
APPROACHES TOWARD THEORIZING MALAY JOURNALISM: HISTORY, CRITICISM AND CONTEXT

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ABSTRACT

The location of journalism education, and hence understanding the profession and the craft has taken a turn toward contextualizing it within communication and media studies and hence viewing it exclusively in the interest of the national polity. This paper discusses the identity of journalism and history of Malay journalism at the analytical level, as well as at the empirical and the popular levels. Thus far, debates with regard to conceptualizing journalism in Malaysia have been silent on the problems of epistemology and journalism as a form of knowledge, history and criticism in relation to colonial society and the nation-state. Thus, there is disconnectedness on journalism as an idea and an area of research in relations to its practice. Ironically the study of journalism as positioned in communication schools in Malaysia has not found their subject matter. Journalism has been invariably taught and researched as a practice and a profession with much folk wisdom and 'hearsay,' without much historical understanding, criticism or self-consciousness. The history of journalism and its inherent values is left to the historical and other social sciences. Thus knowledge of journalism in its historical and cultural contexts are not legitimized and referred to for the very reason that it is not seen as originating from the communication studies domain. Studying journalism within communication has led to its domestication, thus denying it as a genre in historical and political consciousness. This paper suggests that for journalism to unearth its subject matter in theory and in practice, it has to find affinity in the historical, and the human and social sciences.

Keywords: *Malay, journalism, genre, tradition, historiography*

INTRODUCTION

Conversations with journalists and newspaper editors on differences in journalistic text evoke a common response exhibiting indifference. While there is agreement on the difference between news and opinion, there is ambivalence on the existence of different genres within the two categories. There seems to be an absence of commitment to journalistic text form as for example what constitutes news and news analysis; and opinion and commentary, or the column. A story item transmitted by a news agency may be published and placed just anywhere in a newspaper – the front page, the editorial pages or the features section. While there should be some form of interactivity and the manifestation of difference between epistemology and ontology, the teaching and research in journalism in Malaysia displays a similar situation. Journalism, as object of study, has been invariably taught and researched as a practice and a profession with much folk wisdom and “hearsay.” There is not much historical understanding, criticism or self-consciousness. Techniques dominate the day. While the idea is not to produce communication scholars or specialists, still there is a stark absence of the subject matter. Knowledge of journalism is transmitted without its historical and cultural contexts and in this case the conditions inhabiting the Malay world and of the Malay corpus. This explains the absence of work on the origins of Malay journalism.

For understanding the subject of journalism, and that of Malay journalism and its origins, one has to fall back to literature and the Malay writing (and oral) traditions. Such studies toward that effect would have to consider the following:

- Writing and literary traditions of the past and the present
- Theoretical problems of traditions, ideological medium and genres
- Orality and literacy in context
- Historical periodization
- Self-awareness and the creative process
- Cultural and political transformations
- Technology – material and non-material
- Consumption

Hence, the emerging questions are as follows: - what is the origin of Malay journalism? What is journalism to Malay society? How is journalism integral to the Malay writing tradition? And how has that writing tradition created Malay consciousness? What is the subject matter of journalism that informs us of Malay identity, or rather the issue of the identity of Malay journalism? It is beyond the scope of this paper to answer all the questions. It only serves as a point of departure for devising tools in constructing a Malay history of journalism.

THE POLITICS OF ACADEMIC JOURNALISM

The problem at hand raises questions for journalism scholars, and essentially for the domain of journalism. These issues are particularly important, if journalism is not merely to explore ‘any’ relevant journalistic issues, but rather to concentrate its intellectual energies and resources on the major problems, on the problems most in need of exploration. If news media try to fulfill their special mandate, arguably the basis of their special cultural and constitutional status, journalism studies must address what kinds of writing genres, organizational structures, ethical understandings, and means of training or re-training can be designed that ‘re-vision’

and re-ground journalism practices and practitioners. The question is, what kind of trans-level or hybrid structures can be designed that preserve the economic viability of news organizations without rendering news as simply a commercial product. What models could be borrowed and adapted? What models could be designed? What rewards might encourage journalists and news organizations to move, however incrementally, in the direction of the public good or cultural good? At no point have all news media been run by selfless, independent-but-public minded publishers, editors and reporters, nonetheless, the fact that there never was a golden age does not mean that reform and change are impossible (Steiner, p.2000). What is needed is research and further studies (and reflection) on journalism as cultural, political and social capital. Rarely, if at all, has journalism been conceived as such.

