

## Local Broadcast Journalists: Level of Job Perception in Their Workplace

Siti Zabedah Mohd Shariff

### Introduction

The level of commitment in reporting the news by broadcast journalists in the local TV stations namely in RTM1 of Radio Television Malaysia, a government station and two private TV stations, TV3 and ntv7 depends on their professional roles, attitudes and behaviour that are influenced by the culture of their workplace. The notion of whether these individuals have their journalistic autonomy in news reporting is also based on the working environment in the different TV newsrooms they are working in.

In the academic perspective, a cross section evaluation based on previous research that are done locally and overseas found several evidence on the commitment of broadcast journalists towards their job in the TV stations. The reviews of literature presented in such studies include discussion of the factors relating commitment to an occupation because experience in news organizations has an important impact on journalists' perceptions of their occupation.

Journalists are socialized to the norms of the profession through subtle critiques of managers and conversations with workplace colleagues and they commonly define their goals by using those immediately around them as their reference group as asserted by Lowrey & Becker (2004) while Zhu, Weaver, Lo, Chen & Wu (1997: 84 -96) asserted that news workers often generalize conditions of their field from conditions of their specific workplaces, a shortcut pursued because of constraints on time and relative lack of audience information.

Indeed, the broadcast journalists do not have time to really think about what they should do. They are strongly influenced by organizational factors. The editors are continuously assigning them to cover stories at any time of the day and to get the latest development of issues and events as news items. These challenges are not new to them for the aim is to get the work done and to report the story no matter what.

So, characteristics of the workplace have also been examined as predictors of occupational commitment. Weaver and Wilhoit (1994) and Wilson (1966) found that salary was influential, while Becker, Sobowate and Cobbey (1979) found salary to be of little importance to occupational commitment but with some importance on organizational commitment. Although salary has proven to be an important predictor in these studies, the predictive power of this factor is dependent on occupational type as well as age, socio-economic status, and length of time in the field.

In several studies (Lowrey and Becker 2004; Voakes 1996; Weaver and Wilhoit 1996) journalists have been asked to give their own reasons for wanting to leave their occupation. Among the main reasons listed by respondents are low salaries, tight working schedule and long hours and their high stress level. Journalists have also said interest in other fields was important.

There are indicators that imply that the local TV broadcast journalists here always feel that they are being controlled and suppressed in doing their job (Maheran; Kamarul; Razali and Azwaliza 2006). The notion of being controlled may lead to these journalists not doing their job with full commitment. The enthusiastic spirit and the journalistic values to report the news seems to disappear due to the intervention of gate keepers in ensuring that the news does not touch on sensitive issues. The reason being that journalism in the Malaysian environment is different because of the multi-ethnic and multi-religious nature of the Malaysian society that causes a lot of sensitivity. In addition, there are many laws that affect the actual work of these TV broadcast journalists.

Some of these laws are: the Communication and Multimedia Act 1998 which replaces the Broadcasting Act 1988; the Defamation Act 1957, Copyright Act 1969; Houses of Parliament (Privileges and Power); Federation Ordinance 1952 that covers contempt, Advertisement Act 1953; Medicine Act (advertising and sale) 1956; Penal Code – sections 292, 298, 298(A), 499 and 501, Securities Industry Act 1983, Commodities Trading Act and Trade Description Act 1981. These various legislations impinge on the activities of the TV broadcast journalists.

Researchers have frequently conceptualized commitment as an affective factor that symbolizes a journalist's loyalty or pride in his or her work. According to Allison (1986) the committed journalist is assumed to have a sense of calling to the field and recognition that the social consequences of work outweigh economic gain. Others like Becker, Sobowate and Cobbey (1979); Weaver and Wilhoit (1996) found that job satisfaction and evaluation of one's work organization are also the affective factors that have been found to be highly predictive of commitment to the occupation. Their findings are also consistent with the studies of occupational commitment beyond the field of journalism.

For this, Becker (1979) suggested that individuals increase their commitment to an

occupation because they stake things they value in the pursuit. He exerted that the higher the stakes, the greater the commitment to the occupation. Such stakes are placed either by personal choice or result from simply passing through the social structures of work and playing by the rules. Therefore, occupational commitment projected by the TV broadcast journalists is defined as a desire to engage in a consistent line of occupational activity to the exclusion of other occupations.

