

Cyber Journalism: Bridging the Gap between Professionalism and Epistemology

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ABSTRACT

Cyber journalism is a term coined following the convergence of various traditional media brought about by the proliferation of media industries due to current influx of new technology and globalisation. Cyber journalism is made possible by the internet technology and globalisation. Cyber journalism has gained importance over the past years and new terms are attached to it – some popular ones are internet journalism, online journalism, blogs and citizen journalism. Cyber journalism is functioning as a pervasive medium along with the traditional media such as print and electronic. However, cyber journalism has created a big vacuum in journalism education and training since it is a recent development in journalism and journalism educators are caught unprepared. Whilst journalism educators are well groomed and prepared towards the epistemology of journalism education and well aware of the demands of professionalism in the real world, the emergence of cyber journalism has brought new challenges to schools offering journalism courses. Journalism educators have to strike a balance between the demands of new journalism knowledge and professionalism. Furthermore with the onset of new technologies, the definition of cyber journalist has gone beyond the realm of journalistic education. Anybody who is techno-savvy can become a cyber-journalist. The question of epistemology, professionalism, responsibility and credibility have now become an epitome of cyber journalism. This paper will discuss the fundamentals of cyber journalism and strategies in bridging the gap between professionalism and the epistemology.

Introduction

Journalism in the era of globalisation is faced with new challenges that trigger the imaginative and innovative minds of media practitioners and journalism educators. Following the convergence of new media technology and traditional media, we see today a new found freedom in the journalistic discipline in the form of online or cyber journalism handled by the so-called professionals – the cyber journalists. Indeed cyber journalism, made possible by the all-pervasive Internet technology has gained importance and it functions as an alternative medium to the traditional media such as print and electronic. With new demands in terms of mindset, skills, strategies and approaches to handle this new medium, media practitioners and journalism educators need to reorient and retool. In fact the epistemology of journalism need to be redefined as George Thottam (1999) suggests in writing about the future of newspaper.

With the onset of globalisation and emergence of new technology, the newsrooms all over the world are undergoing massive changes. These changes have created new strategies and approaches in newsgathering and production, new alternatives in news dissemination, promoting and selling media products. Furthermore, the professional journalist are no longer the sole producer of information. Those who are techno-savvy can now called themselves cyber journalists. They do not have to go through formal training like the journalism or communication graduates. Often times these people are self-trained and with certain flair for language and writing, they are all set to be information providers. Today we see them much associated with the all-pervasive social media. Some may consider themselves as citizen journalists, while others called themselves professional Bloggers. Such developments could be profoundly disturbing for the mainstream media organisations since they are seen to be competing with the mainstream without adopting mainstream journalistic practices (Burns, 2008).

With the introduction of internet and its new found capability known as the web, news and information can be delivered through this mass media all over the world in unprecedented quantities. Hence the mass audience today have to prepare themselves for the onslaught of information, both good and bad; credible or non-credible. This situation necessitates the immediate retooling of media practitioners and educators as well as redefining the discipline itself.

The Emergence of Cyber Journalism in Malaysia

The emergence of internet in Malaysia has some profound impact on the country's media landscape as well as the journalism profession and education. Malaysia's first Internet Service Provider (ISP), JARING (Joint Advance Integrated Network) was launched in early 1990 by the Malaysian institute of Microelectronic System (MIMOS). The second ISP, TMNet was licensed in July 1996. By November 2000 there were three other ISPs in Malaysia namely Maxis communication, DiGi, and Time Telecommunications Sdn. Bhd. (Time Telekom). When the internet service was launched in 1992, there were only 90 users. The end of 2000 estimated the number of subscribers at 1.4 million with 6 to 7 million users (Legard, 2000).

A leading tabloid, *The Star* in mid-1990's, established the country's first online newspaper. Soon after, other newspapers join the bandwagon. No newspapers in Malaysia, be it small or big, want to be left out in the quest for new markets in this digital age. In time to come, we will be seeing more local newspapers go online.

Utusan Malaysia's former Editor-in-Chief, Khalid Mohamad (2000), has predicted that it will be just a matter of time before news organisations in the country be completely wired up with telecommunication and ICT linkages. ICT is now part of a newsroom culture. Khalid added "technology is driving us further into cyber space and we are certainly heading towards a virtual newsroom in the near future".

