PRODUCING SPECIFIC KNOWLEDGE ABOUT NEWS CONSTRUCTION: THE CONTEXT OF MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT
This paper demonstrates how news construction studies should be conducted by cherishing the specificity of news practices even if the newspapers operate in the same country. Based on Donna Haraway’s notion of specificity and situated knowledge, we argue that in order to understand the complexity of news construction in Malaysia, the study has to recognize the ‘specificity’ and ‘situatedness’ of scientific knowledge of journalism. For that, we first discuss Western influence in journalism studies and the effort of de-Westernization (thus a more specific form of knowledge), the notion of ‘specificity’ and ‘situated knowledge’ and the findings of the study to demonstrate that even in Malaysia, news construction has been a very ‘specific’ practice among different newspapers. In-depth interviews have been conducted with Malaysian editors to understand the heterogeneity of news construction practice, thus supporting the argument on the necessity to produce specific knowledge about news construction in the context of Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION
One of the main challenges, that some would term a problem in journalism studies, is the production of knowledge that is ‘dislocated’. This could refer to situations where knowledge is dislocated in terms of applying Western theories to non-Western situations (Miike 2003, Wang 2011), producing and depending on quantitative studies (Haraway 1988) to understand very subjective situations in the process of news production (Tuchman 1991).

The first challenge refers to applying Western theories to non-Western situations. While some appreciate the importance of developing and understanding Western knowledge in studies of journalism (Ray 2012), others, especially among scholars in Japan, would argue about the importance of merging both benefits of Western and non-Western approaches (Gunaratne 2007), while some would see such effort as pleading for the need to really ensure that journalism knowledge is produced from ‘local and specific’ locations where (for example: non-Western countries) journalism is practised.

Besides this, some would see that this problem also relates to the practice of understanding journalism merely from a quantitative studies perspective. This is connected directly with the subjectivity of journalism, as a field that cannot rely solely on quantitative measurement to be understood (Papoutsaki 2007). Gaye Tuchman (1991) reminded us that studying news
construction and answering the fundamental question of ‘what is news?’ must be answered using qualitative studies. This also relates to the issue of the objectivity of scientific knowledge discussed by Donna Haraway (1988) that will be addressed later in this paper.

Thus, some authors suggest that studying and producing local knowledge about journalism must deal with these problems, that knowledge is produced from qualitative methods such as the observation of journalists’ practices (Papoutsaki 2007) and producing the very own theory of journalism based on local practices (Gunaratne 2007, Gunaratne 2010).

Such efforts are known as the de-Westernization of knowledge (Curran and Park 2000, Gunaratne 2007, Gunaratne 2010) and they are also closely related with attempts to produce a ‘different’ type of values among Asian people, identified as Asian Values (Mohd Azizuddin et al. 2009, Petersen 1992, Stauth 2002, Xu 2005). In journalism, these values have been influential as well, later creating what is known as Asian Journalism.

This view has been dominant in some Asian countries such as Malaysia. As a multiethnic and multireligious country that is inhabited by three main races, Malay, Chinese and Indian, Malaysia is officially a Muslim country and a former British colony. There have been strong arguments about the country developing its own knowledge about journalism, and these discussions relate to the harmony and high economic achievement of the country and whether issues such as press freedom are really an important subject of debate among its people (Mohd Safar Hasim 1996).

As regards the press, the Malaysian press is currently produced in various languages, with the Malay language as the most influential language because of the size of the population of Malay readers and the educational system. Besides that, there are English, Chinese and Tamil newspapers being produced and circulated all over the country.

Thus, to understand the complexity of such a press system, this study has conducted in-depth interviews with seven high-ranking editors in six Malaysian newspapers, ranging from editor to group editor. The six newspapers in this study include The New Straits Times (the NST) and The Sun (TS), both of which are English-language newspapers, and four Malay newspapers, Berita Harian (BH), Sinar Harian (SH), XX (requested anonymity) and Hh (Harakah). Before presenting the findings, we will first discuss the effect of the Western influence in the study of journalism and de-Westernization, followed by Donna Haraway’s notion of specificity and situated knowledge and the findings of the study.