To be more precise, there are three sets of predictors of commitment as Becker (ibid.) suggested. The first set of predictors relates to the nature of the work environment, including both perceptions of work such as level of satisfaction and concrete characteristics of work such as salary. Workplace experiences have proven important in socializing the TV broadcast journalist to the field and they use workplace colleagues as a reference group for deciding appropriate practice.

The second set of predictors represents investments made through involvement with the occupation during undergraduate study. These investments, or stakes, constrain choices and encourage commitment to an occupational direction. The third set of predictors includes investments of time, effort and social role attachment made prior to college. Workplace predictors are introduced first so that the possible contributions of individual-level school experiences may be assessed in the context of presumably dominant organizational influences.

In the Malaysian context, the third set of predictor is applicable. Workplace related factor has proven affect to the level of commitment among entrants to the occupation. As mentioned by Lowrey and Becker (2004:528), early socialization indirectly predicts pursuit of journalistic work. Once in the field, new journalists assess dedication to the occupation by extrapolating from organizational experience. Previous studies also show that internships and involvement with campus media also significantly enhance chances of pursuing journalistic work and finding work (Voakes 1996; Weaver and Wilhoit 1990; Kaminski 2003).

The mechanisms projected by the three sets of predictors propose a model of commitment to journalism. In addition, commitment to an occupation is the result of the socialization activities associated with the education and training that prepares entrants for it. For entrants to the occupation of journalism, training is most often offered in journalism programs at a college or university.

For example, the faculty of Communication and Media Studies in Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM) at the main campus in Shah Alam, Selangor offers niche comprehensive journalism programme that includes theoretical and practical aspects for maximum exposure and assimilation process to its students in the field. Early socialization would enhance a better understanding to the profession so that entrants would gradually assess dedication to the occupation and workplace.

Thus, commitment is conceptualized here as containing both affective and non affective component. The affective component as mentioned by Lowrey and Becker (2004 : 529) focuses on loyalty and a sense of mission while the non affective component focuses on the accumulation of investments made in pursuit of an occupation and involves a recognition of costs of leaving.

Despite this distinction, Lowrey and Becker also state that experiences in news organizations have an important impact on journalists' perceptions of their occupation. Thus, journalists, as members of a profession are heavily influenced by the needs and resultant routines peculiar to their individual organizations.

### **Role and experience**

Theory of experience and interpretation (Littlejohn 2002:184) advocates that the nature of conscious experience and the role of communication leads individuals to adjust themselves to be committed to the job they do. In this case, the work the TV broadcast journalists of the three TV stations, that is, TV1 of Radio Television Malaysia (RTM), TV3 and ntv7 involves ethnography performance (Turner 1987:23) which touches on the involvement of organizational culture through interactions of the members and through task-oriented actions that not only achieve immediate objectives but also create or reinforce certain ways of understanding experiences. Thus ingestion of journalistic culture in the workplace allows these journalists to reveal the passion in their job. Here, workers put on performances that make otherwise dull and routine duties interesting or passionate (Littlejohn 2000).

For this, Irving Fang in Hilliard (2004:416) listed the behavioural attitudes a broadcast journalist should have in accordance with the American Council on Education for journalism. They include the ability to write radio or TV news copy; knowledge of law especially applicable to broadcasting; knowledge of general station operation; appreciation of broadcasting's responsibility to the public, particularly in its handling of news; ability to work under pressure; ability to make decisions quickly; speed in production; familiarity with the various techniques of news broadcast including first-person reporting, tape recording and interviews and ability to simplify complex matters and make them meaningful to viewers.

The other theory which is relevant is the theory of gatekeeping (Shoemaker and Reese 1991:3) which explicitly explains how gatekeepers put limits to the TV broadcast journalists' work in accordance to the need of how news should be disseminated to the public.

