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# 'GLOCALIZING' MALAYSIAN MEDIA RESEARCH: POSITIONING MALAYSIAN ON THE GLOBAL RESEARCH AGENDA AND REPOSITIONING MALAYSIA'S LOCAL RESEARCH AGENDA

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## ABSTRACT

Drawing upon a transnational study addressing the implication of social media sources on the daily routines of global and local mainstream journalists based in Malaysia, this conceptual paper explores the relevance of Malaysia as a site for global media research, and proposes a non-critical, non-status quo research agenda for Malaysian media research. Situated within the chasm between these two oppositional approaches, is a gap in Malaysia-based media scholarship, wherein there is a lack of 'objective' (value-free, interest-free scholarship that is not aligned to either state-centric nor opposition political ideologies), that simultaneously promotes 'subjective' phenomenological interpretative inquiry.

*Keywords: Glocalization; Malaysia; media research agenda; journalism studies; critical political-economy; interpretative paradigm*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper approaches Malaysia as a field work site for media and communications research in general, and journalism studies in particular. Drawing upon a transnational study addressing the implication of social media sources on the daily routines of global and local mainstream journalists based in Malaysia, the paper presents two distinct yet overlapping, transnational perspectives of scholarship. Firstly, approaching Malaysia from a global research perspective, this paper presents Malaysia as a rich, underexplored site for global media research. Secondly, the paper looks at two dominant paradigms of media scholarship in Malaysia, namely 'critical political economy' and 'developmental communication' – two popular approaches to research that mirror two opposing political agendas.

This paper is one attempt to globalize Malaysian media scholarship (by situating Malaysia as a site for global research), and also one attempt to broaden local scholarship (by carving a local niche for interpretative inquiry within the realm of local journalism research). Finally, the paper proposes Malaysia as a ‘glocal’ research site in order repositioning Malaysia’s local media research agenda while simultaneously positioning Malaysia on the global research agenda. In this way, the paper hopes to position Malaysian on the global research agenda, and also to reposition the local Malaysian research agenda.

## **‘GLOBAL TURN’ IN JOURNALISM STUDIES AND GLOBAL COMPARATIVE APPROACH**

Although journalism in US, UK and to a smaller extent, Western Europe, still dominate agenda in most international journals, in recent years, a growing number of journalism research studies have also emerged from other regions.

Although Western liberal-democratic perspectives, frameworks, and empirical evidence spawned the scholarly field of journalism studies (i.e. Anglo-American libertarian-market models and Western Europe Social-Democratic models), and in doing so established the conceptual and empirical tools that drive academic inquiry of journalism, it goes without saying that the phenomenon of journalism itself extends beyond not only the geographic locality of ‘the West’, but also beyond ‘Western’ socio-political models and ideologies. Across the world, news practice is structured by various models of journalism which operate under varied political, social and economic conditions, and are shaped by diverse norms, and informed by different ideologies.

Despite the diversity of journalism(s) across world regions, Anglo-American and Western European contexts remain dominant in journalism research, with most researchers and scholars based in North America or Western Europe, and only a few scholars or research studies coming out of Africa, Asia and Latin America (Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2008, p. 8). In a somewhat scathing critique of Western-centric media research, Curran and Pak (2000) argue:

... it has become routine for universalistic observations about the media to be advanced in English-language books on the basis of evidence from a tiny handful of countries. Whether it be middle-range generalization about, for example, the influence of news sources on reporting, or grand theory about the media’s relationship to postmodernity, the same few countries keep recurring as if they are a stand-in for the rest of the world. (p. 3)

Curran and Park further point out that:

These are nearly always rich Western societies, and the occasional honorary “Western” [sic] country like Australia [. . .] Indeed there are growing signs that US- and UK-based media academics are beginning to feel embarrassed about the viewing the rest of the world as a forgotten understudy . . . (ibid)

The danger of having only select Western countries as ‘a stand-in for the rest of the world’ is that global journalism research may unwittingly succumb to ‘ethnocentricity’ (see Reese, 2001, p. 185). Research ‘ethnocentricism’, in turn, could lead to false assumptions and inaccurate

conclusions not only regarding journalism in other world regions, but also regarding journalism as a general field of inquiry. As Curran (2005) notes:

This encourages the experience of most of the world to be disregarded and misunderstood. It also gives rise to tendentious theorizing that is seldom explicit about its geographical limitations. (p. xiii)

To address these issues in global media research, the Korean Research Council (KRC) – notably a non-Western initiative—supported a global project on 'de-Westernizing media studies' (see Curran, 2005), culminating in Curran and Park's (2000) edited book of the same title. In essence, Curran and Park position their work within "a growing reaction against the self-absorption [sic] and parochialism of much Western media theory."

