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**Media Ethics in Malaysia and South-East Asia: What Price Asian Values?**

Media ethics have been a source of debate and controversy since the first newspaper hit the streets. This is not surprising as the media have a strong and complex influence upon how we understand and shape our world. From news reporting, investigative journalism, political commentaries, and editorials to the broadcasting of current affairs, dramas, films, and documentaries, the media provide us with information, entertainment, and enhance our understanding of the world. Hence it affects our beliefs, values, and outlook of the world around us. It is only natural that given the media's profound impact and influence, there arise a host of ethical and social questions that need to be addressed.

The media thus shoulder an enormous responsibility in ensuring that they are objective, impartial, and accurate in their coverage of news and issues. Whether they are covering political, social, environmental, economic or gender issues, the process of choosing "only news that is fit to print" is never easy. It is necessarily a selective process, both in the old world, and in this age of globalization, in the new world. Media practitioners struggle daily to balance out competing interests while trying to be objective, impartial, and dispassionate.

The First Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1791 on freedom of the press perhaps provides an early evidence of how old this debate is. The amendment reads:

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the government for a redress of grievances" (Friedrich 1966, p. 117).

His provision was clearly intended to safeguard freedom of expression as part of the democratic process and one which was actively promoted by the state.

A former Editor of The Times of London, Wickham Steed, described in 1938 the ideal newspaper with these words:

"The ideal would be to hit upon the sort of newspaper that should be able to make ends meet without conceding anything of its journalistic integrity to considerations of money-making" (Steed 1938, p. 244).

Steed was concerned about the influence of the State as well as pressures applied by commercial interests on the media. Steed's seminal work also reflected the active media ethics debate in the pre-war period.

Just as they still are today, the media under those circumstances were torn between two conflicting demands: the legitimate interests of the state on the one hand, and the need for freedom of thought, expression, and democracy on the other. Those in power would inevitably seek to influence this "in the name of the people's freedom of the press," in the words of one newspaper. In Malaysia, as in other countries, the interplay of these forces has been challenging. The ideal newspaper is founded on the premise that freedom of expression should be allowed to exist in a democratic society, as enshrined in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution.

Both in Malaysia and South-East Asia, there has been a growing concern about press censorship and the influence of the State on media freedom. The recent political climate in Malaysia, for example, has led to a tightening of journalistic freedoms.

In South-East Asia, the media have been under increasing pressure from the State, particularly in countries such as Thailand and Singapore. The media have often found it difficult to publish critical reports on government policies, especially in the pre-war period.

A Thai newspaper editor once said that "the only way to be a free press is to be a dead press," pointing to the difficulties faced by journalists in South-East Asia in exercising their rights to freedom of expression. The editors were under constant pressure from the State, who could use a range of tactics to control the media.

In conclusion, the media ethics debate in Malaysia and South-East Asia is not a new phenomenon. It is a reflection of the complex relationship between the State, the media, and the public. As long as there are democratic societies, the media will continue to be a source of controversy and debate. The challenge for the media is to balance the legitimate interests of the State with the need for freedom of expression and a free press.
Media Ethics in the Dialogue of Cultures
Journalistic Self-Regulation in Europe, the Arab World, and Muslim Asia

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Editor's Preface

PART I: THE DIALOGUE OF CULTURES

Hans Küng
An Intercultural Basis for an Ethics of Journalism

Ghassan Salamé
"Islam and the West": Clash or Coexistence?

Alfred Grosser
Journalism Ethics: The Mass Media and the Mass Media

PART II: "GOOD JOURNALISM: INTERCULTURAL PERSPECTIVES"

Kai Hafez
Journalism Ethics Revisited: A Comparison of Ethics Codes in the Arab World and Muslim Asia

Majid Tehranian
Negotiating Global Media Ethics

Wolfgang Wunden
Freedom, "Blasphemia," and Media

Hussein Amin
Freedom as Value in Arab Media: Journalists

Muhammed I. Ayish
American-Style Journalism and the Arab World: An Exploratory Study of News Styles
Kai Hafez (ed.)

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