# International Journalism: Ethics, Local Wisdom, and Freedom of the Press

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Abstract

*In the era of cyber communication, the practice of International Journalism is facing many challenges. Besides the technology, content is similarly a most crucial aspect. It deals with the practice of freedom of the press, free speech, free expression. It also relates to local wisdom, ethics and standards in different countries. Without understanding those values, international news reporting may create dispute between the press and the subject of reporting. Significant examples of disputes between the press and the subjects of reporting are presented, covering the WikiLeaks cases, Iranian cases, American cases, and cases from some Asian countries. The paper presents how international journalism, which is mostly online journalism, operates; and how freedom of the press clashes with local wisdom/local values in the country being reported. The freedom of the press is a western philosophy, which has been adopted by many non-western countries. Ethical standards of journalism, worldwide, needs to be considered. This paper tries to explore the challenges of International journalism and offer a new paradigm of journalism to guard the freedom of the press, while at the same time preserving local wisdom.*

Key words: *International journalism, WikiLeaks, local wisdom, new paradigm*

## Introduction

In the year 2010, the world of intelligence and communication experienced a significant case concerning freedom of the press and the ethics of journalism. Notwitstanding its slogan "*Publishes and comments on leaked documents alleging government and corporate misconducts*", WikiLeaks published 'leaked' information. This means that the information it leaked was not confirmed or verified according to good practice; it stood against the standards that journalists have practiced for so long in many countries.

In April that year, WikiLeaks released a video of an air attack by the US military in Baghdad (July 12nd, 2007), which killed several Iraqi journalists. The video was called "*Collateral Murder*". It shocked people, particularly mass media practitioners and the US military. In July of the same year, WikiLeaks also released "*the Afghan War Diary*", a compilation of more than 76,900 documents on the Afghanistan War. In October, about 400,000 documents called "*the Iraq War Journal*" were also released. In 2011, WikiLeaks released 779 confidential files about detainees in Guantanamo Bay. These reports were published without any confirmation as to their truth.

It was not easy for the US Government to make a case against Julian Assange, the founder and director of Wikileaks. As an institution of the press, Wikileaks merely adopts the philosophy of freedom of the press, which is upheld highly by western countries and their media. The US and UK Governments had to create a case against him, even though it was not related to the publication of said information. They then found a loophole: Assange was accused of sexual abuse in a European country and he was detained while in London by the Scotland Yard. A group of friends, one of whom was Michael Moore (director of movies *Fahrenheit 9/11, Bowling over Columbine*, Sicko) then posted bail for his release. At the present time, to avoid another potential arrest, Assange lives in the Embassy of Equador in London under the protection of the Equador government.

Global disputes between the media and the subjects of reporting are manifold. It is caused by different standards of reporting, particularly the code of ethics for the journalism profession. In addition to that, each country or region has its own ethical standards and local wisdoms, which influence the conduct of journalists and news reports. The crucial element of discussion in this paper is that both the standards and ethics of journalism, face the challenges of globally consented freedom of speech, including freedom of the press. These three factors that surround the nature of news reporting often clash with one another. The aforementioned Wikileaks case is a good example of how freedom of speech clashes with another standard –in this case, the US Military. It is not easy to decide whether Wikileaks is right in leaking the information for a greater good, or the US military is right to protect its confidentiality.

**Focus of Study**

"How the practice of free press clashes with ethics and local wisdom and why a new paradigm is needed for International journalism."

**Objectives**
The objectives of this study are
1. To present cases of disputes in International news reporting.
2. To suggest that freedom of the press should be applied without sacrificing codes of ethics   and local wisdoms; and to offer a new paradigm in International journalism.
3.

**Significance**
This study will give benefit to media practitioners, particularly the International journalists. They are expected to be more considerate when practicing freedom of the press, by paying attention to codes of ethics and local wisdoms.

It is also expected to enlighten governments, particularly in Asian countries, that freedom of the press means the need to practice good governance.

**Relevant Theories**

This topic of global journalism ethics is important, because it involves a critical perspective on western liberal media theories, which has dominated the field of media ethics, including the ones practiced in non-western countries. As Saadia Izzeldin Malik writes in her paper "Islamic and Western Perspectives on Applied Media Ethics" (2015), there has been a long discussion and disagreement over whether global media ethicists need to identify universal values/principles among all journalists or humans. In this case, these values and principles are those which are contained in local norms and wisdom in different countries or regions.

