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# THE ELEMENTS OF NEWS CONSTRUCTION MODEL IN MALAYSIA

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## ABSTRACT

What becomes news in one country is different from another, and this is connected with the fact that news construction is a complex process. When discussing the complexity of news construction, one of the most important criteria that should not be neglected is the specificity of news construction in a certain country and/or culture. As such, the news construction model in Malaysia is one of the examples of a complex and specific process, as Malaysia is an Islamic country home to a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society. Thus, this paper will discuss two concepts that are suggested as the foundations of the news construction model in Malaysia. They include the principles of Islam and its connection to journalism practice, and multiculturalism. In discussing this, the paper argues that, these concepts are unable to demonstrate complexity and specificity of news construction in Malaysia, but they enable further the focus on the specificity of Malaysian news to be explored and extended by future studies.

*Keywords: Malaysian news, specificity, multi cultural, news construction model*

## INTRODUCTION

News construction in one country differs than others, although they might have some similarities. The similarities, some argues, is connected with the universal practice of journalism that is being practiced by all journalists around the world. The differences, however, is more obvious and of larger aspect. Thus, this paper argues that news construction model in a particular country must be specific to the uniqueness of the country and it is impossible to have a universal model that has attempted to simplify the explanation and to produce universal justification of communication process.

Thus, this discussion suggests two concepts in discussing the news construction model in Malaysia. It suggests that the foundations of the model are suitly based on Islamic principles of communication and the multiculturalism of Malaysia.

### **SPECIFICITY OF NEWS CONSTRUCTION IN MALAYSIA**

News construction in Malaysia has been discussed largely in the context of political economy (Zaharom 2000), with emphasis of discussions related to de-westernization (Curran and Park 2000, Gunaratne 2007, Gunaratne 2010, Papoutsaki 2007 and Wasserman and de Beer 2009 and Asian values (Asad 1995, Xiaoge 2005) that thus related to Asian journalism (Massey and Chang 2005, Masterton 1996, Romano 2005). Besides that, Malaysian news construction is also heavily connected to developmental journalism (Xiaoge 2005).

These approaches, in general, argue on the specificity of news construction in Malaysia, that it is inaccurate to generalize the situations in the West to be similar to Malaysia in terms of how events become news. It is, a way of highlighting the views of the third world, thus having their own voice “that to speak from within that culture and tradition is itself an act of an-imperialist resistance (Ahmad 1992: 9).

The views from de-westernization opponents such as Curran and Park (2000) generally argue that in Malaysia, for example, globalization is a way to reduce the power of the status quo. This implies that in order to understand a specific situation about news construction, local scholars must always generate specific knowledge to produce local conceptual and theoretical framework to understand specific local phenomena (Gunaratne 2010). Through the notion of Asian values for example, it “stresses the role of culture, including religion, in determining the identity and distinctiveness of the Asian peoples” (Mohd Azizuddin et al. 2009: 92), thus emphasizing, to some extent, on specificity in terms of Malaysian context. Among others, religion is a particularly important element that is always included in discussing Asian journalism.

Romano (2005) summarizes the role of Asian journalism as to become the support to nation building, as government partners to support development activities, as agents of empowerment, as watchdogs of government wrongdoings and to ensure transparency. To achieve these, censorship is used in, for example a Thailand newspaper as quoted by Romano, to reduce the impact of ‘panic’ among the public during the 1990’s economic slow down. Besides that, Romano added, in most Asian countries, censorship is a common practice to avoid racial tension.

Yet, although such concepts can become a way of initializing local knowledge, they still, however, fall into the problem of generalization as the reality is that Asian countries themselves are heterogeneous in terms of political, cultural and journalistic practices. For example, Asian Values in Malaysia are associated with Islamic elements, as opposed to teaching-oriented Singapore Confucianism (Xu 2005).

Another example is in the case of Indonesia. Romano and Blythe (2005) noted the changing situations of journalism in different reigns of presidents. Newspaper *Antara* at some points is the mouthpiece of the government (under President Suharto), but it offers more independence to the workers under the reign on President Habibie. This suggests that, if specificity within a particular newspaper is recognized, it is difficult to generalize any circumstances about news constructions at a particular time.

