

Countering the Western Canon: Other Ways of Knowing About Journalism and Media by Ahmad Murad Merican

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INTRODUCTION

This book, by itself, is a small proposition to rethink our know-how about Journalism and the Media. It challenges the current knowledge paradigm especially in Malaysian syllabi and schools of journalism, communication, and media studies away from Euro-American perspectives towards local knowledge based on tradition and perennial values, emphasizing upon Islam and Malay cultural norms and settings within Malaysia and to some extent Indonesia. The problem is that the local schools did little to assess present Journalism – as taught and practiced by universities and professionals – and take for granted that it is a modern phenomenon that only began in the 19th century colonial Malaya. As such, Journalism is an import resultant from the modernizing forces made possible by British (and Dutch) printing press nomenclatures and ‘standard’ practices.

Somehow, this wholesale importation is unexamined and distorted the local’s understanding of themselves when they engage in journalism and the media to appeal to the biases of Euro-American views about their ‘colonial subjects’ and ‘colored peoples’ views. The locals unassumingly adopted these views to understand socio-political phenomena of their own communities, resulting in journalistic narratives that perpetuate Western-centric views stamped by the locals’ own unconscious approval of their own lesser standings in literacy, literary culture, and history of civilization. While there are critiques from within the locals, they are insufficient because they are still within this Western-centric paradigm. By not addressing the sufficiency and legitimacy of local knowledge and primarily asserting theoretical constructs and Western knowledge paradigm, these critiques inevitably created an echo chamber that further strengthened the status-quo Western knowledge and cornered the local narratives. Prof. Murad contended that it is time for local Journalism as knowledge paradigm to expand its project beyond the Western constructs without denying their relevant contributions to construct a local form of sociological and civilizational field of Journalism that begins in syllabus of journalism and media education.

The most critical point this book contends is the absence of questioning how an abstract about the Malay World was formed within Media Studies. The lack of critical analysis about how the Malays view themselves and Others isolates the more general cosmology that does not account finer voices and

reflection beyond accepted 'Media Studies.' Thus, Ahmad Murad introduces some ways to engage in reflecting this ignored dimension by appealing to certain longstanding activities and terms such as pekerjaan kalam, pantun, kaba, and budi, to open worldviews not only of the Malay World, but also from it, so such views could engage in essential philosophies surrounding the Media.

This book can also be viewed as a lengthy process of thought evolution, though not complete and strictly chronological, Ahmad Murad as scholar of intellectual history and Media Studies himself. He is a prolific author who engages in many fields. However, in most of his other titles, he engages in specific topics. For instance, his most recently published *The Avatar of 1786: Decolonizing the Penang Story* (USM, 2023) specifically discusses about Penang, but not much elaborating on conceptual and thought processes of the author himself; we are left guessing his conceptual standpoint and presumptions based on grounded analyses he made in other book. This book relieves us from that – it quite clearly spells to a good degree the philosophical worldview Ahmad Murad holds, which is Traditionalist and non-Western centric (though not denying its contributions), which sets to question the crisis of modern knowledge based on Sophia perennis, the perennial Wisdom, the relevance of religion (Islam in his particular case), and propagates such Wisdom to be inculcated in Media Studies.

Thus, we are led to a vastly different approach to understand the Media as body of knowledge. Ahmad Murad problematizes a number of well-known definitions such as 'communication' and 'identity' and then re-conceptualizes them to expose the limits of 'institutionalized' definitions of those terms. In Chapter 2: Prophets, Philosophers and Scholars: The Identity of Communication and the Communication of Identity, he interposed these as Personality of Imperialism on the one hand, and image and misrepresentation in another to underscore unexamined Colonial narratives that influence the mindset of visibly de-formed and biased identities of the Colonized subjects (in this case, the Malays) which obscured meaningful exposition of communicative identities based on the notions of bangsa, perjuangan, semangat, Raja and Kerajaan in favor uncritical acceptance of feudal and budaya popular. The rest of the chapters follow similar rhythm – they are conceptual re-expositions of the media and journalism grounded by specific Malay experiences and exposures. They are not exactly fluid in a sense that one would engage a thematic or plot-based books. It is more fruitful to think them as a collection of reflective and critical thought done over the years providing a quaint Sapiential perspective which in itself rare in studying a heavily structured and institutionalized modern-mainstream media. I find the writings more philosophical than journalistic – these are not easy chapters to digest. This book is not 'an Introduction to Media Studies' as a common undergraduate textbook would have it. It is on one hand an exposition of decolonial perspective, and the other a treatise to re-appraise media and journalistic studies of and about the Malay World as intellectual corpus and civilization. The concepts and definitions – though are 'mundane' terms – are not mechanistically defined to abide by mainstream dictionary definitions and the mediascape.

I only wish this book to be edited further so its flow improves into a more thematic discussion to ease understanding for the unacquainted in media and journalism studies. The ideas are sometimes repetitive and sometimes out of place and disconnected from a particular chapter. This could result in confusion and even reduce the efficacy of arguments raised from each chapter that is supposed to Beautifully support one another in a logic and coherence that could be more easily followed by a general audience, by undergraduate students.

This book is not about the Malays only or Malay-centrism from the viewpoint of cult or political ideology. Rather, this book is about an attempt to expose a media cosmology based on a media cosmology viewed from the experience and knowledge corpuses of the Malay. It is also a surprising and wonderful exposition of Perennial Philosophy in media studies at large by accounting Traditional

perspectives of the Sacred from words and literary cultures of the Malays as reflected in their practices, but somehow obscured by the shadows of modernism even about their own account and self-description in the media.

For Borneo studies, this book is potentially valuable in a number of ways. First, this book carries a conception and definition of Tradition that could bring the relevance of the Sacred to the center of discussion about 'Us' when it comes to imagining the common baseline of Borneo communities. This baseline could be the Sacred that underlies the various Borneo cultures and beliefs. This book, despite referring mostly to Peninsular Malay and Indonesian experiences, exposes the necessary groundwork.

REFERENCE

Merican, M. A. (2023). *Countering the Western Canon: Other Ways of Knowing about Journalism and Media*. Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris Publisher.