2. WESTERN INFLUENCE IN JOURNALISM STUDIES AND DE-WESTERNIZATION

Western influence in the study of journalism can be associated with globalization. That happens at various levels such as at the regional and international levels. It is from here that internationally, many journalistic researchers deploy Western theory to study the situation in other countries, including non-Western phenomena.

The influence of Western knowledge in the study of journalism has been much discussed (Curran and Park 2000, Gunaratne 2007, Gunaratne 2010, Papoutsaki 2007, Ray 2012). The dominance of such views is related with their ability to facilitate the process of understanding the complexity of journalism in developing countries. Perspectives such as the political economy theory (Herman and Chomsky 1988) and the news values theory (Galtung and Ruge 1965, Harcup and O’Neill 2001) are examples of the Western approach that has been influential in understanding non-Western circumstances in journalism. As such, it is not surprising when Western theory began to dominate discussions on the vastly different Eastern world, as well as the structure of American education, which is first and foremost to include journalism and media studies at the higher level and then become a form of American hegemony over other countries (Papoutsaki 2007). Curran and
Park (2000) see this as an unfair generalization about the whole corpus of knowledge in the field of journalism, when knowledge is dominated by only a few Western countries.

However, despite their contributions, it is not so useful to study the complex journalism phenomena in non-Western countries by merely ‘simplifying’ the process of producing such knowledge. In this matter, the worsening scenario can then be connected with the ‘habit’ of generalizing research findings, which leads to assumptions that scientific knowledge about journalism in Western countries can be applied to understand non-Western situations, and that quantitative studies that are usually applied to simplify the complexity of journalistic practices are generalized to other specific phenomena such as a specifically historically, politically and culturally embedded country, Malaysia.

Adaptation of such knowledge has been criticized by Eastern scholars who have argued that the adaptation of Western theory is uncritical, negative and passive, as well as a form of one-way direction of knowledge from West to East. Such a tendency to promote and imitate Western news studies and see them as a universal form has been accepted by some countries which allegedly emphasize democracy. Mimicking this, without seeing its suitability and cherishing the specificity of a particular country, has caused confusion. For example, the concept is expressed in the Western media of acting as a watchdog against the state, whereas the situation may be different for developing countries that need the media to join the government in support of the development process (Hamilton 1999).

It reminds us that the Western model is not necessarily appropriate to the East and not universal in nature, which is the initial thesis of Hallin and Mancini’s (2004) book entitled *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*. Furthermore, the study of journalism in different countries is itself a unique phenomenon from one country to another (Wasserman and de Beer 2009). This is to avoid what Chen and Miike (2006) observe as Eastern scholars themselves being unable to interpret phenomena in their own countries because of a lack of understanding about their very own distinct cultural heritage.

It is through the de-Westernization of knowledge, scholars argue, that some extent of specificity of knowledge can be achieved. Such approaches have been argued by scholars such as Curran and Park (2000), Papoutsaki (2007), Wasserman and de Beer (2009) and Gunaratne (2010). In *De-Westernizing Media Studies*, Curran and Park also discussed this concept from the perspective of Malaysia, for example through the writing of Zaharom Nain in *Globalized Theories and National Controls: The State, the Market and the Malaysian Media*. To them, globalization is good in some sense, especially when it can reduce the power of an authoritarian state.

Shelton Gunaratne (2010), on the other hand, argued, based on Syed Farid Alatas’s view in his book *Alternative Discourse in Asian Social Science*, that Asian scholars must always make the effort to generate specific knowledge in order to produce local theoretical concepts and distinctive innovations in research methods. Here, Asian Values and Asian Journalism can be seen as examples of the move to de-Westernize knowledge. Asian Values “stress the role of culture, including religion, in determining the identity and distinctiveness of the Asian peoples” (Mohd Azizuddin et al. 2009: 92), while Asian Journalism is seen as being based on the concept of Asian Values and applying those values to form a distinct way of practising journalism (Massey and Chang 2002).

However, 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). In fact, later in this paper,
we will see further that even in Malaysia, different newspapers involve very distinct practices of journalism. This suggests that, in cherishing the complexity of journalism in a specific country, researchers are urged to avoid any form of generalization (thus reductionism). de Beer (2009) uses the example of South Africa to illustrate how scientific journalism should be attributed to local knowledge rather than applying Western theory to understand the particularity of each journalistic practice in the country.

