

**Journalists and News Sources:
Implications of Professionalism in War Reporting**

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Journalists and News Sources: Implications of Professionalism in War Reporting

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ABSTRACT

The study of journalism covers in broad perspectives the principles of reporting in various situations, whether in normal time based on events and press conferences or during news breaking in times of crisis, conflicts or disasters. In this instance, journalists are expected to perform their duty without fear or favour, but with responsibility and ethical considerations. In other words, the journalists need to be professional in their job. Nevertheless, one dimension that involves great discretion, diligence and thoughtful analysis on the part of the journalists is during the reporting of conflicts, for instance war, whether the war news is in their country or another. Studies have shown that government, diplomats, military and humanitarian aid agencies are increasingly affected by the news media through the issues, people and countries the media choose to highlight in war stories. Indeed, the media are seen to have great potential to have enormous influence over decisions and public opinion as well as national and international agenda. Using a qualitative research methodology, the paper seeks to discover the extent the media in Malaysia are professional in their reporting of war stories, especially when they themselves come from a non-warring country. At this juncture, it is also interesting to find out the nature of the news sources and journalists relationship and the extent of professional values they uphold.

Keywords: professionalism, ethical consideration, journalism, public relations practitioners, responsibility, war reporting, news media

Introduction

The question of ethical and responsible practices among media practitioners has become significant and heavily monitored. With the proliferation of new media technology, media consumers are exposed to current information and minute details of what is going on around them through the Internet. They are also exposed to the latest information through social networks such as Facebook, twitter and blogs where citizen journalists are active. Such is the current information trend in the age of globalization where there is a thin demarcation line between what is professional and what is not.

Although news from citizen journalists are readily available at a push of the keyboard on the computer, the extent of objectivity, accountability of the information and professionalism in the assembly of the news are questionable issues that beset the world of journalism today.

While some websites are created by notable organizations and individuals with credible news sources, there are also websites with information that openly violates the ethical standards of journalism. The sources used in some of these news are questionable and may seem biased.

It is a known fact that the role of the journalists, regardless of different historical and regional backgrounds, is to impart the truth and help build new knowledge and experiences through the dissemination of information. Despite differing political and economic situations, journalists all over the world operate on roughly the same ground, which is to gather and impart information responsibly and with integrity whilst abiding to the code of ethics. Again as stipulated by many media codes of ethics, responsible journalists would only report based on credible sources.

Hence, to add authority and believability to their news, journalists need to rely on news sources to provide them with the facts about events. Thus, to a certain extent, it is the news sources and not journalists who are responsible for the accuracy of the facts. It is, however, always the media organizations and the journalists who will be blamed whenever there is a misreporting of facts. The accusations thrown at the journalists in several instances are partly valid because of the fact that the ability to identify who to quote, and under what circumstances, has become an essential part of the journalists' roles and responsibilities (Strentz 1997).

The responsibilities of journalists become more critical when they need to assemble news in a hurry, under rigid deadlines and within dangerous environment, such as in time of conflict and war. Journalists reporting about conflicts and war, whether war in their country or war in other people's country, usually rely on specified information especially those subsidized by the government or authorities in the war zones, be they army generals or other protagonists of war.

It is, however, up to the editors who received the news in the newsrooms to decide whether to release or not to release certain news or facts to the public based on their journalistic norms and criteria, better known as their professional code. On some occasions, an event or happening of news value is judged in bad taste, which is unethical in nature and hence, the news has to be spiked. This is a situation that can be described as a dilemma between news value and the ethical consideration which lie in the realm of journalistic professionalism.

To what extent do local journalists and editors, exercise journalistic professionalism and ethics in their role as disseminators of information, especially in times of war? And to what extent are news sources considered as the determining factor that decides whether certain news see the light of day or get spiked? This paper looks into the written and unwritten rules that beset the media industry in Malaysia. Based on qualitative interviews with several editors, journalists, and government public relations practitioners, this paper tries to delve into the significance of professionalism and ethical considerations in the exchange of information between journalists and government news sources, in the context of war news coverage.