This also applies to the notion of developmental journalism. Although it is synonymous to Malaysia, it is applied distinctly in Africa (Wasserman and De Beer 2009).

## **SPECIFIC FOUNDATIONS OF NEWS CONSTRUCTION MODEL IN MALAYSIA: ISLAMIC PRINCIPLES AND MULTICULTURALISM**

It is impossible to explain the rationale of news construction model in Malaysia if the Islamic principles are ignored. This is mainly because Malaysia declares itself as a Muslim country and inhabited by majority of Muslims. Despite that, there are also two other major races in Malaysia, namely Chinese and Indian, that also requires discussion about multiculturalism that follows in the next section.

In terms of discussing news construction in Malaysia and the Islamic aspect of it, the first aspect brought up by Khiabany (2006) is that, 'Islam' should not be seen as pre-determined determinant that is then used to explain communication. Instead, he argues in terms of the relationship between Islam and the state in news production, "It is not Islam that gives meaning to the state but rather it is the coercive force of the state that makes the particular 'Islam what it is in a particular national context'" (Khiabany 2006: 19).

This suggests the importance of paying attention to the specificity of 'Malaysian context' when discussing about news construction and Islam in the country. If Khiabany's view is taken into consideration, this proposes that what makes Islamic communication in the context of Malaysia is always connected with how the state uses its power to shape a particular form of 'Islamic communication' in a specific country.

Here, although Khiabany does not agree with many aspects of Islamic communication discussed by Hamid Mowlana, a scholar that advocates Iran as an example of *an* Islamic communication, this observation can be connected to Mowlana's view about how a particular form of Islam in a country is associated with ethical and tabligh (propagation) aspects (Mowlana 1993).

This directly connects how Islam views what it means by news as written in the Quran, (II: 42) news from Islamic cultural theory is based on 'truth unmixed with willful falsehood' (Mughees-uddin 1997). Here, supposedly in the construction of news, ethical issues must directly impacting what becomes news; that truth must always be an imperative element of news construction. Truth becomes a journalism ethical aspect that deserves to be treated carefully, then only the propagation can be delivered to the readers.

Truth is also connected with the content of news, as well as the purpose, and process of news gathering, and the writing news is adhere to the concept of social responsibility (Mughees-uddin 1997). Thus, anything about people and events that become news must always related to the benefit of the readers. Hence, "news must have good consequence to the readers, do not destroy the reputation of anybody, benefit to the readers, seek the truth, just news, avoid false allegation and accuse anyone either Muslim or non-Muslim". It is rather obvious here that the major objective of news is "to promote good and educate the people towards goods" (Mughees-uddin 1997: 61), through "dissemination and diffusion of some principle, belief or practice." (Mowlana 2003: 308).

Thus, a Muslim journalist, according to Mowlana (1989: 141-142) "destroy myths. In our contemporary world these myths may include power, progress, science, development, modernization, democracy, achievement and success. Personalities as they represent these

must not be superhumanized and superdeified.... Under the principle of Tawheed another fundamental consideration in communication (another important duty of Muslim journalists) become clear: the destruction of thought structure based on dualism, racialism, tribalism and familial superiority... . One of the dualisms according to this principle is the secular notion of the separation of religion and politics.”

This is done, argues Mowlana (1996) by relating communication activities with the concept of tabligh (propagation) that includes four principles: Tawhid (monothesim); responsibility, guidance and action (*amar makruf nahi mungkar*); Islamic community (*ummah*); and *taqwa* (piety). Mass media should be seen as a tool of propagation, that must lead to the increase of tawhid to Allah, leading readers to guide each other, creating a united *ummah* and creating a society that is always have the faith to Allah. This approach, to Mowlana, is a way of explaining ‘Islamic communication’. On the contrary, Khiabany (2006) argued that there is no single theory to explain Islamic communication. Khiabany further argues that it is wrong to see Islam as a single aspect, as in reality, Islam is being practiced by heterogeneous people around the world.