3. SPECIFICITY AND SITUATED KNOWLEDGE

The notions of specificity and situated knowledge were introduced by Donna Haraway (1988) in response to the theory of Sandra Harding (both are feminists), who argued that scientific and social knowledge reveals men’s experience (rather than women’s), although it seems to claim universality and objectivity. For Harding, science’s claim to ‘objectivity’ and value-neutrality is a myth disguising a thoroughly masculine bias which constructs meanings that are ‘not only sexist but also racist, classist, and culturally coercive’ (Harding 1986: 9). Although Haraway (1988) did not agree with Harding on some points, they share similar views on the objectivity of science and the domination of men in seemingly-neutral scientific knowledge.

For Haraway, “feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledge” (Haraway 1988: 188). To Haraway, this concept argues that scientific culture that discovers scientific knowledge has been dominated by masculinity, and that feminists must find a way to make their specific voices heard. Haraway also added that all knowledge must derive from certain perspectives - specific perspectives- and thus offer objectivity in a way that others do not. Situated knowledge, to Haraway, promises more adequate, sustained, objective, transforming accounts of the world.

The key of such an approach can be applied to understanding news construction in a particular newspaper as the first step to avoid the problem of generalizing the research findings to similar situations. Through situated knowledge, Haraway also suggests the involvement of feminists in the masculine culture: “partiality and not universality is the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims” (Haraway 1988: 589). In the next section, we will demonstrate that in order for media researchers to understand the specificity of news construction in different newspapers in Malaysia, they cannot simply generalize the view that all Malaysian newspapers are similar.

Thus, Haraway (1997) criticized the positivist view for simplifying the quest to understand complex phenomena. Understanding phenomena can best be done through observation, as the object of the study itself is an active object that generates knowledge that plays its role in its construction (also known as material-semiotic actor). However, for this study, because of access issues, the specificity and situatedness of knowledge about news construction is examined through in-depth interviews with different editors, explored by asking process-oriented questions about how events become news at their newspapers.

4. FINDINGS

4.1 English Newspapers

The findings from in-depth interviews conducted with seven journalists from six newspapers in Malaysia are presented in this section. The findings for the English newspapers (the NST and TS) are presented, followed by the Malay newspapers (BH, SH, XX and Hh). All journalists involved in this study are mentioned anonymously.

Generally, when asked about news construction, most journalists would explain the subjectivity of deciding news. This explanation is by journalist A of the NST: “It (selecting news) depends on the strength of the events... Here, experience is the main criteria.” And from here, Journalist A also argued that the journalistic ability to develop the ‘nouse’ of news is almost impossible to learn from journalism schools, and again stressed the imperative of experience in guiding news construction and related decisions.
Besides that, almost all journalists in this study revealed that readership is a main criterion in deciding news, even for the NST, a newspaper which is associated with the state, and some found that it does not really incorporate readers into its news construction process (Siti Suriani Othman 2012).

But of course there are other things like you have to ask the question, ‘Will our readers be interested to read this kind of story?’ Will this story have to sell more papers? If you want to blow it up on the front page, let’s say it’s a court story, or a business story, we asked ourselves, these are good stories, but will this sell more papers? That is another question that we always asked. To put the story on the front page, it must get the attention of the reader.

But the NST is also influenced by political forces given that the newspaper is associated with the government in power, as Journalist A stated:

‘We are pro-government, pro-Barisan, so using the same facts we can do the story as to promote the interest of UMNO and BN. The same facts can be used by another party to promote their own interest. But in this case we use the same facts, facts remain, because if you are using a wrong fact, you are telling a lie and it is very unethical in any news (organization), whether it is pro the Barisan or not, but the fact can be the same but how you do it. Sometimes whether you like it or not, let’s say if for us we are bound by our shareholders and the majority of the shareholders and majority are those people who are linked to UMNO, but very rarely that we get this kind (of order) that they want this story to be played up. So we have to listen to that. This is more of an exception rather than rule. It is rare.’