On the one hand Western theories and conceptual tools are likely the most well-developed in the field, given the long history of Western journalism scholarship. However, 'growing reaction against Western theoretical parochialism' suggests that the application of Western theories and models to non-Western regions must also consider socio-political-cultural contexts surrounding journalistic practice in other world regions.

Accordingly, recent emphasis on a global comparative approach to research is closely associated with an acknowledgement of the Western-centricity that dominates journalism research, alongside efforts at 'de-Westernizing' media studies (Khiabany, 2003; G. Wang, 2011; Wasserman & de Beer, 2009; Xu, 2009). Currently, such 'de-Westernization' efforts tend to emphasize political transformations premised upon Western values of democracy and free speech, for example, focusing on authoritarian constraints on freedom of speech (e.g. Drissel, 2008; Lagerkvist, 2008); or on new media's role in challenging authority (e.g. Cottle, 2011; Hamdy, 2009; Steele, 2009). Alongside scholarly concerns with democratic transformations, is the rise of overlapping ethnographic interest in online news production (e.g. Domingo & Paterson, 2011; Krumsvik & Wang, 2008; Paterson & Domingo, 2008) and participatory journalism across world regions (e.g. Banda, 2010; Kovacic & Erjavec, 2008; Ndangam, 2008; Reich, 2008; Song, 2007).

Tracing developments in journalism research – as undertaken by scholars in both Western and non-Western regions, Wahl-Jorgensen and Hanitzsch (2008) suggest that a contemporary 'global comparative turn' has emerged since the 1990s, coinciding with increasing recognition of journalism studies as a major subfield within media and communication research. This globalizing of journalism research is now an important item on the research agenda as evidenced by numerous calls for transnational comparisons of media (e.g. Donsbach & Patterson, 2004; Esser & Pfetsch, 2004; Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2008; D. Weaver & M. Löffelholz, 2008). The emergence of journals featuring international journalism research, are two further indications of the importance of global comparative research in journalism studies (see Wahl-Jorgensen & Hanitzsch, 2008; D. H. Weaver & M. Löffelholz, 2008). 'Global comparative' research include cross-national comparative studies such as the international collection of surveys of journalists in different countries, inspired and collated into a volume by Weaver (2008 [2003]); as well as various edited volumes comprising of studies by international researchers and in different national contexts (e.g. Boyd-Barrett, 2010; Paterson & Domingo, 2008).

Within this globalized sphere of media research, alongside traditional Western contexts, are a number of non-Western media contexts feature more prominently than others on the ‘global’ research agenda. Among these are: China, Korea, Africa [through ISI-indexed journal *Equi Novid*], Brazil and various ‘Arab Spring’ countries in the Middle East and North Africa. While Southeast Asian countries sporadically appear on the research agenda, particularly in the months following major political incidents (e.g. the fall of Suharto, Thailand’s red-shirt protests, Malaysia’s 2008 general elections), generally speaking, media contexts within this region remain largely under-represented in international literature. For example, a search for ‘Malaysia’ in ‘title’ field under the area of ‘Communication’ in the Web of Knowledge ISI Social Science database results only in 19 research articles. Among these 19 articles – notably only seven deal with journalism in Malaysia. Comparing this to the number of searches for other Asian countries – e.g. China (434 articles); South Korea or Korea (132 articles); we see that Malaysia is not quite on the global media research agenda.

### **DOMINANT PARADIGM IN MALAYSIAN MEDIA RESEARCH**

The bulk of research that focus on media in Malaysia is confined within the local scholarly community, published in local books and journals and presented at local conferences, sometimes in English, but more often in the Malay language. While some of these pursuits might focus on journalism or news as a topic of study, they have yet to develop into any form of distinct ‘journalism studies’ subfield. Few of these works are published internationally. It is unknown if this is simply because local scholars make little attempt to submit their work to international<sup>1</sup> journals, or whether it is because their works are rejected by international editors and reviewers for failing to meet so-called ‘international standards’.

Assuming the latter, one broad explanation for the disparity between local and international publication ‘standards’ may stem from local research culture that emphasizes description over analytical interpretation. In a critique of the state of local scholarship, Nain wrote at the turn of this century:

... media research in Malaysia is very much in its infancy. The bulk of media studies research that has been conducted thus far in Malaysian academia may be categorized as being: (a) positivist and quantitative in nature; (b) policy oriented – insofar as the aim is to examine the effectiveness of policy implementation, primarily by the state; (c) least concerned about the development of theory and largely concerned about the refinement of methods; and (d) blissfully unaware of the ideological nature of media artifacts (Nain, 2000, p. 147)

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<sup>1</sup> Use of the term ‘international’ here is different from the understanding of the word, in which ‘*inter*-national’ refers to transnational cross-border flows *between* nations. Here, my reference to ‘international journals’ and ‘international editors/reviewers’ may be better reflected by the term ‘global’. ‘International’ publications and scholars operate on a supra-national ‘global playing field that is simultaneously sub-national: A scholar’s citizenship/country of residence is of little importance compared to their (supra-national) field of specialization and their particular (sub-national) institutional affiliations. However, for the sake of clarity, here I adhere to conventional language and employ the term ‘international’ to describe what is truly a global community of scholars and their global publications.