Exploring how and why the Malay scribe produces news and opinions and its consumption are crucial. Current understandings of journalism and its (dis)contents rest on an information model of news. Equating news with information, however, may be unhelpful; for the other side of the debate is equally critical. In the Malay world, an understanding of journalism rests in exploring the tradition of writing, debates and opinions. The premise of research needs to ask the right questions. Taking news as a point of departure is erroneous.

THE HISTORIOGRAPHY

If Hooker (2000) and Milner (1995) talk about the tradition of writing and debates in a changing society, they are in effect probing on the journalistic tradition of the Malays. “What were these rather courageous, modern-minded Malays thinking and saying?” Hooker asks in her introduction to *Writing in a New Society* (2000, p.3). While Hooker concentrates much on prose fiction, the same question can be asked pertaining to non-fiction writing – of the essay, the narratives and the chronicles.

Historians and journalism scholars have never deliberated on the scope of journalism history in Malaysia in the sense of an oral, written and literary tradition. Much of what is known of the Malaysian history of journalism is unduly colonial-centric, imperial-centric, print-centric or state-centric. In a profound sense, what is taught in Malaysia can be described as New-York-centric, in that it takes the activities of the largest newspaper in New York City as the primary source of data, and to some extent on Fleet Street journalism.

The historiography and history of journalism in Malaysia is relatively scarce. The few that exist is descriptive and sees the phenomena as ideologically neutral and unproblematic (see, for example, Idid, 2003, 1999; Adnan, 1999; Tham, 1988; Dryer, 1973). This is understandable due to its recent origins, which makes periodical divisions of time less meaningful. Nevertheless, it is urgent to reexamine the circumstances into which journalism has become a field of inquiry in Malaysia, for such a perspective would provide the grounds on which the present corpus as understood is based.

The genesis for the study of journalism history in Malaysia may fall under the rubric of communication studies of which (or the rudiments of it) can be traced to the writings of British administrator/scholars in the context of colonial interest. Prior to 1941, the British administrators were interested to know about the Malays, the political systems and beliefs, and the society in colonial Malaya (Tham, 1981). If anything at all that has come to be understood as journalism (and communication), it was the writing about the press in Malaya. Such writings, either by the British administrators themselves (for example, Birch, 1879), or by historians and native scholars in colonial Malaya, in particular “*Malay Journalism in Malaya* by Zainal Abidin Ahmad (1941), were mainly contained in the *Journal of the Malayan Branch*

Royal Asiatic Society (JMBRAS). Their approach was historical and descriptive, aimed at understanding mainly the Malays and their institutions. What is taken to be unproblematic, can somehow be contextualized by what anthropologist Bernard Cohn (1996,) in Shamsul, (1999) terms as the conquest of “epistemological space” based on his study of British rule in India. By that is meant, an investigative modality which:

includes the definition of a body of information that is needed, the procedures by which appropriate knowledge is gathered, its ordering and classification, and then how it is transformed into usable forms such as published reports, statistical returns, histories, gazetteers, legal codes, and encyclopedias (in Shamsul, 1996:5)

