

SUSTAINABILITY JOURNALISM AS DISCOURSE AMONG CIVILIZATIONS: CONCEPT AND DIALOGUE

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Abstract

The news paradigm needs to embrace the dimensions of timelessness and transcendence as conceived and experienced by societies and civilizations. This paper suggests that a dialogue among civilizations be premised through the restructuring of modern journalism to word the approach of Sustainability Journalism and the discourses produced thereof. It proposes Sustainability Journalism as a form of storytelling, discourse and dialogue in the post-industrial world. It does not assume that Sustainability Journalism is a new concept. It is more of a perspective on how we can engage ourselves both as producers and receivers of information in the continuous flux of storytelling in the modern context. It attempts to transcend the aesthetic/pragmatic dichotomy of the function of modern news. Subsequently, dialogue suggested through the platform is aimed at creating a worldview on sustainability, in which different cultural and value systems are intertwined. To be an effective platform, it is suggested that Sustainability Journalism be integral to journalism education. The reportage of God and Man as well as the civilizational aspects of religions need to be corrected from error and distortion. Such measures would at least create a consciousness to society and media consumers and hence encourage and generate further discourse amongst different communities,

ethnicities, religious adherents, civil societies and politics within and across different civilizations.

Keywords: Journalism, sustainability, storytelling, discourse, civilisation

Introduction

We begin this paper by reminiscing what we have written in a book almost a decade ago. It is on the journalist as a storyteller (Murad 2001). In that book, we attempt to explore the mind of producers of news, information and culture, while at the same time question some of their premises. One way is to pick up the day's newspaper. And yes, it is the hardcopy. Our eyes focus on the headline. It then moves on to the text. That part of the brain in the absence of the conscious mind religiously repeats the act: transcending letters, transcending words, transcending sentences, transcending paragraphs, transcending columns, transcending pages. And so we have read the day's stories. It re-establishes our world for the day. We have celebrated the day. We are gratified. Reading the news (and views) has constructed and reconstructed our existence (and that of similar others). The word has constructed a sense of place and space and time. It signifies our role and function. However, we cannot ask any questions. The story and the news persona will do not respond to us. There is no feedback like when we ask a friend, "*Apa cerita?*" ("What's going on?")

However, the story relates to the many "I's"—in the public ego. News on newsprint (and online) is an impersonal story meant for the "I" where individuality is lost. The story does not know me. It does not recognize me. My ego suddenly disappears. Yet I am in it. It constructs me and defines me although it is not targeted exclusively for me. It creates me (and that of others). It makes me secured in a place lost. And I can say, "I know that!" But do I really know? "You explain this world with an image," I borrow unscrupulously from Albert Camus (1955): "I realized that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know." Caught in a fiction of fiction, I am a stranger to myself.

Modern journalism creates events, facts, ideas and imagination. Missing out any of these will not sustain a story. It is not news. Veiled by

processes, forces and movements, reality becomes bogus. It does not exist. It is an untold myth. Geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1977) in *Space and Place* reminds us that myths flourish in the absence of precise knowledge. It is not a thing of the past. Tuan's idea of myths strikes parallels to the other empty portion of a glass of water. What is not known to the storyteller (journalists, writers, producers of news and views, and even scholars) is not news. Whatever that does not fit into the format of storytelling paradigm is not a story. It is a myth—"a fuzzy idea of defective knowledge surrounding the empirically known," as Tuan puts it (1977, p. 86).

Modern journalism is the outcome of the manufacturing of events. It is the same every day. Even with WikiLeaks. Another layer of pseudo-environment is added to how natives tell their story – this time it comes from the digital natives themselves and subsequently appears in an infinite variety of forms. The (pseudo)-environment becomes a built environment, and like language, it defines sensibility or nonsensibility. Inclusions and exclusions are primary functions of pseudo-environments. What the story routinely excludes will find their way into the village of public meanings.

