms of power and expression.
- (11) Editorializing Religion: Religion as Opinion, Commentary and Criticism
Opinion writing, commentary and criticism on religion.
- (12) Science and Religion
The mainstream and alternatives discourses on the relationship between science and religion. And understanding of the debates and wars in early modern and modern European society.
- (13) The Media and Religion
The media in communicating and expressing religion, notions of fundamentalism in the various religions.

The proposed program can be loosely structured as separate set of electives; or a major within the social sciences and the humanities for a Bachelor of Arts (Reportage of Religion); or alternatively devised as themes and tools at workshops to educate journalists and editors. Generally, the beneficiaries of the proposal, apart from journalists and editors from the journalistic professions, would also be writers of various genres and modes, and the intelligent public who both consume and produce content. This paper also proposes the setting up of an institute called the Institute of the Reportage of Religion to pursue the idea, as well as function as a dedicated organisation in studying the problem of the representation of Islam and the Muslims especially in the journalistic media.

Since we are perennially encumbered with the representation of Islam, or its misrepresentation (and of other religions), that has caused pain, anguish, humiliation to humanity over more than a thousand years, and especially so over the last three decades induced by the Iranian Revolution 1978/79 and by the September 11 incident, we need a permanent forum and initiative to mitigate at all levels – the academic, policy, advocacy and popular on implications on media stories pertaining to Islam, Muslims, as well as other religions. The institute will function as a centre for education, research and training, as well as advocacy on good practices and conduct in the production, transmission, dissemination of especially news and other stories on the matter. The institute can induce dialogue between the journalistic fraternity of both the Euro-American world and the Muslim world, as well as those representing different civilizations, with recourse to the idea and practice of the coverage of religions.

Some conclusions

The praxis in the reportage of religion can be the central factor in the dialogue amongst civilizations. As stated earlier, the coverage of religions by the world media has taken centre stage over the last three decades. What happened over the period was an increased intensity in the (mis)representation of Islam, induced mainly by the Iranian Revolution 1978/79, Salman Rushdie's *Satanic Verses* affair, the 9/11 incident, the mocking of religion and the Prophet by a Danish cartoonist, *Fitna* by a Dutch legislator and the cartoon of American presidential candidate Barack Obama and his wife dressed in the image of Muslims with a photo of Osama Laden hanging in the background. These incidents, which have vulgarized the religion of Islam as dark, satanic and violent have caused the ire of Muslims all over the world. Since the late 1970s it has changed the whole dynamics of Muslim-Christian relations. And not only that, the international community began to look at Islam in a different light. People of other religions have also associated Islam with violence and terrorism. Both popular and scholarly literature, coming from both sides of the divide, are posited on a bias against Islam, and even by the Muslim themselves in the manner of reproducing in their own thinking the logic of Islam induced by an Orientalist discourse on Islam and religion.

Since such a reportage is a normal, almost daily occurrence and a staple diet in the news media with stories about Islam and Muslims being covered – reported, editorialized, and manufactured only to be consumed by both Muslims and non-Muslims alike, it is time for us to address the core issue. It is not a case of understanding or misunderstanding, or representation or misrepresentation, or the incompatibility between or amongst religions, belief systems or worldviews. It is more of the apathy and indifference to the epistemology and ontology of religions by journalists, writers and the media fraternity. Even Muslim journalists fall into this captive-mindedness of their own societies.

This can be seen in how Malaysian Malay-Muslim journalists have reported and editorialised about Islam and Muslims earlier on and even now. There have been some changes but still these are incremental and not fundamental. Most of the time, when Muslim societies are covered, the terms 'terrorist,' and 'extremist' referring to Muslims who are in conflict with nation-states and governments, are still used. Also remember that at one time, the Malaysian media termed the Palestinians as terrorists. The journalistic and media fraternity need to re-examine and reform the manner in which religion and Islam is reported because misreporting could create sparks of cosmic proportions affecting the peace and stability of societies, nation-states, and of modern civilization. We must not lose sight of this focus.

Since this paper's focus is on journalism education as a platform for dialogue, the reportage of religions can play a role in the dialogue of civilizations in the following manner:

1. Providing an informed, comparative perspective, and tolerant platform and framework for journalists, writers and the media to operate on a daily basis
2. Mitigating and fusing the language of the news and the language of religion

3. Formal training and education on the Reportage of Religion as a course be introduced as a university-wide course by the way providing general education and a means of exposing to an important dimension of intellectual production.
4. The course on the Reportage of Religion be a requirement for all journalism majors.

These measures would at least create a consciousness to society and media consumers and hence encourage and generate further discourse amongst different communities, ethnicities and religious adherents within nation-states, and across different civilizations.

Notes

- ¹ Journalism is dominantly conceived – at the academic, policy and popular levels of discourse – as a practical discipline (in the loose sense) relying on techniques and skills. It is mainly understood as a vocation. In that sense, journalism lecturers teach based on what they have learnt in journalism schools, and based on what journalists habitually do. The ‘habits’, or conventions of the journalists establish the measure of what the ‘correct practice’ is. Whereas, journalism is the embodiment of society and civilization with regard to substantive themes ranging from philosophy and thought to literature and leisure. Contrary to popular thinking, journalism is closer to philosophy than to communication. Professional and academic circles have misplaced journalism’s status as a discourse and a corpus in itself.
- ² Referred to as the third which is at a higher unit of abstraction. For example apples and pears are subsumed under fruits. So ‘fruits’ are the third part of the comparison.
- ³ It may be a major within the social and human sciences. Preceding the program offering, students are expected to have taken a set of courses in the humanities or the social sciences.
- ⁴ I emphasize that the proposal is on the *Reportage of Religion* and not a course on the reportage of Islam. It cannot be denied that Islam is the most demonized religion in the world, courtesy of the media. Hence the proposal was constructed with reference to Islam.

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Commentary

Teaching 'best practices' of journalism in Malaysia



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Journalism has over the years invited distrust, scorn, cynicism, even sheer revulsion, from the general public. This is especially so with fraudulent reporting on the rise, such as the one committed by *New York Times* reporter Jayson Blair in 2003. Investigative journalism of the 'Watergate' type seems to have faded to the extent that it would take concerted effort by journalism educators to 'excite' students into taking up journalism as a career.

In Malaysia, journalism ethics, standards and credibility have long been compromised at the altar of political expediency and corporate interests particularly within sections of the mainstream media. This situation is aggravated by the fact that the media are also controlled by the state through illiberal laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA), Official Secrets Act (OSA), Sedition Act, Communications and Multimedia Act, and the Internal Security Act (ISA).

Set against this political backdrop, it is hardly surprising that the teaching (and learning) of journalism in Malaysian universities can be disheartening – and challenging at the same time. Apart from the PPPA, OSA, Sedition Act, and the ISA impinging on press freedom, journalism educators and students are also restricted by the Universities and University Colleges Act (UUCA) and the *Aku Janji* (Oath of Allegiance [to the government of the day]).

The UUCA prohibits academic staff and students from being involved in political activism. This mechanism of control is placed at the disposal of university authorities. Under the UUCA, a number of universities had taken disciplinary action against students for being involved in activities deemed 'undesirable', such as publicly criticising procedures or policies of the university authorities, or student protests against social injustice such as the perpetuation of the Internal Security Act (ISA) that permits indefinite detention without trial. The UUCA (and also the *Aku Janji*) practically serves as an additional layer of control vis-à-vis the other laws over open critical political discourse among academic staff and students.