

31/07/1998

Present-day journalists must be aware of sensitivities

Mazlan Nordin

NOBODY likes the man who brings bad news, thus wrote Sophocles, the Greek playwright, circa 440 B.C. Much earlier, as has been told, was the story of the messenger who was despatched from the battlefield to inform the king sitting on the throne in his palace about the defeat of his army. The messenger was forthwith executed.

There was then the story of Pheidippides, the Greek runner who was sent from Athens to seek help from the Spartans before the battle of Marathon. He was said to have covered the distance of 150 miles in just two days. The appeal was turned down.

In those days of yore with no newspapers, radio, television or the Internet, the fate of the bearer of news or the runner was uncertain. But there are messengers and messengers.

Eons later in the late 19th century was the story of the bellicose American newspaper publisher, William Randolph Hearst who sent a journalist to Cuba - then under Spanish rule - to write provocative news reports and instigate a war. As noted later "Hearst's newspapers whipped up public sentiments against Spain such that they actually helped cause the Spanish-American war of 1898".

Other things happen now, including among countries which have a love-hate relationship such as Britain and France. Published in the Independent on Sunday in London recently was a special article on celebrated French writer, Françoise Sagan, who at the age of 19 (in 1954) wrote the bestseller *Bonjour Tristesse*.

Mentioned then was that the interview took place on the day that Maurice Papon, a top civil servant in the wartime Vichy regime during the Nazi occupation of parts of France, was sentenced to 10 years' jail for crimes against humanity. He had been accused of handing over hundreds of French Jews to the Nazis for despatch to concentration camps and execution in the gas chambers.

It was described as a "momentous day" in French history because thousands of other French officials were also guilty by implication. "This guilt had taken 54 years to establish."

Referring to what he termed as the grey moral climate then the interviewer wrote: "After the liberation of France by US and British forces in 1944, de Gaulle offered his battered country a fairy tale: we have resisted the Germans and we have freed ourselves by force of arms.

"The weary, disillusioned people were happy to buy into this politically necessary fable and their children were subsequently taught nothing of the collaborationist Vichy regime. A country sometimes needs to tell itself stories."

Published meanwhile in the Daily Telegraph, another British newspaper, was a full-page story headlined "Since 1977, 25 Britons have been murdered in France. Only two of the cases have been solved. Why?"

At other times there is self-criticism such as one offered by William Pfaff after a visit to Greece and the archaeological site of Delphi. Incised at the entrance to the temple were two injunctions: "Know Thyself" and "Nothing in Excess".

Noted then was that Western civilisation later produced two ferocious politico-ideological systems, Marxism-Leninism and Nazism-Fascism. Millions became their victims.

Another form of self-criticism was as once described in a full-page

article in the Asian Wall Street Journal about misinformation and distortion which corrupt many US public opinion polls. The opening paragraph reads: "Americans overwhelmingly preferred a Chrysler car to a Toyota after test-driving both, contends a study sponsored by Chrysler Corporation."

Noted later was that just 100 people were involved in each of the two tests. A more important aspect was that none of the people surveyed owned a foreign car, so they may well have been predisposed to US-made vehicles.

In the end, the article reminded, it's the news media that disseminate the findings whether good or bad. "Only if journalists aren't doing their jobs does the public have a problem. It's the journalist's problem to look at the report or interview the researcher."

Earlier on was the warning: "... the scary part of it, people make decisions based on the stuff. It may be an invisible crime, but it's not a victimless one."

No less demanding is the credibility sought from Malaysian journalists whatever the circumstances. Meriting mention in the context of the current economic problem was the situation during and after the May 13 tragedy in 1969. At the time some quarters were thinking of punitive measures against the Malaysian Press.

Thus it was that Leslie Hoffman, then editor-in-chief of the Straits Times in Kuala Lumpur met with senior ministers with the plea: please do not revoke our licences. We, local journalists are looking for solutions since we live in this country. The one looking for stories are the foreigners with their air tickets who can just fly out in one or two hours.

To Malaysian journalists themselves was the reminder: having written our stories we must ask ourselves what good they will do. Only then will the stories be published.

It won't do to just attack left, right and centre. Also important is how certain reports can affect relations with other countries, especially neighbours. One example was the recent advice from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad which, in the words of an English-language newspaper later "cooled the anger" voiced by sections of the Chinese Press over incidents during the riots in Indonesia.

His advice was seconded by MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik who urged Chinese newspapers to be careful when reporting or making any statements on the situation in Indonesia since sensitive issues were involved. The reminders were well-received and the coverage and condemnations were toned down considerably.

Sections of the Malaysian Press have also been criticised for misreporting the economic problem by echoing the views and commentaries of the foreign media and their analysts. As Tun Daim Zainuddin puts it: "The same analysts who failed to foresee the situation are again being paraded as experts on the economy. The background and credentials of these experts are rarely verified."

Speaking in a seminar on "The Economic Crisis and the Role of the Media", the Minister with Special Functions touched on the ethics of journalism. He noted its decline has reached crisis proportions in America that recent surveys show almost 60 per cent of the US public thinks the media hinders rather than helps society resolve its problems.

Not helping matters are journalists as described by a senior American editor. They are those "who feel a constant need to prove their integrity by asserting their contrariness and become tiresome wash-room heroes".

Much is sought, therefore, of present-day journalists who are also at times the bearers of bad news. For those entering the profession there are lessons to be learned: for example, unclear policies and cows that are

sacred.

As they advance further there will be relationships or liaisons formed with a host of people, including information providers, analysts, commentators and politicians. They are not all carefree or careless.

All things said and done though it's too late for a good many to get another job. Indeed, despite the daily adrenalin rush they don't want to.

(END)