Ward (2008), as quoted by Malik ((2015) has written that the field of media studies has been widened by theories outside the field of media studies, such as postcolonial studies. This theory critiques the subject of journalism ethics by examining the relationship between ethical discourse and the exercise of power, western economic and cultural dominance, and post-modern scepticism about truth and objectivity. These opposing aspects are faced by journalists throughout the world at present: power that may abuse ethics, economic priority over culture, and the dilemma in choosing truth or objectivity, since the two are not always aligned.

Technologically speaking, International journalism operates with the support of the Internet. The problem is such that there is no entity that is able to control the Internet. Even countries with strong censorship like China, Malaysia, Singapore, and even the US, fail to control it, despite their on-going efforts. Opinion journalism and free expression of citizens always find ways to reach their target audience via the Internet, online media, or social media. The US Government had once applied a law controlling the Internet –not contesting the *free speech and/or freedom of the press*, but in '*the protection of children from sexual evils roaming the Internet*'. Yet, the Communication Decency Act, released in 1995, was considered 'unconstitutional' by the Federal Court in 1996.

Referring to the main example of cases in this paper, reaction to the way WikiLeaks operates is varied; some were concerning ethics and law of such practice, others, raising the issues of media competition and protection to whistle blowers. Syed Nazakat (2012) stated in his paper 'Social Media And Investigative Journalism' (The Social Media (R)Evolution?);

> "*The success of WikiLeaks has generated a debate within many publications about whether they should have their own leaks website where whistle blowers could send information directly to the editors.*"(Nazakat, 2012, p. 127-137)

There is always a temptation to create and manage a special division or rubric in the news media that can be filled with "leaked news" from "anonymous sources (whistle blowers)". In Asian countries, it is not easy to realize such temptation, because the mass media and journalists are bound by strict codes of ethics and laws, and some countries do not even believe in the freedom of the press.

In many cases in investigative journalism, "leaked" information sources remain unidentified for purposes of their safety. However, Bill Kovach (2004) in *Elements of Journalism* states that giving anonymous status to a whistle blower is like giving *a privilege* to a person who is clearly unable to take responsibility of what he/she says. Kovach argues that not all leaks or whistle blowers are valid, thus invalidating such disclosure to the public. Journalists must still be sceptical and aware of any potential interest or agenda of the source/whistle blower.

Another crucial element in International news reporting is the use of language. Problems often occur in the selection of diction. Underlying Edward Said's concept of 'othering' (Mills: 2007), many international reports tendentiously apply the practice of naming, labeling, and stereotyping. In post modern theories, language is considered the most important means to constitute, normalize, reproduce, challenge, and change social order. Julia T. Wood suggests, because language shapes meaning, it is important to see that the language of journalism (the language used by mass media) is accurate. (*Communication Theory in Practice*: 2004). Meanwhile, Roger Fowler also argues that language is a system of categorization, whereby certain vocabularies are chosen to create certain meaning (*Language in the News*: 1996).

## Data and Methods of Analysis

Data for this paper are selected stories of disputes between the press/mass media and objects of reporting in the last decade. There are hundreds of such problems: the writer purposively selects stories that contain elements of 'international news' and 'local values'. The samples to be analyzed are cases of reporting about Iran, Iraq, Brunei Darussalam, Singapore and Indonesia, and the media reporting the disputed news are CNN, Reuter, Charlie Hebdo, FEER, the Brunei Times and the Washington Post.

The writer applies qualitative methods of analysis with a critical stance. Analysis is also based on literary study and observation into the works of International media.

## Analysis and Finding

*Case 1: Problem of Misquoting*

In 2005, President Ahmadinejad gave a speech in an international press conference, about the Iranian plan for nuclear engineering (in Parsi language) for the welfare of its citizens. A CNN correspondent was there to cover the news. CNN then broadcasted the news from this angle: Iran was to build a nuclear weapon. The correspondent –deliberately or not- had interpreted Ahmadinejad's diction "nuclear engineering" (in Parsi) into "nuclear weapon" (in English). CNN was banned from reporting in Iran after that incident (but later pardoned by President Ahmadinejad). The Iranian government and the Iranian people suffered international condemnation over that maliciously false translation and report, and continue to do so until now.