Sustainability Journalism

In this paper we propose a sustainable approach at modern-day storytelling that we call journalism. It is a response to the industrial revolution induced storytelling paradigm, and suggests a restructuring of the profession, institution, and the reading of news story in light of the paradigm of sustainability. It is based on the assumption that the modern journalistic paradigm is incompatible to universal values—to values human, humane and divine, to values sacred and religious. The concept and practice thereof may be termed as Sustainability Journalism.

This paper addresses an old problem, that is, the conventions of modern journalism as objectivized and conceived by professions and society, with a view of structuring the paradigm by engaging its epistemological roots. The proposed Sustainability Journalism assumes a sacred paradigm in appropriating a language compatible to perennial values. It is critical of secular, modern language as currently used in modern journalism. We have argued in an earlier paper of the need to address how the profession and institution of journalism should cover religion (Murad, 2010). It

assumes modern news and religion as two separate and incompatible paradigms. It then, from a theoretical position, probes on the difference and subsequently suggests some arguments for the reportage of religion by repositing it under Journalism education as a part of the university curriculum as well as a forum for advocacy.

We have used the reportage of religion as an example to illustrate the idea of news as a category, both in the conceptual and in the popular sense. My arguments are drawn from an earlier paper on the reportage of health crisis across borders (Murad, 2007). Both works reflect the spirit of the need to be in harmony with our ecosystem—the protection and preservation of the environment and civilization.

To scholars of modern journalism and mass communication, 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 and reflects reality. Conceptually, the news, which operates as a media apparatus, becomes a built-environment, based on the assumption that the externalized environment as such, stands between the individual and the world beyond. News 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.

Hence, news can be regarded as culture—a primordial construct—produced by journalists as storytellers. It creates an environment, deriving from man’s thoughts, words and deeds as manifested in a system of interdependence at the societal, interpersonal and individual levels. News as a society’s storytelling system therefore is a product of that primordial instinct aimed at surviving the ‘sanctity’ and the ‘sanity’ of civilizations.

Relevant to this argument is the intertwining nature of modern journalism with health, medicine, technology and global warming (HMTG). The reportage of HMTG implies both thought and action. In this regard, HMTG implies crises. With that in mind, the action becomes the thought itself. Just as there are many perspectives on the concepts and practices of the modern journalistic media, there is certainly more than one perspective in suggesting the entire process HMTG reportage. What does information about HMTG mean as it is being transmitted through

the news media? Certainly it makes sense and makes more sense when there is meaning. The world has to be made to mean.

The same holds true for the coverage of religion. But how is religion reported if that paradigm that we call modern journalism 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? It has been argued that journalism has been watered down from an ideational art to an industrial art (Carey, 1984). The inverted pyramid, the 5Ws 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, the event, or the 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 and non-processes. Their existences become absent—the absence configured by the modernity of the news media apparatus.

In both the reportage and the (mis)representation of HMTG and religion, the root problem is both historical and epistemological. The meaning produced by modern journalistic media is determined and is operated within a given political, economic, social and cultural milieu. Specific images of the world are then created and reinforced to the audience. Not only religion, but even in HMTG crises, the media rely on certain stereotypes, based on their cultural and social values, to create a picture of the world to their audience.

At the intellectual level, HMTG are seen as objective knowledge the sources of that knowledge emanating from the objective dimension of science. Hence, HMTG crises destabilize man's definition of himself. If one cannot assess the issues of the HMTG crises in isolation, it will be so also on the crisis of religion, in particular the reportage of Islam. Modern

journalism is guilty of producing and reproducing Islam in the form identifiable as orientalism. Journalists, including Muslims, are captives of the news paradigm in the coverage of their society and religion. The Islam that floods our news and popular daily diet appears in the formula we assume and consume to be correct; and ironically too, we reproduce in our own thinking the ‘news of religion’ of Islam. The reportage on Islam (and other religions) has not been seen as sustainable—both in the technique and language used, as well as the image of the object.