While Khiabany is correct, discussions made by Mowlana has its own contribution in terms of connecting Islamic concepts with communication activities. Besides connecting concepts of Islam with communication, some discussions have been made to connect language used in media with Islamic principles. To Ahmad Shehu (1996), there is very important role played by language. Even in Islam, “language is one of the uncountable blessings of Allah on humans, it is a distinctive feature that proves, as reasoning does, the supremacy and excellency of humans above other creatures” (Ahmad Shehu 1996: 51). Accurate use of language can lead to attitude change (to become more positive) if the messages are effective.

Ahmad Shehu (1996) sees Islamic language as “any language spoken by a Muslim language community, where the driving force in the communal memory is Islam” (Ahmad Shehu 1996: 52). However, Ahmad Shehu also noted that an Islamic language is not merely derived from Arabic loan words, but it includes native languages spoken by local people. It is the message within the language is where the Islamic elements can be embedded thus an important tool to disseminate ideologies.

He explained some of the criteria of effective Islamic language, that can also be applied to the usage of language in mass media. Some of the criteria are to be eloquent and able to conserve with grammatical and stylistic rules of the language in conveying the message to the people, able to identify the linguistic and educational standard of the target group, sensitive to the generality of the people, the knowledgeable and the ignorant, illiterate and elite (Ahmad Shehu 1996: 56). Besides that, Ahmad Shehu also recognizes the effectiveness of literary works such as poetry, wise sayings and quotations from the Quran and hadith to convince the listeners to the message.

Thus, this implies that Islamic concepts can be used to not only explain the general explanations of communication, but also guide how language should be used in mass media. This, to some extend, supports the view that Islam can be seen as a complete *deen* (culture) and “all-encompassing from or pattern for living” (Mughees-uddin 1997: 59). When Islam is understand as such, it also suggests that there is no separation between politics, ethics and other social systems including the media system.

It is here that is necessary to note that with this perspective uphold, journalism practices have to be based on the Quran and hadith, the principle of tawhid and the belief that goods

and bads will be judged in the hereafter (Mughees-uddin 1997). This strikes the difference between the Islamic view about communication and the West because Islamic communication is not necessarily related to merely the ownership of the media and presenting Islamic content (Khiabany 2006).

Khiabany (2006) further presented the difference between Islamic and Western style of communication:

- Islamic principles of communication locate human hearts to be for God and nature, and there is no separation between branches in the society. For example, there is no distinction between religion and politics.
- Islam: the importance of oral nature in communication that is reflected in the Quran and Hadith.
- In Islam, the pursuit of knowledge is equal to pursuit of value. Thus, news construction must both deliver knowledge to readers and good values.

However, the principles might be easily accepted by Muslim journalists because these are the teachings that they are familiar with. The question is now, how is the application of such principles among the non-Muslims? This question becomes pertinent especially because in Malaysia, although it is an Islamic country, it is settled by other major ethics such as Chinese and Indians.

## MULTICULTURALISM AND NEWS CONSTRUCTION MODEL IN MALAYSIA

The fact that Malaysia is resided by other races who believed other religions besides Islam, multiculturalism must be valued and recognized whenever the formation of news construction model is concerned. These religions include Buddhism, Hindu dan Christian, and journalists from different races and religions do cover and write news for this heterogeneous community.

Among the culturalists, they view the adaptation of different cultures with the analogy of the 'salad bowl' (Bobbie 2010). The model that refers to intercultural adaptation in America argues that different cultures in America do exist together but they don't merge into a single homogenous culture. This is however, contradict with the melting pot metaphor, that says the adaptation will turn a heterogeneous society into a homogenous one. Although these concepts are not without critique, the analogy of the salad bowl might to some extent describes the situation in Malaysia.

Albeit various intercultural projects organized by the state to reduce the gap among races in Malaysia, including the formation of *bangsa Malaysia* where Malaysians are identified as 'Malaysians' rather than by distinct race, Giacchino-Baker (2000) in the study of teacher education in Malaysia and the United States found that most teachers interviewed do not feel that they are 'Malaysians'. This is, argued Giacchino-Baker, a danger of the melting pot theory, as different races still feel that, in some cases, they are not truly Malaysian because "of a latent feeling of dissatisfaction among all ethnic groups." Another participant in the research added, "If there is no equality between all the races, being 'Malaysian' has no meaning" (Giacchino-Baker 2000: 12).