Such writing can be broadly labeled as a colonial-orientalist construction. They inform us, in this case, how and Malay journalism in Malaya is “dominated, shaped and ‘factualised’ culturally, by colonial knowledge.” In fact, based on Shamsul’s framework on Malay identity, knowledge was produced of early Malay journalism as established in the cataloguing and writings by Muhammad bin Datok Muda (1940), Roff (1972, 1967, 1961), and Gullick (1953), among others. In addition, a total of 80 theses and dissertations were written for the Department of History both the University of Malaya (UM), and Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM); the Department of Malay Studies, UM and the Institute of Malay Language, Literature and Culture, UKM, and also of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) between 1958 and 1982 (for example, Nik Ahmad Nik Hassan, 1958; Abdullah Jaafar, 1970/71; Ahmad Mt Zin, 1980/81; Arshad Narawi, 1976/77; Ashaari Yusoff, 1975; Brown, 1977; Fakrurazi Abdul Majid, 1967; Maimon Zainal Abidin, 1981; Mariah Salleh, 1977; Marina Merican, 1960; Muhammad Taib Osman, 1958; Noriah Dermawan, 1975; Sofiah Abu Bakar, 1975; Radin Soenarno, 1959; and Zainon Ahmad, 1979).

The theses and dissertations written, mainly by Malay students of History, Literature and Malay Studies on suratkhobar and persuratkhabaran, majallah in relation to kaum, bangsa and kebangsaan kerajaan dan negeri imply a reproduction in their own thinking of the idea of social systems, nationalism, ethnicity, modernization, progress and the nation-state, founded on the belief that such institutions are crucial and a natural process toward political cohesion, governance and statehood. What can be inferred from this is that journalism as a field of inquiry began in colonial Malaya; and more significantly, the genesis of what can be termed as mass media studies in Malaysia lies in history, literature and Malay Studies – the last established in 1949 under the Faculty of Arts, UM, till this day, instituted as the Academy of Malay Studies is still struggling to escape its colonial trappings. The corpus produced does not provide for genre differentiation and was silent on the journalistic text form.

SCIENCE, NEWS AND IDEOLOGY

In Western historiography, the shift in man’s vision of the universe was a significant point in history having ramifications embodied in a mechanistic philosophy impinging upon the concepts of values, objectivity, time, space and place. Written communication is an example (which is unlike oral communication) of the separation of writer and reader in space and time. This implies that the separation of the message from the producer and that of the producer from the audience, the context or situation can no longer be so significant for interpreting the message. Such is illustrative in the news story, which can either be in the form of print, broadcast, or cyber technology. One argument that demands some attention here is that the gamut of scientific enterprise has determined the idea of news, and its subsequent intellectual

and cultural importance to modern society.

What is a “news story” and how can it be located within the domain of the rise of modern society? A news story, seen to be a Western invention, may be regarded as a self-contained “reality” of an event produced by the conventions of the modern mass media, principally that of journalism, a fairly recent phenomenon given the emergence of modern societies. Much of the thinking on the nature of news revolves around how it defines reality which ultimately exists as a socially constructed or symbolically built environment. This assumption is largely based on the premise that the externalized condition, or what can be labeled as pseudo-environment, stands between the individual and the world beyond (O’Brien, 1983, p.4). News, which creates an environment, is in turn the product of a culture, created by the epistemology of science. If news as such is given prominence as crucial in comprehending Malay journalism, it would be in opposition to the view that Malay society is based on orality and aurality. Is Malay society already ‘visual’ before the coming of modernity?

If news is a predominant way of knowing in the context of modern societies, do we actually “know”? Does it make sense in space and time? To relate to the sentiments of geographer Yi-Fu Tuan on the geographies of experience, does news give us a sense of space of place? As a product of the social order, and reflecting that very order, news therefore does not exist in isolation from the multitude of diverging forces shaping and determining the culture and technology of a civilization. If that is so, how do we make out the form of news to the Malays before their encounter with modernity? Given the routinization of the journalistic process with regard to news reportage, could the Malay pantun and bidalan embody the Malay cerita? Taking the virtual as a modern phenomenon, the Malay pantun in its polysemic form, already embodies both the virtual and the immediate dimensions.

