

When Freedom Won't Die Muzzled by Terror

Let me begin this talk with a story of flood and freedom. Living in Indonesia, I learn that the former you can take for granted, while the latter you cannot. Meaning, of course, that while you have to topple a government as powerful as Soeharto's regime to regain your rights to speak freely, you do not have to work hard to witness the streets of your city drowning in rainwater. In fact, Jakarta reportedly has a five-year cycle of major flood, which people tend to forget in the intervening period.

My story is about the flood that took place in 1996.

I returned to Jakarta after a short visit from an old town in Central Java. A friend met me at the airport, and drove me back to the city, about 30 kilometres away. But it was not easy. We had to deal with an immense traffic jam. The ongoing tropical downpour had inundated almost every part of Jakarta. The flood and the ensuing destruction and chaos had blocked alleys and avenues and bridges and barrios. On the high-raised turnpike, cars inched along at a rate of one meter per five minutes. Ours took us out of the gridlock after a painstaking 16 hours. During that time, we tried to overcome boredom by gossiping, cursing, singing, or, occasionally, listening to radio news.

The curious thing was that not a single broadcast word was spoken of the flood. The news was vintage New Order: Soeharto's encouraging report on the import situation; the government's appeal for national discipline. If the rest was pure monotony, meaning speeches, interviews and music of no real value, this was not unusual. Under Soeharto's rule, the government tightly controlled electronic and print journalism. No private and local station was allowed to produce its own report. They had to relay dictated pieces broadcasted by the Radio of the Republic.

In 1998, the economic crisis struck. Soeharto's self-serving way of dealing with the problem angered people. Students launched a large-scale protest all over the country. After the army and the police shot and killed a number of them, hundreds of thousands of students occupied the Parliament. The new situation forced Soeharto to step down. The New Order collapsed. A new government was installed. The parliament passed a new law, giving back the media its freedom.

In 2001, the flood struck Jakarta again – but this time, things were markedly different. Reports about which barrios were hit, which roads were blocked, and what kind of help the victims needed poured forth almost every five minutes from various radio stations and TV channels. The free flow of reporting not only informed listeners about facts and figures of the disaster; they protected residents from rumours and panic escapes; forewarned travellers of possible hazards and hurdles, and more importantly, mobilized citizens to organize themselves to assist the afflicted. In no time, thousands of depots emerged all over the city, supplied with donations of food and clothing. Temporary refugee camps were instantly set up. Medical teams received enthusiastic volunteers. The people even worked faster than the City Hall in supplying flood-victims with aid such as rubber dinghies. Almost instantly, Jakarta became a unified community of people concerned with the city's corruption and the mismanagement of land and water.

Before the month ended, a newspaper investigation discovered that the Mayor had a house built illegally on the hill in a green resort area outside Jakarta; the story duly went to press, and the following week saw the Mayor, desperately on the defensive, destroy his own house.

In 1996, this would have been unheard of. The story of the 2001 flood is a story of a public sphere emerging through the media, forming a political community free from lethargy and indifference. To be sure, there is no guarantee against future flooding or corruption and mismanagement. But I believe that the public has begun to realize its own power, and this will have a significant impact on the way the City Hall deals with future disasters. Freedom can be a means of salvation.

This reminds me of Amartya Sen's famous thesis that famine is not about a country's lack of food, but about a country's lack of free flow of information. If there were an uncensored press in China in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward, journalists would have been able to write reports on real situations in famine-stricken areas. It would have alerted the authorities to the large-scale disasters that

took place at the grass roots, and thus would have prevented more people from dying of starvation. Unfortunately, in Mao's China, freedom died, and, as Albert Camus put it, when freedom dies, it never dies alone. 30 million people reportedly vanished in the aftermath of the Great Leap Forward.

However, there are different ways in which freedom dies. It dies because the media are muzzled by terror, and it dies because a Dan Rather syndrome inflicts the media. This is by no means a disparagement of the CBS anchor. I am merely referring to what I heard on David Letterman's show six days following the terrorist attack of September 11, 2001, in which Dan Rather proclaimed: "George Bush is the president, he makes the decisions." Speaking as "an American," the newsman added: "Wherever he wants me to line up, just tell me where. And he'll make the call."

As a journalist coming out afresh from Soeharto's regimented rule, I found Dan Rather's statement quite astounding. It reminded me of the voice of compliant reporters assimilating themselves into a totalitarian context. In a time when patriotic fever is blinding citizens from seeing the wrongs committed by their country, instead of blowing the whistle, this well-respected newsman chose to join the pack. Instead of questioning 'all the president's men', he eagerly became one of them.

Given that the society in which Dan Rather lives is not continuously compelled to show its civic allegiance, and that his country is ruled by a constitution that protects his right to dissent, his prompt patriotism makes bad news. This is a sign that journalism is in danger of losing its spark. In the 1960s, that spark was undisputably there. It was a time when James Reston put his words in practice, that a journalist's job 'is not to serve as cheerleaders for our side in the present world struggle, but to help the largest possible number of people to see the realities of the changing and convulsive world'. As I see it, the Dan Rather syndrome is indicative of a new media disease.