These two theories are deemed important and useful, especially in understanding the TV broadcast journalists and their work, the environment they are engaged in and the influences that shape the product of news at the end of the day. To study only the TV broadcast journalists themselves would not present a clear picture of the whole operation as TV broadcast journalists are synonymous with their work. The two theories run parallel to each other and would thus contribute a better picture and understanding on how the TV broadcast journalists work and whether the product that is called news is a product that they genuinely produce or otherwise.

### Theory of experience and interpretation.

The central assumption of the theory of experience and interpretation as in Littlejohn (2002:215) is that people act in the world by demonstrating their actions as meaningful as possible and that interpretation is necessary in understanding human experience. To be more concise, this theory relates to the “works” of human experience. Thus, its interpretation attempts to explain the connection between the actions of the TV broadcast journalists in doing their work.

Phenomenology which is highlighted in the theory as asserted by Littlejohn (ibid.: 215) is relevant because of the way in which TV broadcast journalists experience the world. Phenomenology looks at objects and events from the perspective of the perceiver, the experience of the TV broadcast journalists. Littlejohn asserts that anything that is perceived and is known through perception is a phenomenon and reality in that phenomenology is then the way things appear in the conscious experience of the individual.

The job of TV broadcast journalists is congruent with the phenomenological approach because they go for their assignments, gather information that they feel will be useful and important to the public and report it. These TV broadcast journalists gain experience by going through this work process by going behind the scenes to investigate and report on what is going on well and what is not going on well. They interpret and tell people the meaning of what has happened. They also tell how things were done in the past, how the world is being run now, how things get done and what the world thinks is right or wrong. At times, they suggest what action people should take. They write about the day’s happenings, tell about meetings that were held by government officers or about future important events of the day. They may also warn the public about events that are expected to happen and the changes in the weather forecast, or they may write news reports that are directly useful, like figuring out personal income tax at new rates.

These journalists also have to get accurate facts for news reporting and the job needs concentration, empathy, quick thinking and discipline (Yazid Naim 2006). These factors contribute towards making the individual credible when reporting the news (Adnan 2006). While doing this, they apply phenomenological reduction which means putting aside their personal matters in order to concentrate on their work.

The TV broadcast journalist is now obliged to do news reporting with the utmost responsibility as asserted by Masterton and Patching (1990: 136), in their book “*Now the News in Detail*”. According to these two scholars, journalists involved in television reporting, whether in a stand-up, voice over report, scripted pictures taped on location, interview, or any combination of them, objectively know that the picture provides a substantial part of the story. It is essential for journalists to know how that part of the story is gathered because the picture is only a part and often the major part of the story for which the TV broadcast journalist is responsible.

Most important of all, a TV broadcast journalist should possess excellent writing skill and desirable personal qualities such as good public relations that will help build rapport with various organizations, a good personality, is humble, enthusiastic, energetic

and tactful in handling a variety of situations (Sukardi 2006). A TV broadcast journalist like journalists of print media must be knowledgeable in all fields, including political sciences, liberal arts, history, general journalism and telecommunications (Razali 2006).

### Commitment versus constraints

The TV broadcast journalists do not have time to really think about what they should do as editors continuously assign them to cover a story at any time of the day and to get the latest news for each bulletin. Patching (1986) asserted that there are many working journalists who have never had occasions to pause long enough to work out what the principles of a working journalist should be. Very often they take their job for granted and work according to instinct. In a way, journalists are committed to their job even though there are obstacles to do it. The challenges are not new to them for the aim is to get the work done and report the story no matter what. To attain credibility, they even have to report the latest development of the event “live” at the location. Indirectly, this indicates that the journalist’s role in society is crucial, as he or she represent the public.

However, according to Gans (2003: 21) journalists of today are having their own troubles and are confronting their own disempowerment. This is due to the notion that the daily agenda of reports produced, which is news, is actually the product and result of crucial decisions made within a news organization. In this context, news is frequently shaped by trade-offs between journalistic judgment and the imperatives from the business side of the media organization.

Earlier, Bagdikian (1987) shared the view through his investigation that in 1983, the American media were controlled by about 29 corporations. This scenario is not just prevalent in America but elsewhere too where mass media is increasingly concentrated in the hands of a few of large companies (see Bowers 1967:43 – 52; Bailey & Lichty 1972:221-229; Rogers, Zhao, Pan & Chen 1985:179 – 208 ).

