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THE ANT IN THE CIRCLE: DETERRITORIALIZING COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

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I shall begin this paper with the story of an ant. One night, the very night that I sat upon writing this paper, I chanced upon a solitary ant against the white wall before my eyes. Subconsciously my eyes trailed the creature's movement. Strange I thought - a deserter maybe, lost from its own kind celebrated for its *esprit de corps* and industry. Hence my attention was zeroed on that tiny moving speck against the sea of white space.

Subsequently my thoughts began to recall the days when I use to encounter the same experience, except that then (and as the norm), the ants trailed each other in single file, loyal and disciplined, and under normal circumstances, never it seemed, were they out of line. Being curious on the potential consequences of human intervention (I was a little boy then), I would either pick a pencil or a piece of chalk and draw a line on the wall across its path. The march stopped (but only momentarily). After some "ant reconnaissance" by the "frontliners", the others would follow suit, breaking their files, curious as to what had happened.

The picture seemed to be chaotic, while at the same time, some kind of hesitation (or meditation) seemed to be ritualized. And perhaps, they were whispering to themselves: "Should we cross this line?" (Translated into human language). In an instant (and after giving me the fleeting pleasure of observation), they discovered that they *should*, and they *could*, and they *did*. And so they transcended (and some circumvented) their once momentarily enclosed world.

Coming back to this solitary creature that night, I thought I would repeat the experiment - only this time, not by drawing a line across its path, but a circle (with a pencil) surrounding it. The ant was, for a moment, "captured" by the structure. It then seemed to hesitate. Surveying the parameters of its sudden "territory," symbiotically I felt a sense of "consciousness" (or maybe the lack of it) in the ant. The innate scepticism on its "formalized" and "institutionalized" existence seemed to surface. There seemed

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to be some tacit awareness, but coupled with fear and uncertainty, in questioning the premises of its world view. Then two questions began to emerge. Question one: "Is the environment created by the pencil-drawn circle real?" And question two: "Where do I go from here?"

And so on my part, I then decided to change the title of this paper from something like "A Perspectival Approach toward Research" to "The Ant in the Circle: Deterritorializing Communication Research." This paper's focus would be at once and the same time the scholar, the research and his subject - the ant as object and subject, the ant studying and being studied. The ant discovering and being discovered. The ant asking the right and the wrong questions. The ant constructing and deconstructing boundaries. The ant asking "why? Why research? Why communication research? *What communication?*"

Why are we doing what we are doing? Such questions are almost always felt, but seldom verbalized. Perhaps it would be useful to begin at some point. Surveying the present state of social science research (of which communication and mass communication studies usually included) in Malaysia, we could sense a lack of self reflection. In this regard, drawing our arguments heavily from Rustam and Norani (1991), we observe that the landscape of the social sciences (in Malaysia) is "abundantly furnished with such heaps of sawdust, large and small." They emphasize that:

So prominent, in fact, are these heaps of sawdust on the intellectual landscape of the social sciences that they are often perceived, and sometimes, even paraded, as social science itself in its modern form. Yet what such a social science offers is really nothing more than a corpus of techniques and methods for building up more such heaps. So instrumental, technical, and uncritical a perception of the nature of the social sciences is particularly dominant, however, in conditions where the science disciplines have not developed authentically as a particular way of looking at the social world, as an autonomous intellectual response to the task of perceiving and making sense of complex modern social conditions.

Rustam and Norani further argue that the development of the social sciences in the west had a definite political and philosophical "point of view" - so much so that the central social science discipline, namely sociology, and by extension the whole spectrum of what has been labeled as the social science disciplines, have been dubbed "the humanism of the twentieth century." Precisely because the enquiries were premised upon a point of view, the ideas formulated came to exert great influence not only upon social thought but more broadly on the social and political condition itself of humanity.

The "point of view" as expressed earlier, or rather its apparent absence in social science (and communication) research in Malaysia, parallels the scholar to the story of the ant. The scholar exists within the circle of his environment, the invisible structures separating thinking and non-thinking, separating reflection and non-reflection. Both have tacit knowledge of the point of departure, but the potential difference is to where?

The scholar then should take a moment to ponder if he has not consciously thought of it. That "moment" could last an entire life. In studying the "mystery" of why he is doing what he is doing, he could arrive at the wisdom of knowing why others do what they do.

Hence in the context of communication research, grounding on such enquires as the social construction of reality, the scholar is demanded to have a sense of the transcendent unity inherent in the social order - in the secular world, in historical time, in

relation to the metaphysical world. The scholar would not be able to discover if he is blind to the transparencies of reality involving the individual, society, art, literature, architecture, the physical sciences, etc.