Back then, the former *Utusan chief* was talking about tabloid newspapers and today capsule or tabloid he was talking about are available on every mobile phone and I-Pad brought by the Internet technology.

People working in the newsrooms can now draw massive array of information from the databases. Instead of leafing through volumes of papers and news clippings, the journalist simply enters the online databases and gets the desired information in matter of seconds or minutes instead of hours. In its simplest form the computer database provides quick and easy access to reference systems. This means that every journalist needs to be computer literate (Faridah Ibrahim, 2001). Furthermore, the availability of computer-stored information makes it possible for journalist to find or verify information quickly.

Although the potential of the online version is enormous, to date most online newspapers in the country are mere highlights of the print medium except for the notably and controversial news portal, *Malaysiakini.com*

known for its alternative news coverage. The online newspaper does not exist in printed form. With regard to the other newspapers online, the reasons given for having the same printed news online are the question of economy and financial impact and this has a lot to do with training and development, manpower planning and infrastructure improvement. During the earlier days, the traditional advertisers in Malaysia are still not convinced of the enormous reach of online consumers, and many still prefer the more conventional medium. At that time, the effectiveness of online advertising was not felt yet as Wong Chun Wai (1999) from *The Star* observed. He contended that even computer companies prefer inserting advertisements in the In-Tech pull-out, a special weekly write-ups on computers in *The Star* print newspaper, rather than have their advertisements on the online version. *The Star* holds the record of being the number one daily in the country with the highest advertising revenue.

To stay competitive, online newspapers now have to chart new strategies. Besides making their product more attractive to their readers, they also need to look for alternative revenues. To date, accessibility to online newspapers in this country is free. This is definitely not peculiar to just Malaysia. Besides advertising, only one mainstream print publication in the U.S., *The Wall Street Journal* has successfully asked readers to pay a subscription fee for an online edition, an annual fee of US\$49. *The New York Times* online version is free. One can see that the market for paid content, especially in the consumer media, is very limited. But today almost all prints and broadcast media have their online version.

In Malaysia, several mainstream newspapers, *The Star* in particular has made great efforts to put online major breaking news for its readers, like those highlighted by news agencies, even before the prints are out. One important reason for such an effort is to prove that edited online news which are fast and precise, are better than the thousands of websites on the net which are questionable in terms of credibility and trustworthiness.

But to remain viable in cyberspace, media industries need to double and triple their effort to be the number one in providing information to the mass audience. Today, massive information gets transmitted over the Net, some professionally packaged and coming from credible sources and news organisations, while some are from the unknowns. Given such a situation, how do media practitioners steadfastly claimed that their news and information are credible, up-to-date and professionally packaged? There is no answer to this question but the closest would be

going back to the epistemology of the discipline and to uphold journalistic professionalism.

The Question of Epistemology

The question of epistemology should not only concern the journalism educators but also the media practitioners. What makes online news stands out from the maze of other online information lies in the question of epistemology that requires one to get back to basics. By this it means that journalism educators and media practitioners need to understand the nature and philosophy of journalism. What makes journalism a knowledge? And what makes journalism a profession?

By epistemology, we are referring to a branch of philosophy that analyses the origin, nature, methods and validity of human knowledge (*Macmillan Contemporary Dictionary* 1979: 343). From the beginning, journalists are committed to seeking truth. The news media act as watchdog to the government. In their day to day activities they are involved actively in mobilising the public as well as moulding the government. The news media are a forum for discussion and debate. Newspapers in Malaysia and all over the world have special sections such as letters-to-editors, opinion columns, editorial etc. for readers, practitioners and other media public to raise and discuss important issues, voice grievances or compliment some heroic gestures. The same goes to the electronic media via talk shows. Currently, we can see that the interactive feature of the internet has greatly enhanced the job of cyber journalists in similar functions such as seeking information, getting and giving feedback.

All these functions remain strong until today with some modifications here and there depending on the media system of each country. But the basic needs remain. Journalism educators need to inculcate this philosophy in their teachings and their journalism curriculum.

Although the style of journalistic writings change over time, from the conventional inverted pyramid to the interpretive new journalism, the basics still remain – The question of who, what, when, where, why and how are still relevant and especially so in the digital age where accuracy, completeness, depth and sensibility are the order of the day. In cyberspace, at a touch of a button, readers or surfers can just move from one link to another and from one site to another. In line with this statement, Robinson and Godbey (1997) argued that the internet provides people with greater

power to control information to the extent that users or readers control both the content and the pace of arriving information.