So, notwithstanding the subjectivity in news construction at the NST, the economic factor remains important to the general intention of producing the newspaper. However, the economic factor can be argued to have a lesser impact on the NST, and it uses a specific marketing strategy which is to highlight the usage of the newspaper in classrooms:

‘It’s the quality (of the newspaper that we sell). Maybe we lose out to our main competitor in terms of quantity because we are not as thick as they are. But what we do provide is better quality in terms of language, in terms of selection of stories, in terms of how we design the paper and put the paper in the package that we provide. So quality will extend to the use of the newspaper in the classroom. That’s why we have a very big programme for newspaper in education. Newspaper is used as the learning school in the newsroom.’

Besides that, the NST also constructs news based on what they want to campaign about among its readers. This, according to Journalist A, is a sense of social responsibility the NST carries out for the readers:

‘What you want to have a crusade. So this are the kinds of things that you as the people in charge of the paper will decide – we want to make sure the Malaysian public are more disciplined in terms of driving habit, don’t jump the queue, don’t beat red light. So that is what you decide to do. You want to shape the mind of the public, you want to have a campaign that every Malaysian should be more disciplined on the road.’

Another English newspaper in this study is TS. TS is a free urban newspaper in Malaysia, and as a free newspaper, it distinguishes itself from its Western counterparts. Journalist B explained the model:

‘TS is an urban newspaper with a totally different concept, it is a free model. The European model, that I know, go for commuters because they want to, they
have big market for that, there are millions of commuters rushing every minute to go to work and schools and they distribute their newspaper there. Their free newspaper is quite thin, the content is not so serious as ours. They also don’t have business pages, they don’t have lifestyle. So it is very tabloid and more to entertainment. But for ours, we wanted to be a more serious paper, we wanted to educate the young readers and also because they have the spending power. These are the people that advertisers want to reach. So we distribute only in office complexes, in condominiums, outlets like Starbucks and not in villages. So that was our free model concept. So that’s why the issues fluff, entertainment we don’t play much, scandals and stories like this. Ours, we are issue-based, transparency, corruption, waste of fund, government policies and things like that, that affects our target audience.’

Such issues are reported through investigative reporting and non-partisan political news stories.

4.2 Malay Newspapers

In this section, we will present the findings for four Malay newspapers: BH, SH, XX and Hh.

Journalist C explained news construction at BH:

‘We do take into account the reader, in the present situation, when there are too many political stories, readers seem to be bored. We can see this trend among the readers now. So, that’s why we try to put in human interest stories so the reader will find that in BH there are not only political stories in it. Like for the front page story, we are approaching it in a way that a serious story becomes the lead story, but human interest stories can be the second lead story.’

Besides BH, SH is another newspaper in this study that suggests a distinct way of news construction in the publication. Journalist D said:

‘The decision depends on the state government of each state. If we find them more vocal and can benefit the people, we publish them as the front page. Although we receive some reprimand from the state, but we explain to them that if the Chief Minister of Kelantan [a state ruled by the opposition party] has something good to be told to their people, we have to publish on the front page. It depends on who rules the state, as usually who command the states will have more beneficial statements for its people. Some goes to the ruling of the country.’

Journalist E of SH newspaper, a local section editor, added that news construction at SH can be related to local news, besides non-partisan political news. She explained the specific news construction of local news in different states in Malaysia:

‘Other than that, in Kelantan and Terengganu only stories like Nurin Jazlin and very bad accident can sell. Stories about the prime minister can’t sell there. For Selangor, if Khir Toyo is the front page, nobody will buy. May be the Selangorian don’t like him. They like stories about the opposition. They are also more urban, so they like national stories, not necessarily stories about Selangor. [However], Selangor news as the second lead is not a problem. There are also non-native people live in Selangor. They are not born from Selangor and they prefer to know stories about other states as well.’

On the other hand, a tabloid newspaper such as XX produces its stories in different ways than both BH and SH. Journalist F said about news production at his newspaper:
'What becomes news in our paper has to be interesting and usually they are follow-up stories. For example, the case of Mona Fendy, Norita, they boost our sales. As a tabloid newspaper, our main concern is to have a good front page. [To do this], in Roslin Hashim’s divorce issue, we changed the angle of the story and don’t only cover Roslin but also other artists who have divorced recently such as Aziz M. Osman. We don’t really cover political stories, as these are covered by most mainstream newspapers already. So we provide human interest stories as this would help our sales.