An analysis of the “science” and the “culture” of news, as a product of the communication media, and that of its procedures, i.e., the profession, however shows that the product derived from the latter, underscores the absence of philosophical insights and epistemological reflections. What is reflected instead is the portrayal of bits and pieces of isolated and unconnected reality. And the style of journalism according to Philips (1976), - whether “objective,” “new,” “advocacy,” or “precision,” which stems largely to communicate across a heterogeneous audience, typically uses direct and economical syntax, with short sentences, with minimal qualifying statements. The moment is apprehended and history is captured in its “presentness”, just like the Malay pantun, not unlike Hume’s assertion on the primacy of facts, and of “brute facts” at that, apparently without any ultimate rationale of purpose behind them (Khursheed, 1995, 36).

The Occidental argument sees such a method in the restructuring of the environment through unconnected reality (where “reality” is perceived and understood as observable “facts”), gives little, or no social and cultural value to society for it inherently doubts reality itself. Such a method has the effect of inhibiting a sense of the totality of things. The construction of modern science and the perception of modernity, instead of maintaining the production of news as a cultural and an ideational art, have relegated news to an industrial art (Carey, 1983) to a universe without meaning, creating a chasm between fact and value deriving from a *weltanschauung*, which has been profoundly transformed since the Renaissance.

This brings us to the dimension of technology, for example, of electricity and later the telegraph, which was invented and used, and thereby ushering the industrial revolution, which has an effect on the nature and the definition of news, news gathering and writing as

a form of mediated communication. The use of such technology has annihilated time and space, and created the notion of time as a means of measurement bearing upon the contingent. Conversely, in metaphysical terms, the news has no sense of yesterday or tomorrow. It is not conscious of its “now” by tomorrow will soon be yesterday. If to Gutenberg, time is the Bible, to the news worker, time is the clock – subconsciously profane and secular.

Technology has also brought about the “ideology” of objectivity. Since studies on this subject within the matrix of the media and the history of science are inadequate and disparate, we first of all refer to physicist and philosopher Werner Heisenberg’s observations. Heisenberg poses the question: “To what extent have we finally come to an objective description of the world, especially of the atomic world?” (1958, p.55) According to Heisenberg, in classical physics, science starts from the belief – or should one say from the illusion? – that we could describe the world or at least parts of the world without any reference to ourselves. He says this is not possible to a large extent, whether we see a phenomenon or not. And its success has led to the general ideal of an objective description of the world. Objectivity has become the first criterion for the value of any scientific result. Thus, therein lay the detachment of the observer from the observed shifts to the observer being part of the observed. Heisenberg notes that since the measuring device has been constructed by the observer, what we observe is not nature in itself but nature exposed to our method of questioning.

Heisenberg’s profound question undermines the ideal of objectivity in the study of physics. In a similar vein, Schudson asks the same question with regard to journalism. His *Discovering the News* (1978) discusses this very problem – that of the separation between facts and values. Schudson says that the belief in objectivity is the belief that one can and should separate facts from values. Facts, in this view, are assertions about the world open to independent validation. They stand beyond the distorting influences of any individual’s personal preferences.

Values on the other hand, are an individual’s conscious or unconscious preferences for what the world should be; they are seen as ultimately subjective and so without legitimate claim on other people. He explains that the belief in objectivity is a faith in “facts,” a distrust in “values,” and “a commitment to their segregation.” In his discussion on objectivity as an ideology, Schudson is not interested in the internal development of science as an institution or as a body of knowledge and practices, but the reasons the idea of science and the ideal of objectivity are so “resonant in our culture.”

In contrast, Schiller takes a fairly internalist view in his explanation on the objective world and the world of fact. He clarifies that positivism in science and history encourages a general cultural acceptance of a reportable, objective world. He notes that news shares the same commitment. Journalistic objectivity presumes a world prior to all imposed values, and the periodic construction of accurate and universally recognizable copies of events in the world become the “newspaper’s fundamental business.”

To Schiller (1981), the rise of objectivism in modern science and philosophy is considered the hallmark of their modernity. He attributes Copernicus as dislodging humankind from the center of the universe. Quoting Matson: “It remained for the Galilean-Newtonian revolution to remove him from the universe altogether.” But perhaps paradoxically, this objective universe afforded a unique opportunity for human experimentation and control. The great machine that was the substance of Descartes’ famous dream in 1619 inflamed a radical doubt as the prime methodological feature of the scientific pursuit of knowledge. “Corgito ergo

sum” became the measure of the man as man became the measurer of the universe. But it was in the theme of the European Enlightenment rooted in the Baconian philosophical and methodological assumptions that Schiller attributes to the rise of the media in objectively covering the “objective world.”