Thus, it is not strange to find the views among journalists that, in a different discussion made (Siti Suriani Othman 2012), some newspapers still adhere to reporting events based

on the interests of certain ethnic groups. Considering some issues pertaining to ownership of the newspaper, target readers of certain newspapers and editorial preferences, and the relationship with news construction, these can be connected with the type of news published by newspapers in Malaysia.

For example, based on a study conducted (Siti Suriani Othman 2012), *New Straits Times* (*NST*) attempts to reach the widest readers and the strength is it is published in English. However, the main challenge of the *NST* is to reach its younger readers, as the newspaper is now read mostly by older generation in the readers profile. Other mainstream newspapers such as *Utusan Malaysia* (*UM*) and *Berita Harian* (*BH*) target for Malay readers, although *BH* tends to include wider issues including some space for human interest stories.

Other newspapers such a tabloid newspaper that requested for anonymity in the study, prefers not to publish political stories, unless if it contains sensational value in it. *The Sun* (*TS1*), a free urban newspaper, targets Malaysians regardless of race residing in urban areas, while *The Star* (*TS2*) highlights stories close to the interests of the Chinese although it is published in English. Some argued that it is the ownership issue of *TS2*, that is linked with the government, that affects what becomes news at the newspaper. For *TS1*, lesser political influence is traced as the ownership is privately owned.

Here are just some examples to demonstrate that in producing a news construction model for Malaysian newspapers, a lot of considerations need to be taken into account. Ownership is of course one of them, but it is not limited to that only otherwise this discussion will also tend to fall into political economists' discussions about news. Among other things, the views from some Malaysian journalists working in English and Malay newspapers (Siti Suriani Othman 2012) suggest that there exist a strong sense of 'salad bowl' in terms of the news construction in the country. There are of course attempts to bridge this gap, such as done by *BH* (to reduce political stories although it does raise questions pertaining to journalism and democracy) and the *NST* (trying to reach young readers), but some readers who don't read these newspapers questioned the bias of reporting they found in the news, that rather affect the popularity of the newspaper (Syed Nazri Syed Harun 2009).

However, although the mosaic of the society in Malaysia and its press system can be explained through the metaphor of the salad bowl, thus the maintaining of distinct identity among different races, the fact that living in the modern society and connected with the mass media and the internet, is taking globalization as a pertinent concept of discussing news construction model in Malaysia. In the context of Malaysia, the emergence of the Internet has not only become so influential that it becomes a very important source of information and blogs become a popular avenue among Malaysians to express their views, but it is also seen as a communication tool that affects public thinking and thus, affects national election results as the internet provides much more heterogeneous information that the public was not familiar with before (Smeltzer and Lepawsky 2010).

This echoes Marshall McLuhan's (1964) notion of global village in *Understanding Media*, that the world becomes 'smaller' when the people is opened to various avenues of connecting through the traditional and the new media. This however, argued McLuhan, does not turn the society into a homogenous society, rather the community can become much more diverse than before the invention of the internet as predicted 30 years before the internet was invented.

Further, the diversity within the community of Malaysia is another factor to support that globalization is indeed an embedded background in Malaysian society. Three major

ethnicities (Malay, Chinese and India) and various religions suggest that discussing about Malaysia and its press system must always include multiculturalism factor. However, within the multiculturalism, religions also become more diverse but the problem with this is the contradictory nature between religion and globalization.

There is inherent feature of religion to globalize itself, which is through missionary actions and to extend its ability to reach a larger group of believer (Eilders n.d.). However, Eilders also observes that religions are not universal as they compete with different religions to become global.

However, albeit the impact of globalization and the inherent feature of globalizing within the modern society, religion is argued to be able to reduce the negative effects of globalization especially with the advancement of the internet. Thus, one of the elements that should always be included when discussing multiculturalism is religion. Without religion, globalized human beings can become too diverse, that the diversity could affect the definition of right and wrong among them. Here, we argue that the inherent globalized feature of religion should be used as the tool to understand other religions and reduce the gap of the salad bowl, but the ununiversality of a specific religion can become the source of in-depth comprehension of a specific religion and thus the practice of the teachings following strong understandings of the principles.

