

## THE LANGUAGE OF MODERN NEWS AND TIMELESSNESS: REFORMING JOURNALISM IN THE NON-OCCIDENTAL WORLD

(Bahasa Berita Moden dan Keabadian: Reformasi Kewartawanan  
di Dunia bukan Oksidental)

AHMAD MURAD MERICAN\*

Department of Management and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Petronas,  
31750 Tronoh, Bandar Seri Iskandar, Perak, Malaysia

---

### ABSTRAK

*Satu transformasi diperlukan dalam etos berita, komentar dan kewartawanan dengan membabitkan dimensi-dimensi keabadian dan bersifat transenden. Makalah ini mencadangkan amalan kini yang tidak menerima ketidakserasian di antara bahasa agama, seperti mana yang disalurkan melalui Islam dan bahasa media, seperti yang disalurkan melalui kewartawanan perlu disemak semula. Ia menumpukan kepada produk, dan bukan profesion kewartawanan pada keseluruhannya. Berita, institusi moden dan profesion kewartawanan bukan fenomena yang universal. Ia unik kepada dunia Oksidental. Makalah ini berhujah bahawa bahasa berita dan bahasa agama adalah paradigma-paradigma yang berbeza, dan dengan itu mencadangkan cara bagi menangani gejala tersebut. Makalah ini dengan itu menganjurkan bahawa liputan tentang Islam dan agama di dunia bukan Oksidental difikirkan dan dinilai semula.*

**Kata Kunci:** Berita, agama, perspektif, Oksidental, kewartawanan

### ABSTRACT

*The ethos of news, commentary and journalism as an institution needs to be transformed in embracing the dimensions of timelessness and the transcendent. This article suggests that the current practice of not recognizing the incompatibility between the language of religion, as represented by Islam and the language of the media, and as represented by the institution of journalism need to be reviewed. It focuses on the product, not the whole profession. The*

---

\*Corresponding author: Ahmad Murad Merican, Department of Management and Humanities, Universiti Teknologi Petronas, 31750 Tronoh, Bandar Seri Iskandar, Perak, Malaysia, E-mail: amurad\_noormerican@petronas.com.my

Received: 27 December 2010

Accepted: 11 March 2011

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17576/JH-2011-0301-04>

*news and the modern institution and profession of journalism are not a universal phenomena. It is unique to the Occidental world. It argues that the language of news and the language of religion are two separate, incompatible paradigms, hence suggesting overcoming that incompatibility. This article argues for a rethinking and a reevaluation on the reportage of Islam and religion in the non-Occidental world.*

**Keywords:** News, religion, perspective, Occidental, journalism

## INTRODUCTION

This article is on the meaning of news on one side of the metropolitan divide and how that meaning has come to hegemonize the other unequal half of the world. In modern discourse, a news story is a self-contained 'reality' of an event produced by the conventions of journalism. It has been consistently argued that much of the thinking on the nature of news revolves around how it defines reality; much of the thinking on the conventions of journalism revolves around its status as a profession and the ramifications thereof; and finally, much of the thinking on organizations revolves around the notion of control - the setting of the premises of thought, leading back to the question on the definition of reality. In the non-Western world, as in the example of the Muslim world, journalism and the news is a Western intervention - and the point after which words and texts got their meanings, and reality defined. Also, the conceptualization of the profession and the practice of journalism has been brought about mainly by the colonial powers, through the importation and use of the printing press, and ushered by the dynamics of the independence and nationalists movements.

Hence, what we have are that the uniqueness of news and the modern institution and profession of journalism has been represented as universal and thence integral to the mainstream narrative of the story of modern times. This narrative sees phenomena that do not fit into the rationalized world of the empirical as irrational. They are relegated to myths-a non-narrative that occasionally emerges as subtexts in the gamut of the information economy and expediencies of power interests.

In that context, the reportage of Islam (and religion) are dictated by the product, the profession, and the organization, as a built environment, based on the assumption that the externalized world as such, stands between the individual and the world beyond (O'Brien 1983; Yi-Fu Tuan 1977). This paper takes the standpoint of news as thought and practical philosophy. It does not view news as existing in isolation from the multitude of diverging forces shaping the culture and ethos of a civilization. Hence, it refuses to make a distinction between news as a mode of communication, and religion Unlike other human activities such as in the political or economic spheres, religion is communication - it creates an environment, a domain deriving from the arrival of meaning of knowledge emanating from the metaphysical realm. As such,

we see the extension of man's thought, words, and deeds as manifested in a system of interdependence at the metaphysical domain, issuing forth to the societal, interpersonal and individual levels. At the same time, communication is religion, whereby the form is taken to mean the production of reality aimed at surviving the 'sanctity' and the 'sanity' of civilizations.