Discussions on the history and context of journalism in Malaysia and that of Malay journalism are largely based on the premise of news and its rational and objective values. What then is the “objective world” of the Malays in the context of journalism? Or the *cerita*? Can the particular journalism that appeared in the Malay world resulting from initial contacts with Europe be separated from the Malay writing tradition and that of Malayness?

AN APPROACH IN CRAFTING A MALAY HISTORY OF JOURNALISM: RESPONDING TO MODERNITY OR CONTINUING A TRADITION?

Within the context of the evolution of the Malaysian nation, the first published newspaper in the modern sense of the word was The Government Gazette in 1806. The Gazette was based in Penang, at that time part of the Straits Settlement. Seventy years later, in 1876, saw the publication of *Jawi Peranakan* in Singapore. *Jawi Peranakan*, a weekly, was considered the first Malay newspaper in Malaysian historiography. But why would that be so? Considering the peninsular and Singapura as part of the Nusantara region, the first Malay newspaper would be *Soerat Kabar Bahasa Melajioe* published in East Java in 1856, 20 years preceding *Jawi Peranakan*. Subsequently we see the *Soerat Chabar Betawi* in 1858. The two periodicals were the earliest manifestation of Malay journalism using both the Rumi (Romanized) and *Jawi* (Arabic) script at the same time. *Jawi Peranakan* would be the first Malay newspaper in Malaysia, not the first Malay newspaper in the Malay world.

Stretching the history of Malay journalism beyond the boundaries of the Malaysian nation-state, *Soerat Kabar Bahasa Melajioe* would be the first Malay newspaper. The comprehension of the history of Malay journalism in Malaysia has always been based on the political identity of the Malays, defined by the Federal Constitution. Such an attitude and perception narrows and marginalizes Malay identity itself, and that of the epistemological and ontological dimensions of journalism contextualized within Malay literary and writing practices. It erases the meaning of writing as a manifestation of intellectual history having its roots in the Malay literary tradition. An approach toward constructing a history of Malay journalism has to bracket it within the evolution of Malay literature, the reality and the metaphor of the Pen, sometimes termed as *pekerjaan kalam* (the deed of the reed pen) as Braginsky (2004, p.1) describes Literature in his historical survey of Malay literature.

Literary writing tradition forms an invaluable heritage to the identity of the Malays who reside in the Malay Peninsula, Sumatera, several regions in Kalimantan, and a number of island in the Malay Archipelago. Journalism in the Malay world must be seen as a continuity to that literary tradition, initially carved out and stored in stone inscriptions using the alphabet from southern India. Stone inscriptions, as found in various parts of Sumatera and the Peninsula evoke a kind of Innisian echo in that it ramifies power and control – and not only reflecting the collective memory of the community at that time. Nevertheless, early Malay writing tradition reflects oral literature and the beginning of the Hindu-Buddhist literary experience during the first century through the middle of the 14th century. Henceforth, the Malay Archipelago underwent through the process of Islamization, and subsequently European colonization.

If Bahasa Melayu has been the lingua franca among the various ethnic groups in the archipelago as a vehicle for cultural, religious, and commercial communication; the tradition of writing and literature becomes its medium of communication connecting the peoples within the region and between them and the Arab-Persian-Indian tradition and subsequently to the Occident. The current view states that the emergence of journalism in the Malay Archipelago results from European penetration. Moving beyond the modern historical period, Malay journalism can be seen in the context of continuity before pre-European encounters and a transformation of early Malay literary experience. The domain of Malay letters and Malay journalism are two sides of the same intellectual traditions in the history and experience of the evolution of Malay identity.

