

Of press prostitutes and cowed media
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COMMENT Perhaps the most despicable matter that has come out of the great debate between DAP secretary-general Lim Guan Eng and MCA president Dr Chua Soi Lek last Saturday is the contemptible lie by a mercenary spin writer of a mainstream English daily that Guan Eng demanded another debate, presumably to repair damage over his scarred image for losing to Soi Lek.

The claim by such a contemptuous writer is certainly deliberately made to run down Guan Eng and present him in bad light among the general public, since it has been known, and even agreed to by Soi Lek a few days prior to the great debate, that Guan Eng wanted a second round to be held for the benefit of the non-Mandarin speaking public, since the first debate was in Mandarin.

Furthermore, the paper this mercenary writer writes for has acknowledged and published a brief admission of its error in reporting a statement attributed to Guan Eng that claimed he said "We do not agree the prime minister must always be a Malay because we want the people to decide." Yet, he repeated the erroneous statement in his comment, either deliberately to perpetually spread the lie, or is an ignorant fool who doesn't know what is really happening.

The National Union of Journalists (NUJ) has expressed indignation at DAP national election publicity bureau chief Hew Kuan Yau for likening journalists to prostitutes, and demanded that an apology from Hew for the derogatory comment.

Journalists who will sell their principles

Although, I understand the NUJ feelings on the matter, I cannot help but have to agree with Hew's statement that there are journalists who will sell their principles and souls for material gains. The above mercenary spin writer is a good example.

Many people will recall that back in the mid-1990s, two identical comments on the performance of a company were published in two English dailies under two different bylines, i.e. names of different writers. It seemed that both established business editors were "selling" their bylines to the company that had assigned a professional ghost writer to churn out the comment, and paid the business editors for using their names in the comment to enhance its value and newsworthiness.

I believe such practices are still common. If such cases are not press prostitution, what are?

A few years ago, I wrote a comment on the types of journalists we have, and I have updated it here as I think what I said then is still relevant and significant.

I have worked as a journalist and editor in the mainstream news media since 1975, in the now defunct National Echo, the New Straits Times, The Malay Mail, The Sun, and The Star, and had also served as the NUJ general secretary in the late 1970s and early 1980s.

Throughout the 35 years in the newspaper industry, I have worked with all sorts of editors and journalists, and have identified five types of journalists in the media fraternity.

First, there are the EEs - Editorial Eunuchs - who take orders from their political emperors and write and spin stories to promote the emperor's cause. These political appointees are usually in top and senior positions, not because they are good journalists or great writers, but because of their connections with powerful political godfathers. They are first-class cronies. Many are ghost writers for their political masters. Some are made 'datuk' or given various civil awards, even at relatively young age. Several have become millionaires.

Secondly, there are the PPs - Press Prostitutes - who have sold their souls and principles to gain favours and privileges from their political and/or business clients. They will write what pleases their political masters. The amount of hampers and gifts they receive during festive seasons is perhaps a good indication of their rising status in their media organisations. (Perhaps the Malaysia Anti-Corruption Commission should consider looking at this practice of giving editors hampers, gifts and big fat ang pow during festive seasons).

Manipulative opportunists who feed journalists

Thirdly, there are the MMs - Media Marionettes - the puppets who have no brains but are used and abused by opportunists to advance their own political or business agenda. The manipulative opportunists usually feed such journalists with twisted information and deceive these gullible writers to propagate their schemes of things. Our education system has produced many such gullible, unthinking, uncritical and dumb people; and not a few are found in the media organisations.

Fourth, there are the JJs - Junket Journalists - those who will write anything for the sponsors of their overseas trips. Let me illustrate how some big corporate companies use such overseas junkets to bribe editors and journalists to do their bidding: Company A has a product that an NGO considers harmful to the people. The NGO keeps issuing press statements on its research on the harmful product and the newspapers keep publishing the statements. Company A wants to put a stop to such bad publicity on its product. So, it organises a week-long trip for senior editors to visit the product's factory in Japan. Everything was paid for and provided for, including pocket money for shopping. The editors had a thoroughly good time. On their return, they repay their wonderful host by stopping all negative reports on its product.

Finally, there are the WWs - Wise Writers - the rare breed who know how to survive through the controlled press situation and get their honest views into print without rousing the suspicion of their media bosses, who are usually political cronies. There are very few such honest writers with integrity and principles, and they are usually not in positions of power. Many of them, like yours truly, retire poor.

It was the English author Edward Bulwer-Lytton who coined the famous metonymic adage "The pen is mightier than the sword" in 1839 for his play *Richelieu; Or the Conspiracy*.

Why the ruling party is getting jittery

And it was the 18th century French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte who confirmed the truth of Edward Bulwer-Lytton's figure of speech with this profound statement: "I fear the newspapers more than a hundred thousand bayonets."

We can now understand why the ruling Barisan Nasional federal government is getting jittery, fidgety and paranoid over the increasingly popular news portals in cyberspace published by the various independent-minded journalists and bloggers, and also the component parties of the alternative coalition Pakatan Rakyat.

The massive swing of votes to Pakatan during the political tsunami of March 2008 is due in no small measure to the power of the cyber media.

The NUJ plans to hold an EGM on its so-called Code of Ethics for Journalists. I suggest that it should consider asking all its members to pledge not to accept gifts, money or hampers from politicians and businessmen, and to surrender what is offered to their companies for distribution to the poor and needy in the community.

NUJ's immediate past president Hata Wahari is a good example of a true, committed journalist who made a bold and brave stand in defence of press freedom, and lost his job in the process. It has been a long time since any leader of the NUJ has stuck his or her neck out to speak against the abuse and

exploitation of the media, especially in the mainstream newspapers.

Hata certainly deserves our accolade and support for speaking out, without fear or favour, on the very fundamental matter of press freedom, despite the very real risk of jeopardising his career.

An outspoken and crusading journalist is usually a marked person, and a file will be opened to record every little mistake he makes, to build a case against him. There will be trumped-up charges like sexual harassment, etc, to get rid of any journalist who dares to stand up and speak out against abuses in his newspaper company.

So, are there press prostitutes among our journalists?

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