Language accuracy in selecting diction/terminology is crucial, particularly if it involves translation or interpretation. In relation to the relevant theory elaborated in the previous section, this problem can be the result of western economic dominance and exercise of power (Ward: 2008). It also underlines the importance of language accuracy in news reporting as suggested by Julia T. Wood.

*Case 2: Misreporting Patriotism*

In 2011, Iran had experienced several accounts of distorted publication by western media, which has potentially damaged the reputation of the country and its citizens. A group of female Iranian martial artists was branded 'ninja assassins' by Britain's Reuters news agency. Reuters showed a number of Iranian girls undergoing training in martial arts in a city near Tehran, claiming that Iran was training more than 3,000 female ninjas to kill any possible foreign invaders. Following the strong reaction of Iranian media to the report, Reuters made changes to parts of the report, but they refused to apologize for slander. The Iranian girls, accused by Reuters of being assassins, are taking legal action against the agency for defamation of character. These female athletes were asked by the journalist 'what they would do if their country came under attack'. Reuters used the girls' patriotic response of 'to defend their country' as an excuse to call them assassins. The Reuters journalist who conducted the interview left Iran shortly before a court case was initiated against Reuters. On the issue of patriotism, a double-standard is practiced by some western media, in particular the US and UK Media. The citizens who were against military attacks in Iraq and Afghanistan in 2002-2005 were labelled unpatriotic. Likewise, the patriotic female Iranian martial artists (2011) were labelled Ninja-assassins.

Again, this can be seen as the exercise of powerful media towards a targeted group, and which incorporates the practice of labelling and/or slander.

*Case 3: Politeness*

In Iraq, 2008, a journalist threw a shoe at President George W. Bush while he was giving a speech  detailing negative aspects about the country. The Iraqi journalist's misdemeanour was labelled, impolite and unprofessional, while he thought the same of Bush who was talking negatively about the country he was visiting. This case generated much debate on whether it was the Iraqi journalist or President Bush who acted unprofessionally.  This whole episode relates to being respectful of one's customs and traditions, and even more so when one is a visitor in the country. So, even though the journalist was detained and jailed for a few days, many parents in Iraq desired to have him as son-in law. According to local values, his conduct was considered "patriotic" and even "heroic".

According to Jean Seaton's theory of  democracy with responsibility (*Politics and the Media: Harlots and Prerogatives at the Turn of the Millenium*1998), free press is good, but only those who have responsibility shall have freedom. This also works for politicians who make news. This incident is a showcase of freedom and ethics, both of the press and the sources; and how International press is faced with local value.

*Case 4: Libel and defamation*

The Singaporean government banned and sued *FERR* (*Far Eastern Economic Review*) several times because it published negative reports on the Prime Minister and other government officials. In 2009 for instance, the Higher Court of Singapore ordered Review Publishing Company (*the publisher of FERR*) to pay $400,000 dollars to Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his father, former PM Lee Kuan Yew, for defamation.

Similar to this case is RI *Military General vs* the *Washington Post* (2003). It was a libel on a RI General was alleged to have been behind the killing of a Papuan NGO leader, which was proven wrong. The Washington Post apologized by republishing the same story, but from a different angle, correcting the earlier publication.

In cases of libel and defamation, the western media might have different understanding of what is considered libel and defamation in countries like Singapore and Indonesia. Holding on to the maxim 'freedom of the press', the media believe they can publish any facts, irrespective that these facts have the potential to defame the objects of reporting.

The above mentioned matters showcase the existence of different standards of reporting and ethics in different countries.

*Case 5: Religious norms*

In 2002, Malaysia banned *Newsweek* for publishing an unacceptable portrayal of Islam and the Prophet Mohammad. This incident examplifies the lack of understanding by International journalist, about local ethics, norms and values. In another similar case, *Charlie Hebdo* in France was attacked and several journalists ,killed because it published a mockery of Prophet Mohammad.

This case is yet another example of lack of understanding about religious ethics and norms in Islam. Western media seems to ignore these norms, and uphold their own principles of free speech, regardless the impacts of their reporting on the objects of reporting.