War reporting and professionalism

As information gatherers and disseminators, journalists must act in ways that allow them to report news objectively. Only then can they claim that they are professionals and that their news is accurate and ethically sound. Reporting about war and peace, however, requires journalists to adhere to different demands. These include the demands of army generals in war zones, the leaders of the warring states as well as the leaders who send their troops to foreign wars. News about war and peace negotiations is subsidized by these groups who are categorized as the

protagonists of war. Information from these sources is considered the official statements or accredited sources that war correspondents cannot do without.

The news media have long been players in the drama of war. War correspondents or embedded journalists are always looking for sources to provide them information for their news stories. But embedded journalists are not free to roam the war torn zone to gather information. Hence, they have to depend heavily on subsidized information. Such information subsidy normally comes from the government of the warring countries via senior military officers and official spokespersons vis-à-vis public relations practitioners.

Usually war coverage follows a standard format. Its main focus is on acts of violence and prominent national suffering. Violence is represented as a natural consequence of incompatible cultural differences between “us” and “them”. As Lynch (2002) contended, one side is the problem, the initiator, the perpetrator of violence and the other side is the innocent victim who must respond. To the general semanticist Korzybski and his followers, war journalism constructs binaries between good and evil. Victimization and demonizing language is likely to be used by war protagonists and such terminology is passed on to the public via the journalists and the mass media. Hence, the challenge faced by war correspondents is to select the right words from credible sources.

The use of qualified and accredited sources has been underlined in many codes of ethics and has been the basic tenet of objective journalism. In fact, objectivity lies in the domain of professional standards that journalists need to attain and maintain. Roscho (1975) contends that objectivity does not reside in news stories themselves rather it resides in the behavior of the journalists.

What constitutes objective news? For journalists, objectivity does not mean that they are impartial observers of events, but they seek out facts and report them in a fair and balanced way. By giving a balanced presentation of facts, journalists are able to satisfy more members of the audience than if they were to report the news in an overtly political manner. For Malaysian media practitioners, it is the question of balance and professionalism that colors the local media landscape.

One way to get balanced news is by using balanced facts provided by multilevel sources and not just by a single source. The use of multilevel sources will enable journalists to assemble various opinions from a multiplicity of perspectives in a single story, especially a lead story. Gans (1980) identified two types of news sources, the knowns and the unknowns. The knowns are the elites and official sources, namely heads of government, ministers and deputy ministers, official spokespersons usually the public relations practitioners (PRPs), leaders of NGOs, experts, celebrities and the like. While the unknowns are not persons at the higher hierarchy, but rather ordinary people or non-elites who become relevant sources because of their connections with certain news events as eyewitnesses, victims and families of victims. Gans (1980) also points out that media news is primarily about those at or near the top of the power hierarchies and on those low in the hierarchies who threaten the top.

In a study of U.S television networks and a news magazine, Gans (1980) found that the knowns appeared four times more frequent as news sources compared to the unknowns. This indicates

that news using reliable, authoritative and known persons is valued highly. In a local study by Faridah Ibrahim and Mohd Safar Hasim (2005), it was also found that popular news sources quoted by the local media, both newspapers and televisions, are the elites or the knowns as compared to the non-elites or the unknowns. News using the knowns as sources are those quoting the prime minister, deputy prime minister, the cabinet ministers and leaders of other countries and to a lesser extent leaders of NGOs and political organizations. News values are often equated with the kind of sources used in the news.

Interestingly, sources most often sought after by journalists are the official spokespersons or the PRPs. As news sources or news providers, they have their own roles and responsibilities. Through media-relations network they are able to carry out these functions: the first is to maintain favourable opinion toward the organization or client they are representing; second, to create opinion which is non-existent or where it is latent; and third, to neutralize hostile opinion (Baskin et al.:1997). Media practitioners including the journalists are, however, always wary of PRPs' roles and intentions. Journalists have mixed feelings toward public relations practitioners—suspecting them of manipulation while depending on them for information. On the other hand, public relations practitioners view journalists as a conduit through which they can reach a broader public, and also as gatekeepers representing and responding to the publics' need to know.

Although an interdependent relationship exists between news sources and journalists in the war zones, it is the journalists who will retain nominal veto power over incoming information. They can choose to print or not to print. However, they usually relinquish much of their decision-making responsibility to the accredited news sources assigned at the war zones, which will select and control the material disseminated. While journalists may reject some information that they receive through briefings or releases, they do depend on the constant flow of information from their news sources. To a large extent, journalists can be seen as the great processors of information which is passed on by the protagonists of war.