There is no single explanation for what causes the disease. Perhaps it has something to do with the paradox of the times. This is, after all, a time when the extensive reaches of media technology go hand in hand with the narrowing of space in which news are produced and consumed. CNN enters the world's living rooms every single hour; on the same day, in your office in Mozambique, you can read *Jawa Pos* on line. Yet, as Howard Kurtz puts it, more and more newspapers have come to the conclusion that 'the future is local, local, local'. *The Washington Post's* press critic, analysing 'the trouble with America's newspapers' in a book called *Media Circus*, points out that editors still 'proclaim their undying commitment to informing the public, even as some reduce national news to a half-page and foreign news to a few wire-service briefs'.

I remember meeting a retired American civil servant in Maine, who told me of his days of hunting in a remote area in the Midwest, in the summer of 1974. Every morning he listened to the local radio, and learned all about the weather, the opening of a new grocery store, and the election of a new sheriff. But only after returning to his house in Augusta did he discover that Richard Nixon was no longer the U.S. President.

To be sure, the story took place long before September 11, 2002, and Kurtz's book was written before the attack on the World Trade Centre. It was an era when the break-up of Julia Roberts' marriage to Kiefer Sutherland made a banner headline in *USA Today*, in stark contrast to the seven front-page sentences covering the coup in Haiti. Admittedly, there has been a change since September 11. Reports on distant countries have begun to show up everywhere, and I believe even local newscasters have mastered the pronunciation of strange words like 'Afghanistan'. Still, the impulse to localize persists.

Sadly, in tragedy, as in solidarity, there is always a sense of 'territory' -- national, ethnic or religious. Americans like to complain that people in other - particularly Muslim - countries show almost no sympathy for the victims of 911. They are right, at least in part, as Americans have had a share in turning the tragedy into a parochial issue.

While asking the rest of the world to help fight the war against al-Qaeda, Americans continue to view the global effort as, to use CNN's banner, "America's new war." The other day I went to the New York City's Rockefeller Plaza. Prior to The Attack, the flags of different nations would adorn the small central square. After September 11, the building's management pulled down all other flags, replacing them with the Stars and Stripes, the ubiquitous signifier of nationalism, akin to words like

‘Patriotic Act’ and the ‘Office of Homeland Security.’ It seems that Americans like to forget that on the day of The Attack, there were non-Americans, among others approximately 300 Pakistanis and 50 Bangladeshi, killed in the site presently known as ‘Ground Zero’. In the following days, many Iranians lighted candles of mourning in Tehran, though the story was hardly covered by U.S.-based TV channels.

The American media suffering from a Dan Rather syndrome was the first to look the other way when confronted with non-American victims and/or voices. To them, other victims and/or voices are from another universe altogether, a distant, foreign land irrelevant or unintelligible to their immediate consumers. With publishers and editors busy designing products that do not fly in the face of economic reality, the media do their best to be ‘audience-friendly’.

The reason is not hard to grasp: today’s economic reality consists of people who read fewer newspapers and watch more TV’s soap operas. No wonder that ours is an era when newspapers, following television, tend to ‘de-emphasize news and replace it with a feel-good product’, and even practice ‘pink flamingo journalism’, if I may borrow Kurtz’s words of criticism.

To design a ‘feel-good product’ is to be ready not to challenge waves of popular emotion, especially when it is devoted to a powerful focus of allegiance, such as that “unbeatable team” - God and country. I am not only speaking of today’s American media. I can also say confidently that the Dan Rather syndrome often affects South East Asian media, especially in Malaysia, Singapore, and Indonesia. In 1999, for instance, in the aftermath of the referendum that decided the independence of East Timor, Indonesian journalists, writing on international pressure against the Indonesian soldiers’ violation of human rights, took the military’s side of the issue all the way. Obviously, a journalist’s desire to be patriotic can make him/her unnecessarily impervious to different voices outside his/her own mind cubicle. Hemingway once wrote that patriotism is bad for one’s prose, and I think I understand why: such prose bespeaks monotony.

The trouble is, this Dan Rather syndrome – automatic patriotism or other kinds of ‘localism’ – go together with a Catch-22 situation of sorts, in which journalism is the victim of its own strength, namely speed. Today’s news travels thousands of miles per second around the world in staggering quantities, and reporters are forced to compete with each other so as not to be left behind. This is an environment in which information floods in like a tropical downpour while serious questions of ‘how’ and ‘why’ go somewhere else, or fall into the drain, unnoticed, unrecorded. Thousands of stories have been filed on the war against al-Qaeda fighters and the Taliban government in Afghanistan, but I can recall no question being raised about whether 911 was an act of foreign aggression or a crime, or why it was only after the success of American military action in Afghanistan that the U.S. managed to come out with ‘evidence’ indicating that Osama bin Ladin was the mastermind of the attack.

It’s maybe true that today a single newspaper contains more information than a single book of history, but I am afraid that this cliché is becoming increasingly valid. Newspapers *are* generally unable to discriminate between a bicycle accident and the collapse of a civilization.

The question then becomes: what can be done about it. Being an old-fashioned pessimist, I have a rather gloomy answer: nothing much. The media will remain like the small hand of a clock, made of inferior metal, as one philosopher puts it, and which works poorly; ultimately it may end up just like the small hand ticking away in grandma’s antique clock.

But tonight my job is not to cast a pall over tonight’s happy occasion. Even a pessimist, once in a while, needs to cheer others up. Therefore, I would like to end my talk with a different perspective: the spark that makes true journalism, the very same spark that makes the profession worthwhile, has its root in freedom. As long as a society celebrates and maintains its freedom, journalism will always have a space, regardless of the available tools and medium.

Thank you.