

## Islam and Journalistic Values

*An Open Forum with*

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On April 11, USINDO hosted an Open Forum on Islam and Journalistic Values with Dr. Janet Steele.

Steele first became interested in this topic while working at Tempo where she would often hear journalists speak about their work and Tempo's importance in the context of justice, rather than freedom.

How journalists explain universal journalistic values to themselves varies from culture to culture. Steele expressed her belief that Muslim journalists in the Malay Archipelago express journalistic values through the prism of Islam.

In some universities in Indonesia, journalism is taught through *dakwah*, or propagation, faculty because journalism and Islamic propagation are seen as using exactly the same tools and belonging to the same family.

The two news organizations Steele works with most closely are Tempo and Malaysia Kini. Approximately 85% of the journalists at Tempo are Muslim – they think of themselves as journalists who are Muslim, and the organization as being pluralist. They would not, however, define themselves as being secular, which is how the West would likely describe them. Tempo is mainstream journalism of a very high quality in Indonesia.

The Pew Center for Excellence in Journalism has identified nine principles that are widely considered the basic principles of good journalism. They include principles such as a journalist's first obligation is to the truth. In discussing truth, day to day journalists may not know the truth – they know what they think to be the truth and at any moment this can change. When speaking with journalists from Tempo or Malaysia Kini about the truth, the examples they often give come from the Qur'an or the Haddith.

Two of Steele's interviewees explained that it is the duty of a journalist to *tabligh* – spread the message. *Dakwah* is an obligation for those who receive a "verse from the Qur'an." The journalist, by spreading the truth, is doing God's work – if you know something that is true, you have an obligation to spread the word.

However, there are limits to truth – namely, to what should be printed. There must be sufficient evidence otherwise, in the context of Islam, you would be guilty of falsely accusing someone. This can be difficult for journalists who are reporting on a court case, for example, where proof is yet to be given. Many *dakwah* faculty have produced books on the rules of the press and one in particular at IAIN (Islamic State University), who studied in Yemen, has published a book on what is proper or not proper to publish.

This leads to the next principle in journalism – verification. Journalism's essence is a discipline of verification. All of Steele's interviewees in Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Middle East, use the same verse from the Qur'an to describe verification: "When you meet an unreliable (*fasiq*) person with news, you have to look for verification, because if you don't you will regret it."

Another way of thinking of verification, as told by Steele's interviewees, is in terms of *Isnād* – the process of following the chain of transmission of the sayings and acts of the Prophet, which generally takes the form of "it has been related to me by A on the authority of B on the authority of C that Muhammad said..." One of Steele's interviewees describes how, in journalism, one must always ask about the source of a story, and keep following the trail of sources until reaching the original source, much like *Isnād*.

Another principle of journalism is that a story must be comprehensive and proportional. At Sabili (an Islamic magazine), which is known for being unbalanced, a former editor explained that most media rely on the police when covering issues of terrorism. Thus, they are not balanced. Sabili must play the role of dissenting opinion by reporting what sources outside the police say, which then brings the entire story across the media into balance.

A recurring theme when interviewing Muslim journalists is the fundamental principle of justice. An editor from Tempo explained how a story that had been evenhandedly reported

unintentionally overshadowed the victim because by nature, the victim was weak. By being impartial, the voice of the victim was not sufficiently heard. The editor maintained it was then that he realized to be balanced was not enough, there must be justice.

The fourth principle that is often discussed among Muslim journalists is that journalism must serve as an independent monitor of power. Religious scholars, or *ulamas*, have the most difficult responsibility because they must control power, and thus cannot associate with it. If a religious teacher, or *kyai*, had become too close to those in power, Tempo would point this out because it must “speak for justice without siding with power. Power needs limits.” This notion resonates strongly with Muslim journalists.

Arguments often arise when Westerners describe journalism in the context of democracy and a free press. Muslim journalists will often point out that the press in the West is not truly free, often following those in power. However, when discussing journalism as an *independent control of power*, there is greater understanding. Talking about *free* press in a democracy often creates a diversion from the essential issue, which is an *independent* press. An independent press is a much more powerful notion than a free press, and the goal is the same – to monitor the government as an independent institution.

Muslim journalists also explain that “journalism’s practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal consciences.” A fundamental teaching of Islam that runs parallel to this is that “whoever sees a wrong, and is able to put it right...with his hand, let him do so; if he can’t, then with his tongue; if he can’t, then in his heart, and that is the bare minimum of faith.” This is especially powerful when speaking with groups of journalists that have a controlled press, such as in Malaysia.

To conclude, journalists in Indonesia and Malaysia understand and conduct their work under the universal principles of journalism, but they do explain their work to themselves in a different way. They explain their work in an Islamic idiom, using the language of Islam to justify their work, and explain the principles of truth, independence, verification, justice, etc.

## Questions and Answers

***Q: If you focus on Islam in an Islamic society and put in the mix journalistic values, you will get an Islamic idiom. But if you subtract Islam, and look at a non-Islamic society, you have the same journalistic values. So does that mean that Islam is not relevant to those journalistic values?***

There are universal journalistic values – people just explain them differently. In the U.S., they often explain them in Biblical terms. If you remove Islam from Indonesia, the values remain but the way they are explained is different.

