9-1-1996

Relevance of philosophy in the wisdom of journalism schools

A. M. Merican

Mara Institute of Technology, Malaysia

Recommended Citation
Merican, A. M., Relevance of philosophy in the wisdom of journalism schools, Asia Pacific Media Educator, 1, 1996, 42-49.
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss1/5
Relevance Of Philosophy In The Wisdom Of Journalism Schools

The journalistic fraternity is gradually becoming unenlightened technicians and scribblers of words rather than transmitters of thoughts. This article argues for a thorough philosophical grounding in students of journalism both through epistemological orientation and professional practice as fundamental prerequisites in understanding ideas, determining events and processes, developing intellectual perspectives and departing from the finite realms of the immediate.

Ahmad Murad Merican
Maru Institute of Technology, Malaysia

In the chapter "Writer and Journalist in the Transitional Society" (in Pye, 1963:82), Passin observes:

"Each nation that enters the cycle of modernization must at some point break through in three fields: political and social reform, language and journalism. The break-throughs may take place simultaneously or at separate times within a broad historical period. In China the May 4th movement of 1919 was a simultaneous climax of literary, philosophical, and political ideas seeking to burst free of the half-emancipation of the 1911 Revolution. But in India the Bengal renaissance of the late 19th and early 20th century - that outpouring in creative energy in literature, the arts, music, and philosophy led by Tagore - came first; the modern developments in politics led by Gandhi followed by several decades. The Japanese cultural renaissance, insofar as this is the correct label, started about twenty years after the Meiji Restoration in 1868, when political and administrative reforms were well under way."

Passin notes that in those historical experiences, the nations (including those of the Arab states and that of Southeast Asia)
bring with them a literary tradition and a model of the writer as artist. In other words, the journalist is also legitimately seen and accepted as a writer. A tension is created. But how do they merge?

At one pole we have the creative artist with a vision. At the other we have the technician of words, the scribbler preoccupied with the immediate, the surface. The reality is much like a continuum where the moment we leave the extreme, the distinction becomes blurred; and this is where the journalist stops being a reporter and becomes a commentator, essayist, propagandist - a "writer". On the other hand, the writer who leaves pure fiction becomes a commentator or essayist, thus meeting the journalist moving in the other direction. In short, the journalist becomes a writer, even if not a creative writer, and the writer, as commentator with views on philosophy, aesthetics, politics, and social reform, becomes a journalist (Passin, 1963).

Anwar Ibrahim, the Malaysian deputy prime minister, has on many occasions alluded to media reform, especially pertaining to journalistic culture. He points out that several Malaysian national laureates were well-known journalists and novelists of calibre. Those were the writer/journalist. And the writer/journalist is inherently a member of his intellectual generation. He is usually an ardent advocate of reform and enlightenment. The quest for an enlightened journalism (the anathema to the traditional objective, institutionalized journalism) therefore should be the transmission of ideas and values inherent in one's own culture. To quote E.F. Schumacher's (1975) observations in *Small is Beautiful*: "Values must come first; and from it the ideas that make the world, and one's society, more intelligible to live in".

Hence, journalism can be regarded as culture - the dynamism that constructs and reconstructs reality, the entity that determines everyday life - and the life of the very individuals who create the story. The storyteller - the journalist - does not exist in isolation from the multitude of diverging forces shaping the culture of a civilization. The substance of journalism, for instance the news story, therefore needs to involve shared historical experiences and common structures of meaning. The nature of the material world, the nature and destiny of man and society, the past remembered, the present as recorded, are all parts of the story system (Williams and Pearce, 1974). An analysis of the news culture and of its producers (the journalists) finds that the former lacks the ability of having philosophical insights and epistemological reflections which is very much reflected in the product, as portraying bits and pieces of isolated and unconnected reality (Philips, 1976).
Such a flaw in journalistic culture derues perspectives and the creation or discovery of social facts existent in non-Western societies. If the Press (referring to that of Asia) is not aware of its own society, and does not have an insight into its significance and potentials, then it is not able to deal with itself, and to define its own terms of existence. It cannot protect itself from exogenous factors that have the potential of disrupting the equilibrium of its own existence.