Journalists in general have an overwhelming desire to get facts. They maintain that not only are they responsible to provide information to the public, but that their task is to provide feedback from society at large to the powers-that-be. Hence, journalists who gather and organize information for the media tend to take their responsibilities to society very seriously. They view themselves as having a sacred public mission to serve as the public's eyes and ears and to be watchdogs on public institutions. They see their job as seeking the truth, putting it into perspective, and publishing it so that people can conduct their daily activities proficiently. However, a question that is constantly being raised by media critics, especially among the NGOs and governmental organizations is who's watching the watchdogs?

These are the professional demands of journalists. According to Larson (1977:168) professionalism “makes the use of discretion predictable. It relieves bureaucratic organizations of responsibility for devising their own mechanism of control in the discretionary areas of work.” Proponents of professionalism such as Nayman et al. (1977) and McLeod and Hawley (1964) found that professional norms and values are important criteria to uphold journalistic profession. One reason being, professionalism is an efficient and economical way by which news organizations monitor and control the behavior of journalists.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) identify five dominant characteristics that should be present among professionals and these are a set of professional standards, membership in a professional organization, professional norms, a tradition of knowledge and technical competency. In this regard, journalists would call themselves as emerging professionals since the majority would claim that all five characteristics are present in their profession.

Because of their commitment and devotion toward carrying out their responsibility professionally, it is only natural that their view of facts is quite different from those of their sources. The journalists consider news a highly perishable commodity, while the sources of news are more concerned about the ultimate impression a story will make. To the journalists, a story is an evanescent element in the ongoing flow of information; to the news sources, it is a distinct event. The journalist is usually not interested in the positive or negative orientation of the story, as long as it presents the facts fairly. Nevertheless, the source always wants to be portrayed in a favourable light (Baskin et al. 1997:228).

Yet, for all the concerns organizations manifest about how their stories are covered, the media's power does not depend on their ability to slant material one way or another but rather in what words, deeds, events or issues they choose to define as news. Apart from ethics, the universal criteria of news selection also come into play. Douglas Cater (1972: 82).

The essential power of the press is its capacity to choose what is news. Each day in Washington tens of thousands of words are uttered which are considered important by those who utter them. Tens of dozens of events occur which are considered newsworthy by those who have staged them. The press has the power to select—to decide which events go on page one or the prime-time TV news and which events get ignored.

News values and ethical considerations

Sometimes the media's goals of providing truth and making profit are sometimes conflicting. We have seen too often newspapers and televisions carrying more negative than positive news mainly because negative and sensational news attract readers as well as viewers and help make the news business a lucrative industry. This is so when covering war stories. One can see war stories are heavy on negativities compared to positive ones. Such is the case in most countries all over the world and Malaysia is without exception.

In order to survive, media industry has to attract and hold a particular audience which it could then sell to advertisers. Hence, day by day, the media content tends to highlight what the audiences want in order to capture a bigger readership, circulation or ratings, which often means an increase in the advertising and commercial revenues as well as subscriptions. Advertising is essential for the media industry's survival.

To maximize profits, both electronic and print news organizations are encouraged by their corporate owners to find news that captures the attention of the audience. Since negative and sensational news sell, we get to see the proliferation of negative news such as conflicts and wars, and lighter stories about lifestyle, entertainment, celebrities, and gossips and so on. All these

forces lead to considerable pressures on journalists, and these pressures often have ethical implications.

Journalists have to focus seriously on the 5Ws and 1H every time they write a news story. Knowing who might be quoted and under what circumstances becomes an essential part of journalistic professionalism. Often it is the “who” news that makes the headline, says Sigal (1973). And in line with this view, most scholars writing about news (e.g., Gans 1980; Strentz 1989, etc.) have emphasized how official sources determine news events. Various scientific studies by these scholars also demonstrate that officially noteworthy personalities such as nations’ leaders and political leaders as well as the PRPs are official and credible sources that should be quoted. Hence, we get to see the strong relationship between the media and these news sources.