What will make news and journalists in cyberspace different from the others? It is definitely the commitment to the nature and philosophy of journalism. Long before the introduction of cyber journalism, journalists are already educated and trained to be committed to social improvement. It is the responsibility of the journalists to harness on the kind of writing that appeals to general audience, sometimes by trying to be entertaining or even sensationalistic. Journalists are also urged to develop a strong orientation in covering events and will always be on top of unfolding events and providing information to its public quickly. In cyberspace, this is a dream come true. And most important, journalists are urged to be ethical, responsible and neutral in reporting events. These are the underlying principles that are taught in journalism education and which should be emphasised by the practicing journalists.

Defining Professionalism

Besides this epistemological deliberation, cyber journalists need to maintain a high level of professionalism in their profession in order to gain recognition and remain viable in this virtual industry. According to Wok and Kamarudin (2001) paper qualifications seem to be the most important selecting factor in hiring a professional, but it must be supplemented with other criteria such as knowledge acquired and transfer, analytical and strategic skills, human relations, experience and work ethics.

In this case being a cyber-journalist is a noble profession – a journalist is a messenger who brings important news to people – but to differentiate between professional and non-professional journalists is a difficult task to do. Many claimed that the criteria for professionalism are very subjective. To date, media practitioners are still debating on whether to call journalism a “profession” a “semi-profession” or an “emerging profession.” And if there is an uncertainty with regards to journalism, the same may also happen to cyber journalism. Is cyber journalism a profession? Before we go any further, let’s look at the characteristics of a full profession (Orstein and Levine, 1985: 38; see also McLeod and Hawley, 1964; Corwin, 1965; Windhal and Rosengren, 1974; Howsam, 1976; Havighurst and Levine, 1979), such as follows:

1. A sense of public service; a lifetime commitment to career.
2. A defined body of knowledge and skills beyond that grasped by laypersons.
3. Application of research and theory to practice (to human problems).
4. A lengthy period of specialised training.
5. Control over licencing standards and/or entry requirements.
6. Autonomy in making decisions about selected spheres or works.
7. An acceptance of responsibility for judgements made and acts performed related to services rendered; a set of standards of performance.
8. A commitment to work and client; an emphasis on service to be rendered.
9. Use of administrators to facilitate work of professionals; relative freedom from detailed on-the-job supervision.
10. A self-governing organisation comprised of members of the profession.
11. Professional associations and/or elite groups to provide recognition for individual achievements.
12. A code of ethics to help clarify ambiguous matters or doubtful points related to services rendered.
13. A high level of public trust and confidence in individual practitioners.
14. High prestige and economic standing.

A local study looking at the above criteria particularly professional items underlined by McLeod and Hawley, 1964, found that characteristics 3, 4 and 6 are not constantly present among working journalists. The general consensus is that journalism is partially but not entirely a full profession, although it is moving in the direction of becoming one. Hence it should be viewed as an emerging profession (Faridah Ibrahim et al., 2000). However, according to Ornstein and Levine (1985) probably no profession is marked by all the characteristics listed above. And Howsam (1976) writing about educating a profession states that both emerging and full professionals are recognised in courts of law as competent to give expert professional testimony.

With the above contention, it is important that cyber journalists try to emulate these professional characteristics in order to be called professional cyber journalists. Several questions that will be raised would be the lack of body of knowledge and skills, a shorter period of specialised

training or perhaps no training at all (many rise to the occasion due to their mastery of language without experience in building content) and of course, another factor of equal importance is a code of ethics. Print and broadcast journalists have established their own code of ethics. While cyber journalists could fall back on this established code of ethics, it would be very practical to draft their own.

Trends Toward Professionalism

Professionalism is often equated with the skill or qualities of a profession with its member having high competencies. Scholars in professionalism studies such as Hawley and McLeod contended that a person may not be a professional if he or she is surrounded by non-professional co-workers. Hence, professionalism is also seen as qualities associated with a profession, which may include character, status, methods and spirit.

According to Nayman (1973) a professional should possess at least four important attributes namely expertise, commitment, autonomy and responsibilities. Skills and expertise are usually acquired from education and experience. These two factors are important in any job accomplishment. A professional is also committed to his job and is willing to do anything that will enhance his profession, without prioritising on monetary gains. Autonomy implies creativity and freedom in his job while responsibility indicates the individual's concern for ethical sanctions and moral obligations.