Non-Western journalism should be able to see that so much of the "ingredients" that constitute the existence of non-Western societies (in fact of the world order) are hidden, or veiled from our senses, thought systems, and the intellect. The world thus becomes increasingly unintelligible. We are not concerned about the elites, but rather the thousands of villages and millions of souls marginalized and silenced by the synthetic forces of the market constructing an artificial social, political and intellectual climate.

The conflict between civilizations gives an unfair advantage to one culture if the journalism of the other civilization lacks strength in coming to terms with the order imposed by the first. The problem with the present culture of non-Western journalism is its incapacity to respond meaningfully to the West owing to the perception of its own belief and its culture. The non-Western journalist sees the world from the other perspective. As such, he cannot hope to determine his history. His journalism, much to his ignorance, has been "orientalized". The European West has represented for his non-Western "native" and still does the same today. And he accepts that representation as legitimate and true. Perhaps what was once uttered by a sage may still be true, that "The fault of the East in decay is that it no longer thinks; the West in decay thinks too much and thinks wrongly".

The institution of journalism in non-Western societies has developed, almost invariably, as derivatives of those in the West, and together with it comes along training and education in journalism. In Malaysia, for instance, if we trace the development of journalism and communication schools, and analyse their course structures, course readings and journal publications, the American thinking - "and a particular way of thinking at that" - has dominated communication and journalism education (Zaharom, 1992). But of late, there is some realization that journalism and communication education have departed from the Schramm-Lerner-Berelson paradigm and are posturing toward a seemingly more cultural and holistic tradition normally identified.
with Europe, in particular the epistemology adopted by certain British universities.

However, the paradigm shift is not significant enough to render a transformation in journalism education in Malaysia. For instance, the Communication Department at the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, among others, is seen as the crucible of the American heritage in Malaysia. The same is true of the dominant tradition in other parts of Asia, for instance, Singapore, the Philippines, Hong Kong, Thailand and South Korea.

In another development, some journalism educators (see for instance, Mus Chairil and Fuziah Kartini, 1996), have called for better equipped and informed journalism students adept at the skills of information gathering and processing as well as in the substantive knowledge in the context of the new technologies, namely the emergence of the electronic newspaper. To them, the Internet is the newspaper of the future and the journalists and journalism students have to be efficient in using the technology. They observe:

"It (the Internet) is also affecting the local institutions of learning that are offering courses in journalism and mass communication. These courses have to be conducted in such a manner that the full potential of the Net can be harnessed. The time of teaching journalism using traditional ways is fast coming to an end. Even though the basic 5Ws and 1H is still important, journalism curriculum has to be more creative and innovative. The Digital Age that we are living now calls for specialized training in journalism. We can no longer churn out hundreds of broadly trained journalists. The future of tomorrow's newspapers depends on well-trained specialists. A plausible solution is synergy. We are proposing that the media industry has to hire more specialists to suit current changes."

The specialists, they say, will be made up of people with either a first degree in journalism and postgraduate degree in another field, or a first degree in non-journalism area and a postgraduate degree in journalism, to be able to write better both ordinary news and specialized news or reports.

Quoting Katherine Fulton's "A new agenda for journalism", in Nieman Reports, Spring 1994, they agree to the suggestion of a "massive technological literary" campaign for journalists toward educating themselves about the ethical, economic and political
AHMAD MURAD: Relevance of philosophy...

issues surrounding the "information highway". Issues discussed in journalism schools, according to Mus Chairil and Fuziah Kartini, should cover the Internet as a communication medium and opportunity, or as a new tool for reporting, thinking, communicating and telling their stories, and that learning Internet skills can make students good or better journalists.

Such a perspective to my mind is merely extending the dominant paradigm in journalism teaching and education. While I do not disagree with them I am a little ambivalent as to the expectations thereof. The technical know-how, and the synergy expected from the two different degrees may not make a "good" journalist — one who has perspectival strength. The current thinking already encourages journalists or the journalism student to acquire two different degrees.

What is more important here is understanding the different dimensions of information, and being cognizant that the Net is not only a tool, it is an intellectual tool, it is a technology that underlies a conceptual and an intellectual dimension. As Hairudin notes, the development of computers was more a revolution in thinking than a revolution in technology. A revolution in thinking, because it required some radical shifts in the current intellectual perspectives. It demanded a break from the established norms of thinking about the world and its phenomena.