Nearly a decade later, the situation remained the same, as suggested by Ismail (2009) in her PhD thesis on media and communications research in Malaysia.

Alongside locally-confined non-specialized scholarship, however, is a small but discernible body of work published in English in international journals and edited books, and thus available to the global scholarly community. Whereas locally-published media research is non-specialized, distinctly critical-political-economy debates have emerged out of the body of internationally-published works on media in Malaysia.

For example, Wang and Nain (2004) discuss government ownership and control of Malaysia media. Wang (1998) writes of how mainstream press came to be dominated by the ruling coalition. Nain (2008) argues that the Malaysian government uses mainstream media to 'construct a fragile national consensus'.

Anuar (2008) critically analyzes media commercialization in Malaysia, and argues that a concentration of media ownership among political elites does little for media freedom. Anuar (2005a) also writes of how the hierarchical nature of relations between the journalistic fraternity and political leaders, manifested in respect and deference, precludes journalists from asking these revered leaders any searching questions. Mohd Sani (2005), argues that government curbs on media freedom is a means to ensure the survival of the ruling government, while Anuar (2005b) demonstrates how concentration of press ownership among political elites, together with laws limiting press freedom, impede upon the Malaysian electorate's freedom of information. Netto (2002) views the state of media freedom in Malaysia as a 'challenge facing civil society'.

Similarly, literature on new media in Malaysia is usually framed as democratic reaction to authoritarian state control (e.g. Kugelman, 2008; Powers & El-Nawawy, 2008; Quek, 2010; Steele, 2009), be it work on Malaysia's alternative online media (e.g. J. Gomez & Chang, 2010; Steele, 2009; Tong, 2004), or *Al Jazeera English's* establishment of a broadcast center in Kuala Lumpur (see Kugelman, 2008). For example, Powers and El-Nawawy (2008) conceptualize *Al Jazeera English* as a 'new media' in Malaysia and analyzes the station's role in the politics of protest. Steele's (2009) ethnographic study of the alternative online news portal *Malaysiakini* explores how this new media outlet challenges authoritarianism and promotes democratic civic discourse locally. Similarly, Tong (2004) traces the development of *Malaysiakini* through a focus on political pressure and market factors. These debates address three key areas: (1) What Hallin and Mancini (2004) term 'political parallelism' between mainstream media and government political parties, and resulting state 'instrumentalization' of mainstream media (e.g. Anuar, 2005b, 2008; Nain, 2008; Nain & Wang, 2004; L. K. Wang, 1998); (2) State control and media freedom (e.g. Anuar, 2005a; Mohd Sani, 2005; Netto, 2002); and (3) New media and democracy (e.g. J. Gomez & Chang, 2010; Ling, 2003; Powers & El-Nawawy, 2008; Steele, 2009; Tong, 2004).

On the one hand, this scholarly-convergent approach to Malaysian media signals the development and acceptance of 'Malaysian-media-political-economy' as a scholarly field of expertise. (But whether work within this established field is thorough in their analytical or empirical rigour is a different matter). On the other hand, under the paradigmatic assumption that political-economy is the most accurate way of thinking about the topic, this singular approach to Malaysian media risks an unusual academic pitfall wherein academia may stereotypically assume that any empirical study of media in Malaysia necessarily falls under the rubric of political-economy. By extension, this stereotyping of Malaysian media

research risks overemphasizing ideological value-laden assumptions regarding the demerits of Malaysia's state-controlled mainstream media and the merits of Malaysian alternative media, thus inadvertently overlooking other important aspects of media in Malaysia.

### **NON-CRITICAL, NON-STATUS QUO INTERPRETATIVE RESEARCH**

Apart from locally-produced scholarship as described (in criticism) by Nain earlier, at the international level there are very few studies that approach media and communication in Malaysia from a non-critical perspective. Exceptions include: Postill's (2008, 2011) anthropological study of a 'residents sociality' at a Malaysian suburb in which his conceptual focused was on 'internet localization'; Steele's (2011) interview with Malaysian and Indonesian journalists in her study on universal Islamic principles of journalism; and my own research (Firdaus, 2011) into tensions between journalistic and marketing logics at a major Malaysian news organization.

Unlike the 'dominant paradigm' in Malaysian media research which focuses on critical assessment of media in Malaysia, Postill emphasizes theory development by exploring 'conceptual tools at the disposal of internet researchers', while Steele explores 'universal values of journalism' from a Southeast Asian Islamic perspective. Echoing such interpretative approaches to Malaysian-based media, in my own previous study of online news products at the Malaysian National News Agency, *Bernama* (Firdaus 2011), I too drew upon organizational considerations more than I did than political-economic forces or ideology.