According to Nayman et al. (1977) growth in the communication and mass media industries has been phenomenal in the last three decade. Journalists, because of their long tradition as leaders in mass communication, have been cited by researchers as emerging professionals within the communication industry. Since the job of broadcast and cyber journalists also involved newsgathering, writing and disseminating, they too would qualify to be called emerging professionals. However, responsibility and ethical conduct would be issues of great concern for cyber journalists in particular since the professional journalists are no longer the sole provider and gatekeepers of news in cyberspace. There are others from diverse background and skills who see equally fit to carry out the role as information providers and content builders. Hence, cyber journalists should be more wary of the demands of journalistic professionalism.

Professionalism controls the behaviour of journalists in two ways, says journalism scholar, John Soloski (1984). First, it sets standards and norms of behaviour; and second, it determined the professional reward systems.

What we have today in the internet are vital information for individuals, policy makers and decision-makers. We also have other kinds of information, which is known to internet surfers as junk. Without sound knowledge and relevant skills in journalism, Neuzil (1994) noted that a journalist may drop one step behind, from a significant part of newsgathering process.

Bridging the Gap

The proliferation of media industries brought by the advancements of new media technology has blurred the traditional lines between the old and new media. According to Lavine and Wackman (1988) with the increased demand for more and higher quality information, and with the advancement of information and Communication Technology (ICT) that meets the demand, many of the traditional distinctions among the media no longer apply.

According to Editor-in-Chief of the Malaysian National News Agency (BERNAMA), Yong Soo Heong (2011) media practitioners are now known as knowledge workers or k-workers who need to be ICT-literate, well educated, professional, extremely hardworking, creative, imaginative, and in many ways, inclined towards journalistic knowledge. These are important attributes that would make cyber journalists differ from the rest of the players in the internet. This would of course depend on two resourceful groups: journalism educators and practitioners. Both should work hand-in-hand to ensure a bright and flourishing future for journalism and its fraternity.

Many local editors (Faridah and Mohd Safar, 2005) admit that training in cyberspace is vital. As these new technologies are accepted in the newsroom, it is important that journalists equip themselves with the knowledge and skills so that they can get acquainted with the new technologies and their paraphernalia.

Training and retraining is an expensive business but nevertheless, an important aspect of human resource development both at the institutions of higher learning as well as at the media industries. Computers are mere innovative tools, according to these editors and it is actually the human

aspect that will enable news organisations and journalists to stay relevant. Again it should be stressed that whatever miracle technology has brought to mankind, we should always remember that it's not technology that drives human but it's the other way round.

What will make professional cyber journalism valuable? This is an important question for those who are concern about the future of journalism. Founding editor of *The North Carolina Independent*, Katherine Fulton (1994) offers these guidelines. (a) Launch a massive technological literary campaign for journalists. (b) Journalists need to be educated on ethical issues, economic and political so that they have a good grasp on what they are reporting. (c) Pay good attention to serious intellectual work that could have an impact on public journalism.

In terms of preparation, cyber journalists need to be trained on the fundamentals i.e writing and editing skills besides basic computer knowledge. As cyber journalists, they need to re-orientate their writing in a non-linear style, using lots of information, experimentation, research as well as empirical data. In today's information era, they are dealing with a knowledgeable and an intelligent society. Hence, they should also acquire a strategic and intelligent gathering skills. Only then will they be able to reach out to the audience with maximum impact and influence. They should also have a good sense of design and creativity since cyber journalism involved multimedia presentation, a convergence of traditional and new media. Online news usually comes in the form of text of non-linear news writing and hyperlinks, together with moving images or still pictures and actualities and sound effects. Hence, today's journalists are not only trained to be print journalists, but also broadcast as well as online. Already major journalism schools in the world are moving towards this direction.

Conclusion

What does professionalism means to cyber journalists? It's everything that will make cyber journalism valuable. The truth is that people don't understand why good journalism matters. This is merely because there's plenty of information on the Net. And that people have the power to choose or not to choose. If professionalism is to survive, professional cyber journalists have to be willing to be as tough on themselves as they are on others. Nevertheless, a simple truth remains – no matter how massive the information is, the selective audience still places a high value on credible and responsible news.

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