Besides that, Journalist F also added that XX is a newspaper that highlights sensational news with sexual elements and superstitious values. However, it also contains counselling and religious sections. Journalist G, of Hh, the only opposition newspaper in this study, explained another specific way of news production at his newspaper:

‘The main consideration is policy of Hh, which is the party’s mouthpiece. So the main issues that would be published must give political benefits to the party [PAS]. So issues that we prefer are anything that can increase the influence of the party and thus reduce the influence of the opponent [the government]. This is normal as we do declare Hh as the party organ. Besides that, the commercial success of the newspaper is also another consideration, as the front page needs to be interesting for readers to buy and read the newspaper.’

Journalist G further added that besides being a political newspaper, Hh also associates itself with publishing da’wah or preaching stories:

‘Hh is an Islamic newspaper. Many who read Hh (do so) not because of politics but because of Islam. [But] it depends on current issues as well actually. I would choose the newspaper headlines over politics, to give priority to the reader about our views. This is because this paper represents Islam, politics and missionary reason. We keep the concept of preaching and politics. So, we select news topics that support that direction. The readers are those interested in politics and religious issues, and usually the other family members read Hh for its non-political news and usually it’s the religious contents, advice columns etc.’

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Although this paper has only examined English and Malay newspapers in Malaysia, the data already suggest heterogeneity among these newspapers. For example, as regards two English newspapers - the NST and TS - both are very specific in terms of news production where the NST rather sees itself as a newspaper affiliated with the government in power, and reports developmental news as a form of performing its social responsibility to the readers. This is an example of Asian Journalism, as argued by its opponents, particularly those who see this as a way of maintaining the stability of the state, in terms of both politics and the economy (Asad 1995, Massey and Chang 2002).

However, some scholars understand the notion of developmental journalism (that is often closely associated with Asian Journalism) differently. McKenzie (2006) argued that the philosophy of developmental journalism does not blindly support the state, but it has to become the watchdog of the state. In this sense, it also suggests that the application of the notion of Asian Journalism or developmental journalism can be seen as specifically applied in different countries in Asia. Again, it is inaccurate to generalize that Asian Values are applied similarly to all Asian countries and affect all systems alike.

TS, on the other hand, is an English newspaper that might be closer to the meaning of developmental journalism if McKenzie’s definition is to be considered. TS aims to open up readers'
minds about political wrongdoings and corruption occurring in the country. However, despite its noble aim, TS has also been criticized in terms of its ownership, which is said to have had a relationship with a previous prime minister of Malaysia (Hilley 2001). Here, if the political economy theory is taken as the approach to explain news production at the NST and TS, some generalizations can already be made: that newspapers in Malaysia are politically influenced, and they are not free. However, the specific and distinct ownership issue that differentiates the NST and TS is not fully addressed. One of the authors has criticized such an approach somewhere else (Siti Suriani Othman 2012), which also demonstrates that even two English newspapers in the same country can construct their news in a very specific way, so that the knowledge we have about these is a form of ‘situated knowledge’.

For Malay newspapers in this study, the specificity of news construction among these newspapers can be seen from certain categories of news values: nationalism (BH), political and local values (SH), religion (Hh) and tabloid (XX). These categorizations, however, are obviously insufficient to explain the complexity of news creation in these newspapers, but they do suggest the ‘situatedness’ of news construction in each newspaper - that each newspaper does not construct news merely from ‘nowhere’. BH, for instance, specifically constructs news with highlights on (partisan) political stories, but has found it necessary nowadays to reduce such news. As BH and the NST are published by the same publisher, it is probably easy to generalize that all newspapers published by the New Straits Times Press (NSTP) are pro-government, as is always implied (Wang 1998, Wang 2001, Zaharom 2000, Zaharom 2002a, Zaharom 2002b). But, as we have demonstrated earlier, BH does take into account what the readers want, and this is done by reducing political news and allocating more importance to human interest stories. Although there is an issue of journalism and democracy here, at least, at this stage, it suggests that no simple generalization can be made about newspapers published even by a similar publishing house.