### **NEWS AND METAPHYSICAL SPACE**

The substance of news therefore needs to involve shared historical experiences and common structures 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, as all parts of the story system (Williams & Pearce 1974). Indeed, in this sense, the news is a self contradiction in term and meaning where the past and the future are intertwined as the present, which has been the past and will be the future. Conceptualized and practiced as such, the news is always present and in the present tense. It is not in the past tense nor the future tense. It is of present and *presentness*. It is the now and *nowness*, where origins and future defy time and time dimensions.

However, an analysis of the news culture and that of its producers, i.e., the profession, shows that the former lacks the ability to have philosophical insights and epistemological reflections, and this is reflected in the product, as portraying bits and pieces of isolated and unconnected reality (Philips 1976). The news like all modern stories, structure experience for the individual and society by filtering out the complexities of the environment and offering a polished, perhaps even literary version, unlike stories and the grand narratives, in the form sacred texts and of *hikayat* of religions, cultures and genealogies. Orientalist scholarship places these as non-scientific, irrational and mythical and cannot be considered as history and reason. And as such, sacred text are taken to be unreal.

On the other hand, we can also argue that the method in modern narratives such as the news, in its structuring of the environment through unconnected reality gives little, or no social and cultural value to society because it can also distort reality. It becomes a modern myth, if myths are usually categorized as only referring to pre or non-modern phenomena. It denies the individual the cognition, that "subterranean and frequently glacial movements that provide the meaningful substructure which determines the eruption of events and the emergence of personalities that we now call news (Carey 1983). One of the major factors inhibiting a sense of the totality of things is the news format. The non-Occidental world, mainly referring to Asia and the Muslim world, instead of embracing the structures and aesthetics of sacred prose, employs the profanity of industrial art, derived from the Industrial Revolution, born from the womb of secular capitalism.

Why must the institution and culture of newsmaking itself be 'sacred'? Would not the scope of news be broadened, i.e. in transcending the aesthetic/pragmatic dichotomy leading to the news as a mode of communication in the explanation and interpretation of the world departing from a Eurocentric, orientalist perspective? This involves communities of interpretations. And the non-Occidental world sorely lacks that structure. And for communities of interpretations to exist, there has to be functioning intellectuals, intellectualizing the occupation of journalism, and deconstructing the premises in how members of the profession 'see' the world. The design of space and place surrounding the relationships and the interrelationships inherent in the cognition of reality (and Reality), knowledge and news, journalism and organizations are critical. As geographer Yi-Fu Tuan observes of architecture of a well-design product: it 'teaches', (it) 'is a key to comprehending reality'. There has to be the mutual encounter between the internal self and the external world without one configuring upon the other.

### **APPROACH TO INQUIRY**

This article proposes an approach at reforming the practice of journalism with regard to the product. It departs from the notion of news and journalism as industrial arts, having peculiar techniques which cannot capture Islam and religion. Islam and religion cannot be framed as news, for the reason being that the criteria of journalism is based on timeliness, superficiality, simplicity, and objectivity (See for example Breed 1955). If news is a perishable product, how can that be compatible to the transcendence and timelessness of Islam and other religions from the metaphysical dimensions? While cognizant that the past and present, the Orient and the Occident are intertwined and exist in overlapping spaces, it is nevertheless critical to tap into existing concepts, categories and practices that impinge upon our lives in modernity. Form and meaning are inextricably connected, so much so that existence becomes enigmatic if one were to confine oneself to the former (Geertz 1973). What is presently conveyed through the news is form. Hence, what is generally perceived through the ubiquity of the news form is just that - no more, no less. An alternative way of arguing in this regard is that form and meaning are aspects of a single entity. And the news, of any event, process or phenomena, has to be covered in that sense.