## **SUGGESTIONS OF FOUNDATIONS OF NEWS CONSTRUCTION MODEL IN MALAYSIA**

Thus this paper suggests to consider these two elements in considering the foundations of news construction model in Malaysia. With this suggestion, we extend the argument that journalists will able to produce news suitable for the Malaysian context only if they understand other religions in the country, but they also have profound knowledge about the religion they embrace.

With that, we suggested to consider some teachings in Islam to be considered as the foundations of news construction model in Malaysia, following the national religion of the country which is Islam. As discussed in the earlier part of this paper, it suggests that the moral values advocated by Islam can also be followed by non-Muslim journalists in the country as they are in line with journalism ethics. Values such as to avoid publishing harm news that avoid slander and defamation, and using appropriate language are also in line with the general ethical conducts of human beings in the world.

Thus, it can be argued that, supposedly, Muslim countries should embrace these values further, that should able to turn Muslim countries as examples of a successful news construction model. Furthermore, in Islam, the benefit of the majority is prioritized, than upholding capitalism. Here, if the values are valued by the Muslim countries, they should also become free from any interventions, except following the rules of God.

Consequently, some would view that control from the state can be deemphasized, because what really makes people ethical, from Islamic perspective should be the fear of Allah. However, due to deviant nature and potentials of disruptive move by some, laws and regulations are still needed. It is just that, if the fear to Allah is the main fear among the public (that includes the journalists), rules can be reduced and the public can be treated more maturely.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has discussed important foundations in discussing news construction model in Malaysia. Two elements identified to be the most important aspects are the principles of Islam in journalism (thus ethical issues) and the multiculturalism of Malaysia. Being sensitive of these elements should assist journalists to construct news that will not harm other people but in fact benefit the majority. Besides that, news in Malaysia must also be sensitive of the needs of heterogeneous needs of the different ethnicities that include to respect the status of the King, racial and religious issues. Thus, ideally, if both aspects are under consideration of journalists, press freedom can become an unquestioned concept.

However, some view that most Islamic countries has always been criticized for not advocating press freedom (Mughees-uddin 1997). In his arguments, Mughees-uddin said that Muslim media should be free from governmental regulations and censorship because the concept of fear goes to Allah and not to the king or president. From his view, "In the Muslim world, by and large, the media seems to play the opposite role of *amar bil ma'rul wa nahi 'anil munkar*" (Mughees-uddin 1997: 62).

However, in the context of Malaysia and the potential threat of globalization especially from the internet, it is not easy to let the media operates without censorship. For example, through laws, materials with pornography elements can be banned to enter the country. Besides that, specifically when considering the multicurality of Malaysia, there are some aspects of sensitivity that needs to be considered. It is suggested that to increase understanding among ethnics of different religions in Malaysia, the globalized nature of religion and the ununiversalise nature of religion can be considered.

In this instance, we argue that, following the Islamic principles can assist journalists to reduce conflict after the publication of news, because they consequently uphold journalism ethics. Here, control from the state can be reduced, but in the context of Malaysia, this can only be done when all newspaper organizations understand Islamic principles and relate them with the practice of journalism. Differences of different religions are cherished, and it is important to be the source of profound understanding of the faith of individual journalist especially the non Muslims.

By suggesting this, we however are not saying that other religions are of lower value in Malaysia, but taking Islamic values as the universal values journalists can practice is to reflect the practice of the majority of the nation, and to produce news stories that echo the principles of the official religion of the country. Here, it is seen that the issue of living harmonously in multiculturalism and thus globalization can be sustained via lesser control by the state, but through practice of religious principles that guide the life of the public including the journalists.

Thus, discussions about foundations of news construction model in Malaysia could be explored more in-depth if journalists in Chinese and Indian newspapers in Malaysia are also interviewed to hear their views about the current journalism practice and the suitability of Islamic principles to be applied to their newspapers. Through such interviews, too, will enable researchers to identify other elements that are important to be considered when discussing about news construction model in Malaysia. It is by including such specificity that allows further understanding of the foundations of the model. As demonstrated, two concepts discussed as the foundations of news construction model in Malaysia are unable to demonstrate the complexity of news construction process, but rather, they can become



the concepts that deserve further investigation by journalism researchers when studying news in Malaysia.

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