SH, on the other hand, is a newspaper published by a private company not affiliated with the state. Besides publishing a lot of non-partisan political stories that are usually used as its front page story, SH values community stories, especially stories about sewage problems and clogged drainage, or minor scheduled events organized by villagers. It is recently in 2010 that we learned that SH has now changed its orientation to limit the publication of such stories, and publish only community stories with human interest values. But if the ‘old’ SH and BH are to be compared (as political newspapers), both newspapers construct news in a very specific manner; if researchers ignore such specificity in their studies, it could lead to the simple generalization that all political newspapers in Malaysia publish partisan political news.

Thus, it is only when we realize the specificity that we understand that BH is more government friendly, while this does not always apply to TS as it also publishes opposition political stories (Journalist D of SH). In this sense, Hh is the most hostile newspaper to the state, as it is obviously an opposition newspaper that always opposes government policies. Hh, which is published by Parti Islam SeMalaysia, also known as PAS, also portrays itself as an Islamic newspaper. This can mainly be associated with the fact that PAS is an Islamic party that upholds Islamic teachings in its policies and party administration. However, although Hh portrays itself as such, Janet Steel (2011) criticizes this approach by arguing that an Islamic newspaper cannot become so ‘Islamic’ if it is operated with political intention (or political Islam). Here, religious intention can go astray when it also functions as a political movement.

Thus, what becomes news at Hh is obviously very distinct from that of XX. As the only tabloid newspaper in this study, XX emphasizes sensational news values that include elements of sex and superstition. If this particular version of a tabloid newspaper is compared with European versions, again we can see a very specific way of
labeling XX as a tabloid newspaper, as superstition is not really a news value that is considered ‘tabloid’ and could attract crowds. Similarly, Dueze (2005) in studying the meaning of infotainment and popular journalism in tabloids in the Netherlands, found that the Netherlands popular publications are more ‘mild’ than their European counterparts. These suggest, again, that specificity of news construction is rather obvious, even when observations of other tabloid newspapers in Malaysia are made. Generally, not all tabloid newspapers in Malaysia would rate superstitions as news. It is here that we grasp that even a tabloid newspaper in the same country cannot be generalized into certain types of news values.

From the analysis, one of the trends that can be identified is the increasing popularity of human interest stories to be published such as in SH and with a prominent placement (such as BH as its second lead front page story). XX is at this point obviously dependent on human interest stories to maintain its popular appeal. Whether human interest news value will become a continuous trend among newspapers in Malaysia is yet to be seen, but what can be said so far is that the possibility is there.

This is both an interesting and an important phenomenon to observe, as it is interesting to note that while previously news construction in Malaysia was always associated with political affiliation with the state (Crouch 1996, Herbert 2001, Hilley 1975, Means 1996, Mohd Azizuddin 2009, Shome 2002, Wang 1998, Zaharom 2002a) in terms of ownership (Kenyon and Marjoribanks 2007, Wang 1998, Zaharom 2004), today most newspapers seem to have much less interest in publishing political news. On the other hand, it is an important development in discussing the status of journalism and democracy in Malaysia. When less political news is being published by the newspapers, what will happen to discussions about political rights and to increasing political awareness among electors? These functions cannot be performed through publishing human interest news. Here, it is not a case that the fewer political stories are being published, the fewer problems there will be in terms of press freedom. But when there are fewer avenues to discuss politics in the newspapers, readers will depend so much on the internet; that can always become a supplement to news reading, but is not the sole source of information because of credibility issues. Currently, we can discern specific issues that still exist regarding the challenges of journalism in Malaysia, and that merit further in-depth studies.

Besides that, such studies can benefit more by including Chinese and Indian newspapers in their samples because Malaysia is, as mentioned earlier, a multiracial country. Furthermore, future studies can deploy observation methods to study news construction, as this study was only able to focus on in-depth interviews owing to some technical difficulties. From here, more diversity and specificity can be identified, thus producing de-Westernized knowledge. Such an approach is argued as important to journalism scholars from all countries. However, we also cherish the imperative of updating ourselves with Western literature to understand the trend of news studies, the findings and to comprehend the views from the West.

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