News on Islam and Islamic Views

In that regards, the image of the East therefore in the Saidian sense dominated by that in the Arabs and Islam, was not only depicted through the scholarship of Orientalism but also by popular orientalism expressed daily in the journalistic media and consumed by millions of readers across the Occidental/Oriental divide. The predominance of the Orientalist perspective has led to a particular mode of consumption transmitted by information and cultural producing apparatus. Hence, the religion of Islam has been produced (or reduced?) by the media, to borrow the words of Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1979, p. 3), “politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-enlightenment era.” This has implications for the lives of contemporary Muslims and the rest of the world.

The news on Islam is not only a thing of the past, conjuring a ‘pastness’ making it incompatible with the contemporary world. 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 ‘now-ness,’ in relation to the geographical, cultural and the political. The media tends to adopt the prevailing terminology when it talks about Islam and the problems of extremism and terrorism. These terms were 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 (Chandra, 2004). This has developed into two modes of ‘languages’ that are incompatible—and hence, not able to either sustain the paradigm of modern journalism vis-a-vis the reportage on Islam and the image of Islam to the world. 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.

The media and journalism cannot regard themselves 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.

Much that has been argued and proposed on modern journalism premised from the milieu in early-modern Europe, and subsequently configured upon the economics and technology of the Industrial Revolution. We have argued for the need to theorise journalism as ingrained in Man and Creation. The Angels, Jibrail and Prophet Muhammad S.A.W. were embraced and incorporated within 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.

Given the dominant perspective as argued, the substance of Sustainable Journalism therefore needs to involve shared historical experiences and common structure of meaning. The cosmic order, 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 & Pearce, 1974). An analysis of modern journalism and its news as a storytelling system demonstrates the absence of philosophical insights and epistemological reflections. This is reflected in the product, as portraying bits and pieces of isolated and unconnected reality (Phillips, 1976). One sees the ‘news’ as both material and non-material.

Sustainability Journalism as Discourse Among Civilizations

News is metaphysical and difficult to define. At issue here is despite its very nature, the 'news' of modern journalism has been reduced to 'prove' the exception (Tuchman, 1978; 1977); to be timely and perishable (Park, 1940) saleable, superficial, simple, and objective (Breed, 1956) on human interest, knowledge, events and issues. The central question here is why has a metaphysical phenomenon been reduced to a mere 'tangible', 'profane' and 'unsustainable' reality setting the premise on how we see the world?

We live in secondhand worlds, asserts sociologist C. Wright Mills (cited in Said, 1981). We live by the images provided by strangers and dead men. These create our consciousness. Between consciousness and existence stand meaning designs and communications which other men have passed on first, in human speech itself, and later, by the management of symbols. These provide the clues to what we see, how we respond, how we feel and how we respond to our feelings. To Mills, every man interprets what he observes as well as much that he has not observed. Our terms of interpretation are not our own, we depend on observation posts, the interpretation centres, the presentation depots, which in our society are established by means of what Mills call, the cultural apparatus.

Given the knowledge of the complex web of existence that man has spun, the knowledge of the ecological system that man has come to inherit, it is pertinent to reflect, and depart from the conventions of social communication and modern journalism. The argument against modern journalism is that it assumes the notion of objectivity, which paradoxically, engenders its own biases built in the procedures themselves. This logic in itself produce the attitude of absconding responsibility by relegating 'facts' as unrelated to its producer.

Sustainability Journalism transcends fact and fiction. The news as product is a window to ourselves and our being. Sustainability Journalism take the task of first and foremost, the transmission of ideas and values of one own cultural cosmos of what to do with "our lives." Also, we ought to used Schumacher's (1975) observations in *Small is Beautiful*: "Values must come first; and from it the ideas that make the world, and one's own society more intelligible to live in." Why Sustainability Journalism? The first construct that come to mind is the word 'civilization.' The epitome of a "civilized existence" is the

refinement of culture modes of behaviour and harmonious relation between man and God. Civilizations are based on agricultural traditions. The term ‘culture’ is associated with ‘care of soil.’ Thus, to care is to exploit, not to destroy but to nurture. Sustainability Journalism therefore takes root in the meaning of the ‘careful tending’ on nature in order to bring out the best in it without destroying its roots.