In the case of Malaysia, Das (1990:29) discusses the manipulation of the media which is basically done in three ways. They are: 1) control of ownership; 2) legislation and 3) escape journalism. Control of ownership of newspapers is the most obvious and easiest way in the media manipulation and significantly, it is not a coincidence that the biggest circulation newspapers in Malaysia are owned by the political parties of the Barisan Government. The *New Straits Times* group for example is owned by UMNO, *The Star* is the MCA paper. As for the MIC, it controls the Tamil newspapers. Control of ownership of newspapers by these political parties which want to promote their own side of the picture does not allow for integrity of journalists.

The ownership of newspapers by political parties allows for other kind of manipulation that is the manipulation of a more direct manner. For example, papers print not only stories which the party would like, but even propaganda written by party officials. Speeches which are completely political fill the editorial pages. The second

form of manipulation of the media described by Das is done by legislation where apart from the Printing Presses and Publication Act, there are other laws like the Internal Security Act and the Official Secrets Act.

On a similar note, Netto (2002: 17) found the similar phenomenon in Malaysia where media freedom is restricted in three ways: through restrictive laws; ownership of media by political parties and connected business individuals; and self-censorship exercised by editors and the journalists themselves. He also added that, for years now, power has increasingly been concentrated in the hands of the executives. This centralization of power has stifled mainstream media. The pressure from gatekeepers at a certain level seems to jeopardize journalists' credibility for they, to a certain extent cannot make their own decisions.

### Newsroom – executive divide

The issue of broadcast journalists being controlled and suppressed when doing their job is not new. Working in such a situation would only in the end, erode their enthusiasm and spirit of journalism, thus resulting in low commitment toward work. For this matter, the former Group Editor-In-Chief of the *New Straits Times Press*, Datuk A Kadir Jasin (1998) said that journalism in the Malaysian environment is different from that seen and practiced in other ASEAN countries and Europe and the United States. This is largely due to the fact that Malaysia is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society that has multiple responsibilities and sensitivities to consider.

In addition the electronic media (TV and radio), has many laws that affect the actual work of the broadcast journalists. The following list is some legislative Acts that impinge on the activities of the TV broadcast journalists:

- Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 which replaces the Broadcasting Act 1988;
- the Defamation Act 1957; Copyright Act 1969; Houses of Parliament (Privileges and Power);
- Federation Ordinance 1952 that covers contempt, Indecent Advertisement Act 1953, Medicines Act (advertising and sale) 1956; and
- Penal Code – sections 292,298,298(A), 499 and 501, Securities Industry Act 1983, Commodities Trading Act 1981 and Trade Description Act

The impinging laws have intensified over the years and as a result, there is a manifest and widening gulf between journalists and the people they work for. Kovach, Rosenstiel and Mitchell (2004:4) observed that news people are divided into three separate groups firstly, executives who have the chief financial responsibility over the news company-publishers, the chief executive officers or the CEOs and the chief financial officers; secondly, the news executives who are the editors-in-chief, executive editors, managing editors and executive producers, and assistant managing editors; and thirdly, newsroom staff from those from bureau chiefs to cub reporters.

Kovach, Rosenstiel and Mitchell (2004) concurred that this situation could lead to other moral problems, resulting in two possible phenomena: i) executives and journalists cannot even agree on the basic things in their newsrooms and ii) that the impact of these bottom line pressures, journalists are losing their journalistic qualities of autonomy on their journalism duty. As such, it is essential to look into the Malaysian situation and to study what local TV journalists face in performing their job as a base to understand the situation.

It is therefore deemed essential that the Malaysian journalism environment is studied in depth in order to discover and understand factors that affect the work performance of local TV broadcast journalists.

### **The gatekeeping theory**

Shoemaker (1991:1) defines gate keeping as a process by which billions of messages that are available in the world get cut down and transformed into hundreds of messages that reach a given person on a given day. Meanwhile Donohue, Tichenor and Olien (1972) suggested that gatekeeping be defined as a broader process of information control that includes all aspects of message encoding: not just selection but also withholding, transmission, shaping, display, repetition and timing of information as it goes from the sender to the receiver. In other words, the gatekeeping process involves every aspect of message selection, handling and control, whether the message is communicated through mass media or interpersonal channels.