To this we can dwell on the basics by moving on the specifics. Mundane as it seems, but what is communication? What exactly is "mass" in mass communication? Do the masses actually communicate as conventionally understood? Why "mass communication", and not by any other name? (and maybe why not?). What is knowledge? Why knowledge? Why discover knowledge? What does it mean by the "media?" Why bother over reality constructed by the media? What is the relationship between media, society and reality? What is reality? What is the nature of news? What makes news news? Does news convey knowledge, fact, or illusion of the social order? Is news reality, or the creation of reality? Why do story-tellers (if we can place a label on journalists, and maybe scholars too) become story-tellers?

The scholar then should seek to think, ask, and attempt to answer these questions. What appeals to the common sense is not always what *is*. What we perceive of the world is through what we call symbols - forms that give shape to our experiences. In this sense, every form is symbolic, so that "symbolic" means "semiotic" in general, and myths are symbolic forms as art, language, algebraic notations, and scientific laws (Eco, 1985).

Therefore to study communication is to examine the actual social process wherein significant symbolic forms are created, apprehended and used. Attempts to construct, maintain, repair, and transform reality are publicly observable activities which occur in historical time. Carey (1975) observes:

We create, express, and convey our knowledge of and attitudes toward reality through the construction of a variety of symbol systems: art, science, journalism, religion, common sense, mythology. How do we do this? What are the differences between these forms? What are the historical and comparative variations in them? How do changes in communication technology influence what we concretely create and apprehend? How do groups in society struggle over the definition of what is real?

It is these questions that communication research must answer. Scholars must move beyond the facts to interpret, speculate and imagine. Hence we can say that there is no distinction between works of fact (labels given to phenomena and taken to exist as true) and that of imagination (interpretation, speculation and intuition, and even facts).

Fact and fiction can be seen as parallels to form and meaning - inextricably connected, so much so that existence becomes enigmatic if we were to confine ourselves to the former (Geertz, 1973). In attempting to understand the meaning of communication within ourselves; within, and between cultures and institutions, the scholar therefore should adopt the attitude that form and meaning are aspects of a single entity. And within that, the change in forms and the permanence in meanings. In this paper, I will review and explore the study of news as a constructed entity in light of their potential contribution to our understanding (or misunderstanding) of reality and consciousness.

A news story signifying and conveying form is a self-contained "reality" of an event produced by the conventions of journalism. This simple statement however, evokes layer upon layer of thinking that seems to lead to more questions than answers. Much of the thinking on the nature of news revolves around how it defines reality; much of the thinking on the conventions of journalism revolves around its status as a profession

and the ramifications thereof; and much of the thinking on organizations revolves around the notion of control - the setting of the premises of thought, leading back to the question on the definition of reality (Merican, 1987).

In the study of news, it is therefore pertinent to examine the product, the profession, and the organization at the same time as a built-environment, based on the assumption that the externalized pseudo-environment as such, stands between the individual and the world beyond (1). The substance of news could be seen as the need to involve shared historical experiences and common structures of meaning. The cosmic order, the nature of the material world, the nature and destiny of man and society, the past remembered, the present as recorded are all part of the story system (Williams and Pearce, 1974).

Framing the study of news within a certain perspective, the generation of research should no longer be confined within any particular discipline. As Dahlgren (1989) emphasizes, the study of news is transdisciplinary. And to stretch the concept further, communication research should no longer be confined within the spectrum of disciplines in the so-called social sciences. Nevertheless, we see the "social" in social science as related to metaphysics. The "social" is fundamentally metaphysical (Puhek, 1982). Society cannot be seen, touched, smelled, or in any way directly known by the senses though the "social" does give *physical evidence* of itself through patterns of behaviour and language.

Puhek argues that if it is true that the "social" is fundamentally metaphysical, then every person who claims to be a social scientist (or a communication scholar) must recognize himself or herself as a metaphysician.

In rejecting a linear perspective, we adopt what we call a circular perspective in the transdisciplinary study of society, communication and the news. In framing a perspective, we borrow insights from Nasr (1972). He observes that traditional man knew with certainty where he came from, why he lived and wither he was going. The Qur'an summarizes this certainty in these simple yet majestic words "Lo! we are Allah's and lo! unto Him we are returning" (Al-Baqarah: 156). According to Nasr, many treatises of Sufism and theosophy bear the title of "the beginning and end" and *alpha* and *omega* which contains in summary fashion all truth and wisdom.