*Case 6: Social norms*

In Brunei Darussalam, journalists are very careful when interviewing or quoting their sources, particularly if the latter are from the royal family, or citizens being critical of the government. These journalists are so afraid of making mistakes, that it has given rise to the situation "there is no news in Brunei Darussalam, because nothing happens here". Some journalists still hold on to the Malay cultural norm that "asking too many questions is impolite". The writer has had an experience of working in the *Brunei Times* (2007), which she considers very challenging because of the minimum news events and news interviews, in the name of politeness.

In Indonesia on the other hand, people barely have privacy and journalists lose their sense of politeness. If someone is suspected of being corrupt, all their family members will be hunted down and exposed in their news coverage. Such kind of reporting has driven families away from their homeland and/ or their children, leaving school. For Indonesian journalists working in newspaper companies in Brunei Darussalam or vice versa, the different traditions (attitudes of journalists towards sources) can become a serious challenge.

*Case 7: Problem of Objectivity*

In 1999, many international news reports portrayed the East Timorese pro-independence group as victims and heroes, and East Timorese pro-integration group as militias or even non-existent. Still in Indonesia, between 1999 – 2000, international media covered the conflict in Ambon as 'ethnic cleansing', creating sympathy towards a particular group. This resulted in the shipment of weapons from the Netherlands –where many resident Ambonese created the political activist group, Republik Maluku Selatan (the Republic of South Molucca, dominated by Christians) - to Ambon. Lack of objectivity shown by some international journalists who took the approach of war journalism when covering this news, only led to more conflict and violence.

These examples stimulated a discussion on the International journalism practice involving aspects of ethics and local values. So, it is not only the advancement of information and communication technology, or the sophistication of cyber communication. International

journalism is about many other things. Ironically, globalization has made our chief editors or news directors lazy to edit and select news from International news agencies for local audiences. They publish or broadcast whatever news is available without any critical thinking. The writer finds that many news stories concerning the Middle East conflicts, for instance, use a western and liberal angle.

**Discussion**
*International journalism*
    WikiLeaks, the main case study of this paper, was established in Iceland by an Australian citizen, and operates from many places in the world. This has been made possible because of the Internet. Many reports released by WikiLeaks (the data were gathered from all over the world) occupied headlines in European and American mainstream media. However, some media institutions were reluctant to publish them because such reports because they believed that the reports might endanger the sources (the whistle blowers) or other people involved in the news. Assange and others who were enthusiastic to uncover certain secrets had a similarly strong argument: publication that risks the safety of the whistle blower was done for a greater good. It means, in publishing 'supposedly secret' news stories, there is always a risk of danger to the sources (whistle blowers) or subjects of reporting. However, the risk is worth taking for a greater goal: the betterment of the world and/or humankind.

    The most interesting issue in the practice of international journalism is: "who determines the nature of news". Is it the authority in the country being reported about? Or the citizens –the public? Or, is it the news producers operating remotely from the country of reportage?  In 1997, when an American embassy was bombed in one of the African countries, US media were busy investigating and exposing the scandal of Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky's affair. The editors assumed that the scandal would have a more significant impact on the American audience. Also in 1994, the World Cup event in the US was over shadowed by the news of OJ Simpson's felony. Then, those who had subscribed to CNN International, did not live in the US and had no idea about American football, were all forced to contend with the OJ Simpson saga for several hours daily, for a month or two. Who decides such coverage?

    In the case of *Indonesian military general vs* the *Washington Post* (2003) and Singaporean Prime Minister vs *FERR* (2009), both subjects felt defamed by the false reporting.

    The disputes had to be settled in court l. *FERR* was banned in Singapore for some time and it was legally obliged to pay a fine. In the case of the *Washington Post*, it apologized to the Indonesian general and republished the article, by correcting the false information.
The portrayal of East Timorese pro-integration group as 'militias' was misleading. Almost half of East Timorese citizens who favoured pro-integration but were labeled as 'militias' could have sued the press for defamation and false reporting. But who dares to sue the international press in a political situation like Indonesia in1999? Alatas's insightful memoir *The Pebble in the Shoe* (2003) presents clearer facts surrounding East Timor during that period.