As opposed to the dominant paradigm, this paper takes inspiration from studies like Postill's and Steele's to approach news production and new media in Malaysia not from a political-economy perspective, but from an interpretative perspective where research in begun by setting aside value-judgement, and instead begins with an attempt at hermeneutic interpretation of journalists' professional reality as they themselves perceive it.

Within the local Malaysian research agenda, such an approach exemplifies attempts to carve a social constructivist, interpretative niche within a local scholarly agenda that is currently dominated by locally-published policy-oriented research and internationally-published critical-political-economy scholarship.

### **MALAYSIA AS A RICH SITE FOR 'GLOCAL' MEDIA RESEARCH**

Wherein these studies published by international publishers and thus made available to the global research community, their interpretative approach to researching media in Malaysia also serve to highlight Malaysia's relevance as a rich context for media research.

However, it should be pointed out that while Steele's work involved Malaysian and Indonesian journalistic contexts, Postill's study and my study are not strictly speaking 'global comparative' studies, in that both research studies are only concerned with Malaysian case studies.

However, it should be noted these three studies exemplify what I would call a 'glocal' approach to research. 'Glocality' here refers not to popular conception of 'glocalization' wherein transnational organizations attempt to localize global products, for example local Malaysian chapter of Disney Channel, etc. Rather, drawing upon the work of Meyrowitz (2005), my notion of 'glocality' refers to the idea of local localities as a space wherein global

flows of information find their landing and take-off points. This notion of glocality also borrows from Sassen's (2007, 2010) ideas regarding the relevance of 'global cities' to the world economy as well her argument that the national provides a space where global processes occur, wherein I propose that 'glocal' localities are a highly networked localities as spaces or 'nodes' where cosmopolitan individuals and transnational organizations converge (Firdaus 2012).

As one attempt to add to this 'glocal' literature regarding Malaysian media, my research draws upon a study of Malaysia-based journalists, involving in-depth phenomenological interviews with expatriate journalists from Al Jazeera English, local Malaysians working as 'foreign correspondents' for Kuala Lumpur bureaus of several international news organizations, and local Bernama TV journalists (Firdaus 2011, 2012; Volkmer & Firdaus 2013).

In approaching research interviews not simply as a tool for gathering data, but more as a phenomenological space for reflecting upon the everyday 'lived experience' of producing news, the abovementioned study was able to draw out the diverse, yet overlapping experiences of both expatriate and also local Malaysian journalists – all of them operating out of Malaysia, some for Malaysian state media, some as local 'foreign correspondents' for transnational news outlets, and some as global journalists producing world news for global audiences. In a break from conventional research practices where data collection is approached through a pre-existing construction of reality – stemming from fast-held assumptions regarding either the so-called 'evils' of Malaysian political economy, or the so-called sensibility of supporting policy with research findings – this experiential approach to Malaysian media research allows ample room for interview participants (i.e. Malaysian-based journalists) to share with the researcher their experiential reflections of their professional journalistic lives in Malaysia. The professional reality of Malaysian-based journalists go beyond commonly-debated issues of media freedom or institutional policy-oriented practices, but encompasses multifaceted influences on journalistic life, ranging from individual circumstances and experiences, routinized professional norms and practices, organizational-level considerations around target news market/news reach, and the resources to do so, as well as external macro-level institutional and ideological forces.

One particularly illuminating facet of this interpretative phenomenological approach to research that the semi-structured in-depth interviews that were conducted in gathering data merely set out to learn how journalists incorporate social media sources into their daily news routines. But because the interview and also my own thinking as a researcher was not constrained or boxed in by pre-determined critical assumptions or pre-set orientation to policy, the substantive topics in my interview conversations flowed from what interview participants decided was most salient to them. Organically and naturally, my expatriate and my local participants weaved for me a story of multifaceted influences on their professional lives, which corresponded after-the-fact remarkably well with Shoemaker and Reese's (Reese, 2001; Shoemaker & Reese, 1996) 'hierarchy of influences' model for understanding the factors that influence the news.

## CONCLUSION

This paper's proposal for repositioning Malaysia's research agenda by making it more relevant for a global-comparative research hinges on the notion that Malaysia is a rich 'glocal' site for research, where globalized and also local nuances of media/journalistic practices are available for study. While this paper argued the need to seek alternative approaches to researching

media in Malaysia in order to address the dominant critical approach internationally, and the local developmental-approach, it must be noted in conclusion that these two established approaches have their merits. The 'glocal' interpretative phenomenological approach suggested here is not a call the move away completely from these two established paradigms of research, but rather an addition, and alternative way of looking at media practices and media actors in Malaysia.

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