

Fair reporting - an idea whose time has come
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COMMENT The fair reporting pledge mooted by the National Union of Journalists (NUJ) for its members is an idea whose time has come. But more work has to be done before we can expect any substance.

To begin with NUJ represents only a small fraction of working journalists in the country - those in newspapers and that also not in all newspapers and publications. The broadcast, multimedia, new media and government media sectors are not in its fold.

Some are suggesting the formation of a press council to ensure fair reporting. I don't think so. I have been privy to some closed-door discussions at the highest levels and my impression is that those most enthusiastic either have vested interests or lack the necessary knowledge of the workings of such a council nor the magnitude of the work involved.

During Dr Mahathir Mohamad's days, the man has little time for such things. Abdullah Ahmad Badawi or Pak Lah was persuaded to give it a shot, but the editors pushing it were trying to do themselves a favour more than anything else.

Now in Najib Abdul Razak's time, we have the same old story. Can we imagine Utusan Malaysia columnist Awang Selamat sitting on any press council! The irony of it is that the proposed press council is prescribed by the boys in the Home Ministry (KDN). Imagine letting the foxy musang into the chicken coop! KDN cuba curi ayam ke?

Consider this, the proposed council would have to deal with multi-language complaints. The translation work is mind-boggling. Setting up language specific bureaus is equally nightmarish.

Consider also this, there are at least three regulatory authorities, the Home Ministry for print, the Information Ministry for broadcast and Multi Media Ministry for new media. The least I can say is that the right hand more often than not does not know what the other two left hands are doing.

So forget about the media council for a while please. Maybe after the 13th general election.

Something else can change first

But there's hope yet. If oppressive censorship cannot be changed overnight, something else can change first. The journalists themselves can start changing bit by bit. Begin with exercising self restraint. This is not the same as self-censorship.

He or she can restrain from reporting that is unfair, like indulging in tabloid sensationalism at the expense of other people's right to privacy or in dirty politics. Or refusing to write on anything that is considered blatant unfair or unethical. Or sign up for NUJ's fair reporting pledge. This won't necessarily lead to fair reporting overnight but journalists must start to learn how to say no.

You can't get sacked for saying no to unfair reporting. But you are not likely to be promoted to be an editor. That's the price you have to pay for saying yes to fair reporting.

Newspapers and other media can start setting up their own ethical framework for their journalists to abide by. They can also set up their own internal and independent press council to handle complaints against its coverage and to provide space for right of reply. It may surprise some to know that Bernama, the national news agency, actually has an internal press council. So take your complaints to them first before going anywhere else.

For NUJ, it can start negotiating with media owners to include its code of ethics and the fair reporting pledge into their collective agreements as a working condition.

It can introduce the “conscience clause” into the agreements to provide for claims against constructive dismissals where a journalist can exercise the right to refuse to write anything against his or her conscience. If dismissed, then the claim for wrongful dismissal together with compensation can be applied.

The NUJ did try to get this into the collective agreement with one newspaper in 1985 but the Industrial Court was too timid to award this on the grounds that this is not a monetary claim, therefore, it cannot be a working condition!

The ethical framework for the journalist profession is no different from that, say, of accountants and auditors. They are obliged to practice fair reporting. That is their implied working condition.

So, too, for journalists. Fair and ethical reporting is an implied working condition according to universal convention. The International Labour Organisation recognises the “conscience clause” as a valid and implied condition of work for journalists. There’s no need even to put it down in writing.

Taking the lead in advocacy

Journalists must be aware of their rights. NUJ can take the lead in advocacy in this direction and set up a defence fund to defend such inherent rights in court. But this costs money and NUJ members are not inclined to put their money where their mouths are.

Union dues have remained the same for the past 50 year while their salaries have grown many times over. Press unions in industrial countries are equipped with highly qualified union staff because journalists there pay as much as five percent of their wages in union fees.

If NUJ is serious about defending ethical reporting, it has no choice but to boost its intellectual and leadership capacity through a better-resourced and expanded membership structure. Coming up with a fair reporting pledge is a good start. It’s an idea whose time has come. Bit by bit the tipping point for change is bound to happen.

To quote Victor Hugo, “An invasion of armies can be resisted, but not an idea whose time has come.”

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