    These insensitivities in International reporting take place mostly because journalists prioritize the concept of freedom of the press/free speech over other aspects of reporting. They seem to neglect the fact that journalism ethics and standards comprise principles of ethics and good practice..They overlook the significance of local wisdom, norms and values of what is

appropriate or accepted in targeted communities. Going back to the question "Who determines the nature of news", Syah in her book Journalism and Its Ethics in the 21 Century (2015) explores the possibility of news sources (and whistle blowers), or editors (editorial policy), media owners, or journalists as the determinants of news.

*Local Wisdom, Cultural Element*

Respect for others, tolerance, and the need to maintain harmony could easily become challenges for freedom of the press and free speech. Bruneian journalists uphold the value of politeness and restrain themselves from in-depth questioning when meeting with government officials. It might become the object of criticism in the study of journalism, but if the country's philosophy is to maintain harmony, why should Bruneian citizens adopt the philosophy of freedom that comes from a foreign country, and which might jeopardize their tradition?

Indonesia and the Philippines could be the most advanced Asian countries in terms of journalism. They adopt the western philosophy of freedom and human rights. However, many people in Indonesia are critical of these philosophies. What is the limit of freedom? And, apart from human rights, every human being should also remember the importance of human obligation/duty. One cannot just demand his/her rights without performing his/her duty as a person. Jean Seaton argues that attention needs to be directed away from the concern to protect the right of speakers. It is necessary, as well, to consider their *obligations*, and in particular, the duty of those with powerful voices and powerful positions in society to exercise responsibility over their rights to speak.

Article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Right states that, "Freedom of expression carries with it special duties and responsibilities. It may be, therefore, subject to certain restrictions .. ." What kind of restrictions are these that can be accepted in the spirit of freedom of expression? The said Article elaborates that it is about respect of the rights or reputations of others, and for the protection of national security or of public order, or public health or morals.

The need to consider consequence and responsibility in dealing with freedom of the press and free speech/freedom of expression is also discussed by Cohen-Almagor (2001) in *Speech, Media, and Ethics*: *The Limits of Free Expression*: "There is a moral responsibility to freedom of expression. Speech must have boundaries if it brings harm to others .... "

In the cases explained above, WikiLeaks did threaten the reputation of the US Military, but it had done so for the greater good, for the security of more people. Many Malaysian journalists may also feel restricted by their government, but in the name of national security and public order, they obey the rules. Perhaps, the government should be aware that citizens know when it is about national security and public order, and should not just act to silence dissidents. When the government ignores its citizens' intelligence, it could lose people's trust and lose its credibility.

In many Asian countries, respect towards religions, culture, traditions, local wisdom, norms and values, is strongly upheld. The people in this region believe that protests and even chaos happen only after there is a humiliation or mockery, for example the issue depicting Prophet Mohammad in controversial cartoons. So, instead of criticizing the protesters (who run amok, in several cases), the media community, particularly the international press institutions, must

understand the reasons underlying the chaos, and also understand the values of others. One is forced to accept that making a statement such as "Holocaust is fiction" in Europe, is harmful and the person can be sent to jail. Likewise, one must also accept that mocking Prophet Mohammad is unacceptable to certain communities in certain countries.

**New Paradigm**

For so long journalists all over the world, have upheld the standards and criteria that were invented more than a century ago. The world of mass media, the press, and the practice of journalism, are changing. The advancement of technology gives way to media convergence and multichannel media operations. Consequently, some standards and criteria are altered. The need to be objective is challenged by the fact that sometimes objectivity is not fair. Fairness in reporting should be given priority. Covering both sides is no longer adequate. Journalists have to cover news from many angles so as to get a clearer picture of the facts and present them to audiences.

On the other hand, in the practice of online journalism, covering only one side of a story is sometimes unavoidable, due to time constraints in meeting deadlines, but so long as the other side is given a space/duration in the updated reports.

More importantly, the news criteria of prominence can be put aside since we also need to give voice to the voiceless. Instead of interviewing public leaders, the press should also listen to the grass roots. The criteria of magnitude is altered by the fact that small things matter. A Christian priest helping a Muslim family matters more than the death toll in religious/racial conflicts. Journalists can no longer hold on to the role of merely being a watchdog. They are participants in the world news. Journalists select facts and sources. They don't just watch. They participate. They shape how the world is and should be.

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