Thus, the journalist and the journalism student should ask (of the Net) a litany of questions, such as: "Should we expect a machine that would eventually outstrip our intelligence?" (Alexander and Burnett, 1984 in Hairudin). Subsequently, is such a machine feasible and desirable? What are the social and ethical consequences of such a technology? What are the limitations of computer technology, and the Net? The Net, is not only technology but also epistemology, and a socio-cultural artifact (Solomonides and Lewidow, 1985, in Hairudin). To borrow Hairudin's argument on computer education, they are the West's technological and educational response to their contemporary intellectual and socio-political needs. The needs may not exactly concur with the needs of non-Western societies.

What is important is to see the Internet as a different form of technology, not just to be used, but to be understood in all its ramifications. The current perspectives on information held by Asian societies merely extend the paradigm of the orthodoxy of development. Again, philosophy is important to break the orthodoxy, to peel the layers of conventional thinking on technology and to move beyond the factuality of existence. Thus, the underlying basis for philosophy in journalism is
understanding the quintessence of journalism itself.

A typical curriculum in some journalism schools in Malaysia, following the American curriculum, is structured along skills courses such as news-editorial writing, editing and newspaper and magazine management and production. Media and society, and international communication are some of the courses in the communication component. Courses in the social sciences and the humanities, such as political science, sociology, economics, literature, religious studies; and those that fall under philosophy are usually not treated as integral components to journalism and are not seen to have a direct bearing on journalism and its practice. Therefore it does not bring to the student the necessary dimension of philosophical literacy in relation to his environment, and the potential and actual contribution of philosophy to news reporting, opinion writing or other kinds of journalistic enterprises.

Journalism should be seen as not only a skill, or an instrument in the transmission of information, ideas and values, or as technology with specific social, political, economic and cultural objectives. It should also be seen as an intellectual artefact.

Borrowing the argument by Hairudin (1994) on the computer from the intellectual and philosophical dimensions, the understanding of journalism from such a perspective is crucial to the cultivation of a "paradigm basher" journalist. He argues that computer literacy should not be equated only with one's ability to operate a host of software application. Neither should it be confused with the artisan's knowledge or the mechanics of repairing a broken down PC's or the compatibles. Computer literacy, if not exclusively, certainly involves the understanding of the intellectual and social dimensions of computer science. The understanding of the "logic of discovery" behind the development of a computer technology is another indispensable component of holistic computer literacy.

In similar parlance, it is critical not only to imbue the journalism student with the techniques of writing and of substantive knowledge of society, but also to make the student understand the epistemological dimensions surrounding the journalistic enterprise, and its inherent philosophical properties.

While courses may vary from one institution to another, the foundation areas which can inject a broader philosophical orientation in journalism education would be subjects related to the studies of history of ideas and epistemology of information.
I propose that the journalism student should be required to take a number of the courses such as logic, philosophy of science, philosophy of the social sciences, metaphysics, philosophy of mind, philosophy of language, moral and political issues, scientific theory and explanation, technology, culture and change. The courses are to be a major component in the journalism curriculum.

Steering students toward courses in philosophy and intellectual history would help to provide them with a substantive worldview, and alternative perspectives, to contemporary problems and issues over time and space. I suggest that a thorough orientation to this area could prove to be crucial to the education of future journalists amidst the hype over digital technologies and all its ramifications. The culture of journalism education has to change. The journalist, if he is insensitive to the historical and intellectual context of his work (in which many are) may well be like Turing's man. He tends to see the past, and the idea of progress as an indefinite extension of the present (technological or otherwise). His world is finite.

References


Kuhn, Thomas (1992). "The Trouble With The Historical Philosophy of Science". Kesturi. (2)1, 11-29.


Mus Chairil Samani and Fuziah Kartini Basri (March 1996). *The Future*


Ahmad Murad Merican is head of the Department of Journalism, School of Mass Communication at Mara Institute of Technology, Malaysia. This article is extracted from a paper presented at the "Asian Communication: The Next 25 Years", AMIC Annual Conference, June 1-3, 1996, Singapore. Email contact: Amurad@sel.itm.my