Hence, the generation of research should no longer be confined within particular disciplines; or as in this case, research in the field of mass communication should no longer be confined within the discipline of the so-called the social sciences given its generally agreed objective of describing and explaining phenomena. The social science has been there as a symbol for heuristic purposes. And this should include metaphysics. The 'social' is fundamentally metaphysical. Society cannot be seen, touched, smelled, or in any way directly known by the senses even though the social does give physical

evidence of itself through patterns of behavior and language. If it is true that the social is fundamentally metaphysical, then every person who claims to be a social scientist must recognize himself or herself as a metaphysician (Puhk 1982).

In studying the complex web of man's existence, it is no longer possible to ignore every conceivable approach. Thus, with regard to the subject matter at hand, it is deemed vital to transcend the particular disciplines toward a more enlightened and realistic interpretation. Such an approach is circular as opposed to being linear in perspective.

Existence rests within the interplay of opposites. The dualism is regarded as the outcome of a process, leading to the comprehension of the position transcending two opposite ideas. For instance, with regard to the news, experiential versus anti-experiential, pseudo-environment versus primordial environment, and objectivity versus subjectivity. And here the scope of news must be both transformed and broadened.

### **THE NEWS OF RELIGION**

As I have discussed elsewhere (Merican 2008) Muslims and Muslim journalists are equally guilty of producing and reproducing orientalism. The captive minded paradigm as advanced by al-Attas (1974) is a predominant feature amongst journalists, intellectuals and scholars in the non-Occidental world. The Islam that floods our news and popular daily diet, produced as autonomous pieces of thought and empirical observation, is in essence, a reproduction in their own thinking the 'news of religion' of Islam.

Debates over orientalism have not only pointed out to the scholarship enterprise that Edward Said expresses in his 1978 book of the same title; but also to popular orientalism expressed daily in the journalistic media and consumed by millions of readers and viewers across the Occidental/Oriental divide. The predominance of the orientalist perspective has led to a particular mode of consumption transmitted by the information and cultural producing apparatus. Hence, the religion of Islam has been produced (or reduced?) by the media, to borrow the words of Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1979), "politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically and imaginatively during the post-enlightenment era".

Certain Orientalist ideas common in the nineteenth century have contributed to current stereotypes about Islam and Muslims, and the *ummah*. One of these preoccupations is the idea that Oriental cultures are animated fundamentally by religious and spiritual impulses. Ernst (2004) refers to the concept of the 'mystic East' which came from European Romanticism, contributed to a tendency to disregard more mundane factors such as technology, economics and society.

What is important about Orientalism as a discourse is that it is founded on stereotypes and distortions that play a role on the cultural and political life of the West (al-Attas 2005), and self-imposed within popular, academic and professional consciousness of the non-Western world. It is not only a thing of the past, it is present in many ways through both print and broadcast news media, documentaries, the internet, fiction, fashion, advertisements, tourism, and architecture. Both in scholarship and in popular culture, there is abundant discourse illustrating that the exception proves the rule.

Although the past and the present is intertwined, the West and the East exist in overlapping spaces, much of what there is outside of the Occident-epistemologically, historically and culturally, challenged the dominant language and methodology of observing the world. Measuring the world against the criteria of timeliness, currency, novelty, and the 'nowness' may not be an appropriate measure for universality. The language of religion is timelessness and transcendent. The language of religion is anti-positivistic, unlike that of the language of news.

### **REFORMING THE PRACTICE OF JOURNALISM THROUGH THE NEWS**

Locating the news within the matrix of communication, one can discern four basic levels (referring to the latter) in which one may engage in, namely with God, with society at large organized at various levels of abstraction, with fellow human beings and with oneself. These forms of communication may be labeled as transcendental, social, interpersonal, and interior, respectively. No matter at which level one begins, one would eventually end with all the levels. From the standpoint of a normative approach to news, we examine the second level, i.e. social communication, otherwise known as mass communication.

Therefore, what ought to be the role of the news? And journalism? "New is a window on the world," says Tuchman (1978) three decades ago. Through its frame, we learn about ourselves, and about others. In proposing for an alternative role for journalism, it should take the task of the transmission of values and ideas that make the world, and one's society intelligible to live in. Much of news and journalism may be assumed as being transplanted from the Occident to the non-Occidental world. Anything transplanted, without care tends to be destructive. The non-Occidental world then must care and tend to the nature of what is being transplanted so that society's potentials and its endogenous being can be meaningfully realized.

The news produced should therefore be consistent with the environment in portraying values and ideas, and not messages that stand between people and the world beyond. This a transformed news and journalistic institution must

institute a consciousness in the creation, disclosure, and interpretation of ideas based on events and processes but transcendent in terms of time.