The quest for Sustainable Journalism emphasises the task of manifesting the hidden potential in us and making sense of the environment primordial to our existence, and not one that alienates us from the scheme of things. The news produced therefore should be consistent our environment and not that stands between us and the world beyond (O’Brien, 1983). Hence, Sustainability Journalism is viewed as the creation, disclosure and interpretation of ideas based on events and processes. At the same time, it provides constant criticism of society. It sees that underlying structures, movements and forces shaping and determining social facts and meanings. Sustainability Journalism works on the assumption that the journalistic processes ought to emphasize on explanation but not merely on information.

Sustainability Journalism is meant to develop a new awareness of the world; a new self-consciousness in symbiosis with the environment and the Divine. It is a response against the primacy of newsgathering, the fascination with objectivity, and against the defunct genre of ‘Development Journalism’ embedded in the ideology of developmentalism.

In Sustainability Journalism, news is the exception, not the rule. We are still trapped in the futile role of merely being informed. What we see is more and more of such information about our environment is being presented to us as to a man in a glass isolation booth. Our sense of substantial identity, of individual significance, which derives in large part from consequential behaviour in the reality of our own cultural cosmos, is depleted because so much of that matters is alien, and detached from our psyche, and sense of being (Wiebe, 1973).

If we do not know, do not have an insight and are not conscious of the significance of our potentialities, then we cannot deal with ourselves and have the capability to define our own existence. We cannot protect ourselves from exogenous factors that have the potentiality of disrupting the equilibrium of our existence. Under Sustainability Journalism, the

norm should be on interpretation, analysis, and the ‘why’ of ideas. So much of the ‘ingredient’ that constitutes the existence are hidden, veiled from our senses, thought systems, resulting in the world to be increasingly unintelligible. To cite Schumacher (1975, p. 9) on the role of education, “When a thing is intelligible, there will be a sense of participation; and when a thing is unintelligible, there will be a sense of estrangement.” Further if the mind cannot bring to the world a set—or shall we say, a toolbox—of powerful ideas, the world must appear to it as a chaos, a mass of unrelated phenomena, of meaningless events. Such a man is like a person in a strangle land without any signs of civilization, without maps or signposts or indicator of any kind. Nothing has any meaning to him nothing can hold his vital interest; he has no means of making anything intelligible to himself (Schumacher, 1975).

Sustainability Journalism therefore attempts to transcend the aesthetic/pragmatic dichotomy of the function of news. Sustainability Journalism must bring the awareness that we are the microcosm of the universe and that the social order, perceived through the news, is part of the anatomy of the macrocosm. As such Sustainability Journalism is intellectualized, contextualized, and sensitive to the primordial nature of our society. It emphasizes the cognitive and affective aspects of communication—which should invariably define our place biologically, socially and metaphysically. In this regard, Tehranian (1979) relates that the intrinsic communication needs of an individual may be therefore considered to consist of the needs for identity, legitimacy and community. That is in the secular world. And in secular history, the substance of news needs to involve shared historical experiences and common structures of meaning. In that sense, Sustainability Journalism is a system of storytelling—a culture’s storytelling system.

The Objective Nature of the Sustainability Journalists

Man is *Homo Narrans*. Sustainability Journalism attempts to preserve and maintain our society and identity. Culture is viewed as transcending both tradition and modernity. It is also is viewed as a sustainable system comprising the components both natural and man-made; existing from the alpha and omega of the cosmic order, It is timeless therefor it should also be the news in Sustainability Journalism. One of the criteria is not timeliness, but timelessness. At this juncture, it is instructive to assure that nothing is ending except a century, which is a figment of our own

imagination. (Tehrani, 1999, p. 189). We recall the reflections of Buddhist leader, Daisaku Ikeda. Ikeda makes a critical distinction among three kinds of time: cosmic, historical and ontological. Cosmic time (light years) marks the evolution of the universe; historical time punctuates human days, weeks, years, and centuries; ontological time celebrates the timelessness of being. Sustainability Journalism takes its cue from the suggestion that enlightenment is the awakening to the timeless of ontological time (Tehrani, 1999, p. 189). Sustainable Journalism liberates us from the burden of time. Sage and poet Rumi have a similar view:

Consciousness mirrors past memories.
Past and future are curtains concealing God
Burn the curtains, for how long indeed
Will you continue as a knotted reed?

(The Mathnawi, translated by Tehrani, 1959)

On the relationship between the Sustainability Journalist and the story, it is viewed that both are integral parts of the same component, and therefore there is no separation of facts from values. Sustainability Journalism sees facts as values, The Sustainability Journalist takes the position of an interested observer and interpreter, and therefore not detached from issues, processes, movement, forces and ideas.

The science and art of Sustainability Journalism—as a discourse is reflected in public discourse as well in formal education that facilitates the dialogue. Dialogue literally refers to a conversation between two people. What we have in mind is 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 dialogue is to inculcate an attitude founded on appreciation, understanding, interest and compassion for the worldview of sustainability, intertwined amongst different cultural and values systems.

If the year 2001 was the United Nation's Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, all we see in the world's media is war and conflict—a very unsustainable manifestation indeed. There is very little dialogue, and very little dialogue has been initiated, produced and covered. Dialogue itself is a sustainable process. This situation was conditioned and determined by a multitude of forces, amongst them, the commodification

of news and information, the conceptualization and practice that journalism is a profession intertwined with the needs of industry and capital. Journalism and media are indeed can be seen as strategic elements in power relations.

Sustainable Journalism Curriculum

Journalism education taught in Malaysia and other parts of the Muslim world (and also in Western universities) should be based on indigeneity and should be endogenously embedded, but having a universal bent. At the university level, the journalism curriculum must be embedded in the need to educate students about the divine/prophetic origins of the production, transmission and reception of messages, epistemology, ethics, the multicultural origins of modern civilizations, the sustainability sciences, the difference between utilitarian modernistic language of (modern) journalism and transcendent language of religion, definitions and conceptions of religion (historically and sociologically), technology, literature and semantics. This is meant to be a singular programme in Sustainability Journalism.

Emphases are to be given to knowledge production systems and endogenous culture and worldviews. The history and philosophy of technology are to be emphasized. Policy studies, on the other hand, needs to be embedded in the study of politics, economics and the environment. In this light, Sustainability Journalism curriculum should incorporate contemporary problems and structure such themes as modernity, development, Islamic and religious fundamentalism, imperialism, terrorism, and democracy. These are themes that can itself be a single course having its subject matter and components from diverse of perspectives and traditions. Hence, such courses should be mitigated as universal in its perspective as well as allowing for multiple and peculiaristic dimensions. But, of course, the idea and overall objective is to produce good journalism. It falls back to the fraternity of journalists and the ethos of the society in which they reside and represent.

Conclusion

Having argued earlier, it can be said that the praxis in the reportage of God and Man can be the central factor in the dialogue amongst civilizations. Central to this is the coverage of religions by the world

media having ramifications on the political, economic, cultural and scientific spheres. We have seen this taking centre stage over the last three decades. This paper has argued on the concepts and components of Sustainability Journalism. In so doing, it proposed that Sustainability Journalism be a platform for a dialogue on values and sustainability. The dialogue of civilizations in that context may be actualized in the following manner:

1. Mitigating and fusing the language of modern journalism and the language of sustainability
2. Sustainability Journalism be introduced as an alternative discourse of media and society
3. Sustainability Journalism be used to promote the humane linkage between technology and politics for a peaceful society
4. Formal training and education on Sustainability Journalism as a university-wide course by the way providing general education and a means of exposing to an important dimension of intellectual production.

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

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