***Q: It seems that independent media [in Indonesia] is independent of the State, but not of the mosque because they cannot say anything against the Qur’an. What would***

***happen when an Indonesian journalist says the wrong thing about the Prophet or Islam? How does the English language media in Indonesia fit into the Islamic idiom?***

Indonesian media is independent from Islam. In comparison to Malaysia, Indonesia has a far more open press system. If you have an Islamic state regulating the media, then it is not independent. A concern in Indonesia is the blasphemy laws – that is a problem. If the hypothesis is correct, then Christian media should be different too. I will be exploring this in Timor Leste where the press was created by Indonesia but the people are mostly Christian. How do they see these things? In terms of the English-language, this is a less significant factor than how the leader of the media sees their mission.

***Q: In the countries affected by the Arab Spring, what advice do you have for media organizations that are newly freed from an authoritarian state, and that are Muslim, but are now being confronted with these discussions of the role of church and state, especially as Islamist parties take a greater hold?***

Look to Indonesia as a model. I was recently in Egypt, where these same questions were arising, and encouraged journalists to look towards Indonesia because of the striking similarities between the two nations.

Also, Al-Azhar in Egypt has important historical ties to Indonesian and Malaysian Islam. The young people in one of my classes at Al-Azhar agreed that Indonesia's most democratic president was Abdurrahman Wahid, a Muslim who studied at Al-Azhar and subsequently abolished the Ministry of Information. Gus Dur's example demonstrates how the argument that Muslim scholars cannot support independent media is absurd. At Tempo, they say if Islam is doing something wrong, they need to correct it too.

***Q: A recent study indicated that Indonesians do not see Malaysia favorably, despite sharing a language, culture, and being neighbors. What can both countries do to end this hostility?***

In the past couple of years, there have been many scandals of Indonesian maids treated very badly in Malaysia. The Malaysian Tourism Board used Balinese dancers for the tourism advertisements. There is just a sense in Indonesia that there are no limits to what the Malaysians will do in taking things from Indonesia without crediting them. Instead, why doesn't Malaysia look to Indonesia for models, especially in regards to state press issues? Perhaps it is sibling rivalry.

The countries are different in their political structure – the British as a colonial power were very involved in state issues that the Dutch were not. In Indonesia, religion has always been outside the State. In Malaysia, where Islam is the state religion, they are still arguing about whether or not Malaysia is an *Islamic* state. Indonesia has shown recent waves of piety - twenty years ago, we may not have seen such pious language. Perhaps this is not an internal phenomenon but rather something happening now.

***Q: How far could Malaysian journalists get if they were writing about State-Owned Enterprise reform?***

Malaysia has an extremely controlled press, and one of the ways they maintain that control is through ownership. Many of the news organizations are owned by parties in the ruling coalition. Malaysia and Egypt both have highly controlled state press, but interestingly the internet is vastly unregulated. This has led to the growth of organizations like Malaysia Kini, which can publish these types of stories online, but they must take care that they are solid, well researched stories that do not commit blasphemy. The opening up in Malaysia has come from this pressure.

***Q: Is there a relationship between the investor in a press organization and media productivity?***

Yes, and this worries many in Indonesia because of the consolidation of media ownership. There is no perfect media system, and consolidation in media is happening both in the U.S. and Indonesia at an alarming rate.

There are many Indonesian scholars studying this, such as Ignatius Haryanto. I am more interested in journalistic values in the Islamic culture. To paraphrase another scholar, culture is like water in the fish bowl – it is the one thing the fish does not recognize. As an outsider, I recognize differences that Indonesians may not.

***Q: Should more money be spent on studying the tenets of Islam that promote independent media?***

Any type of cultural exchange can have unbelievable positive consequences. These types of programs work best when not organized by the government – funding can come from the government, but activities should be conducted independent of government. General promotion of cultural exchanges pays off in wonderful ways that often no one can anticipate.

***Q: Please talk more about your upcoming chapter on colonial history?***

The chapter is called “Ramadan in the News Room” but this may change. There is a difference between the roles of both countries in religion. Malaysia mandates the practice of Islam. In Indonesia, the government does not decide whether or not you are a good Muslim. Many see this as hypocrisy, especially when some officials are not good Muslims themselves.

Part of this is a result of history. Malay sultans had all power taken away from them except for Malay religion and culture. This has led to the state today having power over managing religion. There is no parallel in Indonesia. Even the Ministry of Religion in Indonesia does not enforce Islam; instead it mediates disputes between religious groups. In Malaysia, non-Muslims feel threatened in ways non-Muslims in Indonesia do not.

Another interesting difference is that I have never been prohibited access to sources in Indonesia, whereas in Malaysia, there is always suspicion of motivation, and some people are inaccessible because of this suspicion.

***Q: Have Indonesian news organizations found a way to make money from and use social media?***

Malaysians have really embraced social media. Indonesia has too but there, if you have something to say, you can have it published in a printed news media. The internet and social media are more important for citizen journalism in Malaysia because print media is controlled by the state. In Indonesia, news organizations seem to be just posting online what they post in print, rather than creating new content. There are some exceptions. Citizen journalism is so much more important in Malaysia, and there will often be viral videos that contradict what Malaysian media is saying, for example. Print media is still pretty strong in Indonesia.