On a more microscopic level of analysis, according to Shoemaker (1991:1), gatekeeping can also be thought of as the process of reconstructing the essential framework of an event and turning it into news. For this, news are covered, selected and evaluated according to their importance, and later presented in accordance to the expectation of the gatekeepers who controlled the whole show.

To some scholars, gatekeeping is important because gatekeepers provide an integrated view of social reality. The fact that millions of selection decisions are made everyday makes the gatekeeping process highly significant. As Bagdikian (1983:226) put it, "The power that controls the flow of information is a major lever in the control of society. Giving citizens a choice of ideas and information is as important as giving them a choice in politics". Hardt (1979:22) on the other hand, wrote, "Control over the media of dissemination may suggest control over the mind of society".

### **Supra-organizational influences**

Supra-organizational influences as put forward by Bailey and Lichty (1972:229) is obvious at this stage whereby organization holds the supra stage of influence is the gatekeeper of any news organization and therefore there is bound to be complexity in



decision making. Nevertheless, although gatekeeping is defined as an activity performed by a communication organization and its representatives, communication organizations also exist within a social system alongside other social institutions and many of which affect the gate keeping process.

For this matter, Shoemaker and Mayfield (1987) and Shoemaker and Reese (1991) found that the level of complexity of the social-unit and the five levels of gate keeping involved in the process are: the individual communication worker (for example, the worker's attitude), routines or practices of communication work (such as deadlines or the inverted pyramid of news writing style), the organizational level (such as ownership patterns), the social and institutional level (including the mass media, advertising and interest groups) and the social system level (such as ideology and culture). These levels thus are important in determining the complexity of constraints faced in the journalism profession.

In Malaysian broadcasting, TV1, TV3 and ntv7 are interlinked with various stakeholders including policy-makers, regulators, advertisers, advertising agencies, program suppliers and producers. There are various ministries and agencies that regulate and control the media environment. While policies relating to broadcasting are formulated at ministerial cabinet level, the electronic and print media are also subject to other rules and regulations both implicit and explicit (Rahmah Hashim 1991:2).

These influences exerted on news content by organizationally mandated work routines have been documented by Tuchman (1973) and Fishman (1980). Work routines, which March and Simon (1958) called "programs" are designed to allow beat reporters for example, who are assigned to cover large and complex bureaucracies such as a municipal court systems – to generate a substantial number of stories and still meet the deadlines imposed by the news organization.

## Conclusion

The argument presented above thus shows that news is also frequently shaped by trade-offs between journalistic judgment and the imperatives from the business side of the media organization.

In the case of Malaysia, it is sometimes beyond the boundaries mentioned above because journalism in the Malaysian environment has to take into account the sensitivity and responsibility of the multi-ethnic and multi religious nature of the Malaysian society. Thus, this indicates too that gatekeeping can be affected by the ideology of the social system in which gatekeepers exist. Raymond Williams (1977) and Deuze (2002:4) define ideology as "a relatively formal and articulated system of meanings, values and beliefs". These scholars elaborated that on the social system level ideology becomes not an individual's belief system but an integrated worldwide shared by practically everyone in a social system. This ideology is closely mirrored in the themes identified by Gans (1979b) in his study of working definitions of "what's news".

Thus, TV broadcast journalists have no lasting control over the news story. The

persons immediately responsible for the entire product of the news cast are the executive producers and the news director. Despite all this, experiences in news organizations have an important impact on a journalist's perceptions of his or her occupation.

In the Malaysian context, the local television networks have also been targets of public criticism over the choices of news coverage which are shaped by the regulators and policy-makers (Rahmah Hashim 1995). She identifies that there are various ministries and agencies that regulate and control the Malaysian media environment that cause news content to be more government oriented. Along similar lines, Ahmad Murad (2001:14) asserted that pseudo-events and pseudo-news is events and news which are planned and staged precisely for the purpose of entry into the newspapers and to gain television coverage. Stories which have no true news value but are important for image purposes are carried.

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