This concept is a reaction against a historical and decontextualized reportage. The argument may run as follows. It is similar to the journalism practiced in non-Western societies during the colonial era. Passin (1963) notes that journalism in these societies develop almost simultaneously with the new awareness of the outside world and a new nation, nationhood and collective consciousness. Anti-colonial advocates saw the press as essential for public enlightenment and for political action.

A reformed news reportage methodology seeks to discover the environment rather than making sense of it. Much of what is observed is that more and more of the information about our environment is being presented to us as to a man in a glass isolation booth. His sense of substantial identity, of individual self and significance is depleted because so much of what matters is alien, or constructed to be alien, and detached from the psyche and senses of being (Wiebe 1973). If non-Occidental society does not have an insight, and is not conscious of the significance of its potentialities, it cannot deal with itself, and cannot have the capability of defining its own existence.

The human potential must be awakened in transcending the norm of the exception proving the rule. The news reportage must therefore put interpretation, analysis and the 'why' of ideas as the norm. So much of the ingredients that constitute the existence of society are hidden, veiled from the senses, thought systems and the intellect, resulting in the world to be increasingly unintelligible.

### **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

In reforming the practice of journalism, it is not only concerned with the product, but also with the producer and the organization. There has to be a concerted effort by the non-Western world to investigate the practice and corpus of journalism and reinvent the discourse about journalism to fit into its endogenous being. In the reportage of news, attempts must be made to transcend the aesthetic/pragmatic dichotomy. It must make us aware of our 'original home' and to awake us from our 'ignorant sleep'. While we have attempted to examine the product, much needs to be deliberated, especially on producers of the news - the practitioners of the vocation in the non-Western world. We imagine that the non-Occidental journalist begin to think about the nature of journalistic thought itself and how best to communicate the nature of reality. Viewing the vocation with the matrix of time and space, such knowledge of the journalist is deliberately 'teleological'. Collectively, the journalist is the microcosm of the universe, and that the social order, perceived through, and created by the news, is part of the anatomy of the macrocosm.

## REFERENCES

- al-Attas, Syed Farid. 2005. Is Objective Reporting on Islam Possible? Contextualizing the 'Demon. In Syed Farid al-Attas (ed.). *Covering Islam: Challenges and Opportunities for Media in the Global Village*. Singapore: Centre for research on Islamic and the Malay Affairs and Konrad Adenauer Foundation.
- al-Attas, Syed Hussein. 1974. The captive mind and creative Development. *International Social Science Journal* 36(4): 691-699.
- Breed, W. 1955. Social Control in the Newsroom: A Functional Analysis. *Social Forces* 33 no. 4: 326-335.
- Carey, J. W. 1983. Journalism and Criticism: The Case of an Underdeveloped Profession. In Michael Emery and Ted Curtis (eds.). *Readings in Mass Communication: Concepts and Issues in the Mass Media*. Dubuque, Iowa: 123-133.
- Ernst, C. W. 2004. *Rethinking Islam in the Contemporary World*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Geertz, C. 1973. *The Interpretation of Cultures*. New York: Basic Books.
- Merican, Ahmad Murad. 2008. Orientalism, the Reportage of Religion and Journalism Education: Expanding the Space in the Dialogue of Civilizations. Paper presented to the Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Media. International Islamic University, Malaysia. Kuala Lumpur, 29-30.
- O'Brien, Dean W. 1983. The News as Environment. *Journalism Monographs* 85: 1-33.
- Passin, H. 1963. *Writer and Journalist in the Transitional Society*. ~~in~~ Dlm. Lucien W. P. (ed.) (pnyt). *Communications and Political Development*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Phillips, E. B. 1976. Novelty without Change. *Journal of Communication* 4: 81-89.
- Puhek, R. E. 1982. *The Metaphysical Imperative: A Critique of the Modern Approach to Science*. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America.
- Said, E. W. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books.



Tuchman, G. 1978. *Making News: A Study in the Construction of Reality*. New York: The Free Press.

Yi-Fu Tuan. 1977. *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Mineapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Wiebe, G. D. 1973 Mass Media and Man's Relationship to his Environment. *Journalism Quarterly* 50 (3): 426-32.

Williams, P. & Pearce J. T. 1974. Communications as a Biosystem. *Journal of Communication* 24 No. 4. Autumn.