The use of appropriate news sources has been the creed in professional journalism and has been spelled out in media codes of ethics in most countries. However, sometimes news sources can provide misleading information in order to advocate a certain cause without the journalists realizing that they have been maneuvered. Hence, journalists need to be aware who their sources are, what are their track records and how credible and reliable they are. Four key factors that help journalists in analyzing the news sources are the extent of quotability, accessibility, accountability and credibility.

What constitutes credible and objective reporting? The question of objective reporting is value-laden, and there is no clear-cut guideline as to what is objective and what is not, or what is news value and what is bad taste. A simple answer to objective reporting is the kind of reporting that uses relevant and reliable sources which is not bias or slanted to a certain party. However, a practical answer to this is to put extra effort in gathering information honestly and fairly as well as treating involved people with compassion. Journalists should try to seek and report the closest truth about events of great concern and interest to the people (Ghani & Ibrahim, 1996).

It can be seen that the news source is an important force that shapes the news (Sigal 1986). A story will never take shape without credible source and most often will be put aside or spiked.

Methodology

To further understand the nature of professionalism involved in the news sources and journalists’ relationship, a study based on in-depth interviews with several local editors, journalists and public relations practitioners was undertaken by the authors between 2008 and 2010. Some of the findings are discussed in the following section.

Analysis and discussion

Based on the responses made by media practitioners interviewed, it is clear that when it comes to selecting what should be printed or broadcast and what should not to be highlighted in the news, it is the journalists and news practitioners such as the news producers and editors who call the shots. Although most of the news is obtained from high-level news sources including the PRPs from the relevant government bodies, the decision to print or broadcast lies in the hands of the news people.

As indicated by an informant who is a public relation officer and also the official spokesperson for a Ministry: “Basically, the relationship is simple. We need the press to publicize and circulate our news. We try our best to provide important news information so that the press will find it newsworthy to highlight it in their newspapers or television station...but if they choose not to highlight it, there is nothing much we can do. But of course, in most cases when we have positioned the news strategically, our story will be highlighted without much persuasion on our part. One important tool for the PRP is their media relation strategies.” Apart from these strategies, the news sources, basically the PRPs need to package their news with some elements of newsworthiness. Because of this situation, “we tend to see that the coverage of war and peace negotiations in war zones have taken a different angle. Statistics of war casualties, plight of victims, new turn of event, peace negotiations, humanitarian aid, economic turmoil due to war, leadership changes, and demonstrations are issues that will always attract the ears and eyes of journalists and we try to address these angles,” he elaborated.

On the question of source-journalist relationships, an informant from the Ministry of Defence said: “We are professionals. We help each other. The press needs us as news sources and we need the press to promote our cause.”

And for the press, it is always news value, ethics and professionalism above anything else. An informant, who is a group editor for a leading newspaper company in Malaysia said that news sources are important in news writing especially in war zones because it will increase believability and credibility of the coverage. He said “...we need news sources ...to give credibility to the news. Otherwise readers do not know where the news had come from. So if there is a ‘face’ that we can use to attribute to the story...we will definitely use it...then there is a certain amount of believability.”

With regard to who makes the decision, he said: “Top priority is that the newspaper is a business entity. We are not a non-profit, non-governmental agency or an NGO. We have to make money or else we are not able to produce a newspaper. Without money we are not able to pay our staff, and get journalists to do a decent professional job. So, journalists need to understand that while they have to carry out their job professionally well, they cannot go on without thinking about the commercial element. But we have had cases where we reject money but use the stories...for instance, if there is a company that have invested a lot of money with us ...but if the company is in trouble or involved in some scandal, we will report about them regardless of whether they bring in money into our company or do not,” he said.

“We do not have hard and fast rules where news sources are concerned. Our focus is news value and we use news that is newsworthy. Even if the news is from a high ranking news source...if the news has no value, we are not going to print it,” said another informant, an editor of a leading Malay national daily newspaper. The editor also stressed that he will constantly have briefing regarding reporter-source relationships with his reporters because news sources are critically important, where his newspaper is concerned. “We need to be fair to the readers. Whenever possible, we need to identify the sources. I will not carry non-credited news by my reporters. I will want to know who the source is and if questionable, I will ask them to check further.”