The earliest efforts in the transmission of news of events were pioneered by Jan Pieterszoon Coen in Indonesia in 1615, through the hand-written newsletter titled *Memorie der Nouvelles*. The newsletter was distributed amongst the employees of the Dutch East India Company. The first printed newsletter in the Malay Archipelago was *Succesos Felices* (Peristiwa-peristiwa yang Mujur) in 1637 by Spaniard printer Thomas Pinpin. What can be established is that journalism, beginning with the hand-written newsletter, or with the printed newspaper was first established in the Malay Archipelago almost about 390 years ago.

The craft of journalism in the Malay Archipelago has gone through various changes based on its functions and roles. If earlier on, it reported on events and happenings and missionary activities, it subsequently became a channel for commerce and business transactions and continued to be a medium for cultural and political expression. Indeed, the Malay debat (debat Melayu) began very early before any newspaper in Malay was published. Abdullah Munsyi is responsible for this 'genre.' In the early 1800s, Abdullah, from his writings, was considered to be the founder of Malay modernism.

BY WAY OF A CONCLUSION

Like any other form of linguistic communication, journalism obeys the same general laws as the communication sciences. But it has its own characteristics which are not suitable for literary analysis, because the manner and object of the journalistic text differ fundamentally from those of the literary or artistic text. Therefore, it is important to define genre. Here, a genre's definition follows two schools of language research: some regard it as a product and some as a process (Gledhill, 2002). The generic texts are used as products for various purposes: to describe, explain, instruct. Furthermore, it can be argued that generic texts are also processes aimed at, among other: (1) description, (2) explanation and (3) instruction.

The development of the news genre in the Malay press was a long process. In fact, news is a late-comer form in the tradition of Malay writing, the Malay scribe falls along a continuum of what we call opinion-influenced stylistic form to the *tawarikh*, the writing of history as fact and criticism. The traditional story-teller (the *tukang cerita*) takes a new form. The new journalistic medium, which generally began with *Jawi Peranakan* in 1876 embodied new genres of writing – namely the news genre (*khobar*) and the commentary genre (*makalah*) but the latter genre, was the most popular in the days before World War II. Integral to Malay journalism throughout the years are the following genre: (1) news (*berita*) (2) news analysis (*analisis berita*), (3) features (*rencana*) (4) the leader (*lidah pengarang*), (5) opinion (*pendapat*), (6) editorial cartoon (*kartun editorial*), (7) column (*pojok*), (8) criticism (*kritikan*), and (9) essay

(esei). Generally, genres numbers three through nine are conventionally identified as makalah.

The Malay form of makalah was dominated by criticisms of society as manifested in the works of Eunus Abdullah (of Utusan Melayu) and Syed Shaikh al-Hady (of al-Imam). Here, the journalist takes a direct part. His or her attitude to an event is not neutral (objective), but evaluative (subjective). The communicator wants to interpret the event, that is, to give it meaning – especially shown in our relationship to them. Self-criticism tends to dominate the trajectory of Malay journalism before the colonial period. The Malay journalist played the role of a social scientist, the philosopher, the thinker, armed with ideological, cultural and philosophical tools, and harnessing the suratkhobar as a weapon for insight and reform. During the period between 1876 and before World War II, Malay journalists see themselves within the context of Nusantara and the Malay world. One sees this in Al-Imam (1906-08) and Jawi Peranakan (1876-1896). The fostering of the knowledge of Malayness and a sense of community and identity was very much displayed in the latter.

The Jawi Peranakan sees itself not as an institution in Malaya but in the Malay world with representatives (wakil) not only in most parts of the Malay Peninsula, but also in the Sumatra in places such as Medan, Deli, Padang and Singkel, and in Riau, and Sarawak. It published long reports describing conditions and events in most of these areas. Roff (1976, p.54) raises the question of consciousness. Jawi Peranakan must have assisted in the development of Malay consciousness, of its unity, as well of its diversity. Much of Malay journalism as seen in the narratives of Abdullah Munsyi before it, and those appearing between the 1900 and World War II, echo that consciousness reflecting both transformation and continuity of a tradition.

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