

Exploring the Strengths and Limitations of Development Journalism in Malaysia

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ABBREVIATIONS

UMNO	United Malays National Organization
PAP	People's Action Party
BN	Barisan Nasional (Malaysia National Front Party or Coalition Party consists three major parties, UMNO, MCA, MIC)
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
POA	Points of Agreement
ISA	Internal Security Act
OSA	Official Security Act
KTM	Keretapi Tanah Melayu
NST(P)	The New Straits Times (Press)
BH	Berita Harian
ICJ	International Court of Justice
SEA	South East Asia
IMF	International Monetary Fund
BERNAMA	Berita Nasional Malaysia
PPPA	Printing Presses and Publication Acts
PAS	Parti Islam SeMalaysia
MCA	Malaysian Chinese Association
MIC	Malaysian Indian Congress
NUJ	National Union Journalist
MPI	Malaysia Press Institute
SUHAKAM	Human Rights Commission of Malaysia
SPH	Singapore Publishing House
CNN	Cable News Network
Rakyat	Common people
RTM	Radio and Televisyen Malaysia
TV3	Media Prima Berhad (Sistem Televisyen Malaysia)

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Abstract

Since decolonization in 1957, development journalism has played a central role in serving Malaysian governments by disseminating ideas on issues concerning that country's national development. Indeed, development journalism is seen as the mainstream form of journalism practice in Malaysia, not only on domestic issues but also significantly, on regional and international issues.

The thesis makes a contribution to understanding the different ways development journalism is conceptualised through an investigation of how and why development journalism is practised in Malaysia.

Therefore, the main aims of this thesis are to analyze the role of development journalism in Malaysia, and how journalists understand and talk about its strengths and limitations. This is done by first, exploring how, why and when journalists/reporters who follow the development journalism philosophy appear to take a harmony-oriented approach towards framing international relations. Second, this thesis identifies what are the contributing factors impacting on journalists in adopting this harmonious reporting approach. In this regard, this thesis offers a comprehensive analysis of development journalism's strengths and limitations as demonstrated in Malaysia when maintaining international relations with its neighbour, Singapore. I thus focus on development journalism practices in the Malaysian context and the general understanding of development journalism in Asian journalism. The empirical analysis identifies whether the media in Malaysia are applying the same concept of development journalism as proposed by Western scholars, or the reverse.

In Malaysia, development journalism has been based on the idea that media organisations are partners and associates with the government. However, my analysis of current Malaysian journalism practices appears to demonstrate that, within the traditional tasks of media, new opportunities are emerging. The thesis identifies factors influencing the idea of a developing free press in Malaysia. In my case study, Malaysian reporting of the Malaysia-Singapore relationship provides an important example of the way the media helps define regional relationships for both countries and is essential to regional stability. By studying the news reporting on the Malaysia-Singapore

relationship, the continuing development role of journalists when reporting the regional news becomes clearer. The ability of each journalist to express ideas or views consistently on the regional issues pertaining to the Malaysia-Singapore relationship is the benchmark of the seeking for harmony that I want to illustrate in journalism practices.

The case study focuses on BERNAMA news online. As the national news agency controlling the flow of international and regional news for Malaysia, BERNAMA has to maintain the credibility of its news reporting, and help sustain the ties of the government with other countries. Apart from this, BERNAMA also has a critical role in defining and shaping the national perception of Malaysian foreign affairs and regional relationships.

Both quantitative and qualitative methods are used in the study: content analysis, textual analysis and in-depth interviews. An analysis of 497 BERNAMA news online documents from 1996 to 2008 is included, to investigate how BERNAMA demonstrates and frames the elements of 'harmonious reporting'. Diplomatic agenda setting by government is also analyzed since it has an impact on reportage, specifically Malaysia-Singapore issues. The comparative analysis of the news reports reveals a trend towards reviewing this important relationship with Singapore, whatever the specific issue being discussed. This trend was more noticeable during Tun Mahathir's premiership of 22 years (1981-2003). The in-depth interviews with Malaysian media practitioners, academics and policy makers present an interdisciplinary dialogue between journalism and political strategies studies that address the diplomacy strategy in managing the regional relationship through the media. The thesis concludes with a summary of what has been discovered about development journalism practices in Malaysia, and a note on what possible changes will occur in the future.

Declaration

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution to Awan Ismail and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Signed:

Awan Ismail

Date:

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Lastly, I dedicate this thesis to *bangsa* Malaysia and especially the next generation who need to be at the forefront of their journalism/media studies. Knowledge is a never ending process. This thesis offers a positive reading of the importance of journalism/media to the people.

To everyone else who has helped me, I extend my thanks.

Preface

In conducting this project, I have relied in part on my journalistic knowledge as a trained journalism student, practitioner and now academic for the past fifteen years. A journalistic background has provided me with insights, but also some challenges in writing this thesis which is concerned with the questions raised by, and explorations of, different perspectives and contexts of journalism than I have encountered previously. My experience and knowledge of journalism have contributed to understanding the challenges and opportunities in the practice of journalism in Malaysia.

My training in the daily routines as a journalist in a newsroom have supplied and exposed me to journalistic routines and conventions; for example, an understanding of how the institutional practices work under newsroom pressures. All journalists face complex issues regarding the ethical conduct of their work, the production of responsible writing, and objectivity. A journalist can shape and frame perceptions, and has the power to affect the world, and furthermore has the ability to influence different groups.

I found that undertaking an academic study has given me different perspectives on journalism, its philosophies and the ultimate outcomes of its practices. However, I have found it helpful to refer to my experience in writing this thesis, particularly when exploring the assumptions of what is known as ‘development journalism’.

The thesis is, I hope, evidence of the belief that journalists need to think beyond their professional training – to understand the grassroots of journalism practices and institutional conventions. Media groups or organisations work to different rules in different contexts and cultures, even in democracies. The specificity of the Malaysian news culture as it pertains to the relationship between Malaysia and Singapore is of significance to these two nations. Another current challenge in Malaysia is the growth of civil society and the variety of news platforms now available and these two factors have become additional forces contending with traditional journalism practices.

These phenomena provide an opportunity to recap and understand the role of media at a pivotal point in the nation’s history. Despite all these challenges, however, the journey of rethinking journalism has been an enjoyable and optimistic one.

Note: Earlier versions of some sections of Chapters One and Two have been presented and published in the proceedings at the Indonesia International Conference on Communication: Global Challenge to the Future of Communications on 22-24 November 2010, in Jakarta. Furthermore, some findings presented in Chapter Five were presented at the 16th Malaysia and Singapore Society Colloquium: Power and Change in Malaysia and Singapore on 10-11 December, 2010 in Australia National University, Canberra.