Where war news is concerned, too often the newspapers and television in the country have been bombarded with comments about too much negativities in the daily news package. Readers and viewers complained that they are fed with bad news day by day or hour after hour. In response to the question on this bad news syndrome, one of the informants, an editor with a Chinese daily newspaper said that it is important that readers are exposed to all kinds of stories. Gory pictures of war should be printed to create awareness among the people. “We try all kinds of appeals, fear appeal is one of them, so that people will always remember. We also print good news which helps to motivate people,” he said. This is in line with various writings on ethics (see Itule and Anderson 1994) whereby it has been contended that readers and viewers, despite what they say, are attracted to bad news, and do read and watch it attentively.

“Covering other people’s war is a problem because we don’t have the right equipments and resources. Our journalists are not trained for combat and they are not ready for war reporting” said an editor with an English language daily. Hence, a large amount of war news is taken from the international news agencies. “The army generals, foreign minister and foreign high commissioner as well as diplomats are official sources we will be looking for to add believability to our stories,” he said.

“But we do not depend on them alone. Our reporters develop their own news sources. Usually, the kind of sources used will depend on the kind of news the reporters are trying to develop. Most news need credible sources and often, one news story will have more than one news sources. This is one of the ways, we can provide a balanced news story,” said an informant, a news editor from a leading Malay language daily. “There are times, when we combined information from various international agencies so that we can give a balanced war story to our audience,” he said.

However, when there is a breaking story in a foreign land and a conflict situation is unavoidable, the journalists and official spokesperson from the foreign ministry are trapped in a kind of tug-of-war that produces a moral-ethical stress. On one hand, the journalists are trying to get as much information for the audience while, on the other hand, the official spokesperson are trying to control the flow of information. In such a case, most reporters will find their own news sources and develop stories with or without the help of the official spokesperson. “In this tug-of-war, usually it is the official spokesperson who has to give in finally,” said an informant, a news editor.

Who is the ultimate winner in this game? “Nobody wins,” said all the informants. Basically the public relations practitioners as news sources and the journalists as the information seekers have their own role to play. These PRPs are official spokespersons for government agencies or private organizations which will always protect their organizations and will never put their image in jeopardy.

However, for the journalists, their main mission is to sell their news. According to the informants who are journalists and editors, “The bottom line is profit.” News of great importance, whether good or bad, needs to be imparted to the public. Concealing information is not going to help anybody. The public, with alternative source of information brought about by the proliferation of new media technology, will have access to the news anyway. Furthermore, it is the responsibility

of the journalists to be on top of unfolding events and providing information to its public quickly. And most important, journalists are urged to be ethical, responsible and professional in reporting events, especially in times of war, where citizens' lives and security are at stake.

In most cases, where news reports were said to be biased, stereotyped, negative, misrepresented, unethical and irresponsible, it is not just the reporters who get the blame; the news sources particularly the official spokesperson are also to be blamed. As one informant said, "The messenger should not be blamed for the message."

Conclusion

In the coverage of major events, crisis, war, disaster and the like, the question of news value versus bad taste has become issues of great concern. With regards to news dissemination, a question to be posed here is who creates and who provides the news to the masses. To answer this question, perhaps media practitioners need to dwell into the basics of journalism profession. Journalists are basically information gatherers and disseminators. And the news sources, for instance government and official spokesperson (the public relations practitioners) are the information providers. Journalists and the news sources cannot save the world; they cannot even lessen the grief of people whose loved ones are killed in accidents, wars and natural catastrophes – but they can help minimize human anxieties and sufferings. What they can do is to be accurate, comprehensive, professional and sensitive in the news business.

In order to maintain responsible journalism, many ethicists suggest that journalists should have control of their environment and situation (Ghani and Ibrahim 1996). They need to be aware of the avenues that can help them maintain or raise their professional standards. Philosophy and ethical principles may be the best guiding light for a journalist in facing the daily pressures of the newsrooms. Journalists should also try to seek and report the closest truth about events of great concern and interest to the people. Hence, if a reporter cannot interview people and report observations faithfully, then perhaps that person should not be a reporter after all. Above all, reporters cannot escape the burden of responsibility for what they report, whether or not within the control of news sources who can choose to be truthful, biased or manipulative.

In this light, there should be a concerted effort between the media and news sources, basically the official spokespersons from the government and private organizations, to draw a strategic media relation plan for a win-win situation and to uphold professionalism.

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