Here we unveil the concept of birth and decay leading to the return to the Primordial, hence being aware of the Infinite Wisdom. However it is this unawareness of His Infinite Wisdom that is the core of the disease not only encountered in the physical sciences but also in the social and behavioural sciences. How do we know what we know and how can we be certain of what we know and that what we know exists?

How do we sense, discover and interpret phenomena? Schuon (1965), on the question of knowing, relates the sage who sees all things in its total context, who sees causes in effects in causes, who sees God in all things, and who sees all things in God. The sage then sees the certainty of the union between revelation and reason. Amplifying the perspective, the sage (or the scholar) may conclude that science, that is, knowledge discovered with reason and identified as social facts, is impregnated with the sacred. In other words, the life world of phenomena is imbued with sacredness - the phenomena being from God, the First Cause, the First Principle, the Creator.

Science discovers phenomena and gives names to it. The wisdom of the significance of the meaning of phenomena leads science back to the Primordial. Bearing in mind that man's engagement in research is the outcome of the urge, that inner quest *inter alia* to describe and explain phenomena, to probe into the existence of matter, to predict, to

control, to identify causes and effects, to build theories, to seek knowledge, to discover the past, to seek meanings in the world; knowledge then was discovered that of himself, of the relationships, and of man's position in the total scheme of things.

Pristine knowledge from man's enquiries would, and should, by its natural self ultimately lead man back to the path and tends to be unified to the knowledge of the Primordial (Merican, 1987) [See the proposed perspective in figure 1.

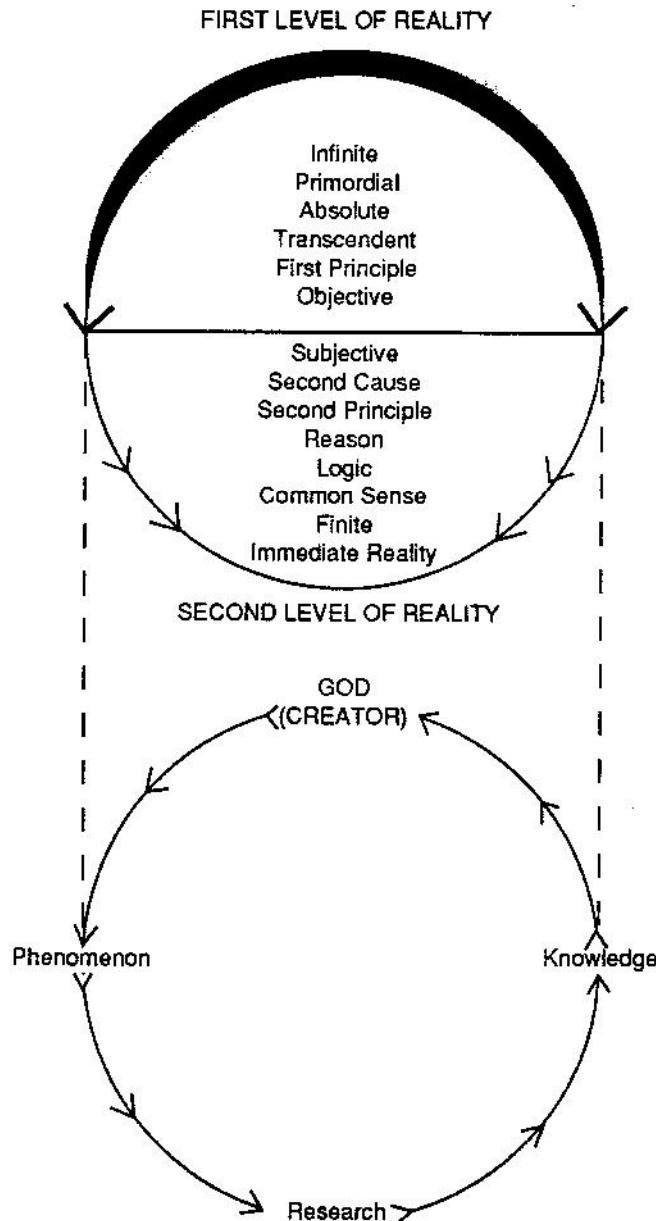


Figure 1: RESEARCH WELTANSCHAUUNG (World-view)

In the process leading back to the Primordial, research must move within the interplay of opposites. The dualism of ideas and concepts is regarded as an outcome of a process, leading to the comprehension of the position transcending two opposite ideas and concepts creating a research *weltanschauung*. For instance, in studying the news, assumptions can be observed within the dichotomy of experiential versus anti-experiential, pseudo-environment versus primordial environment, and objectivity versus subjectivity. Hence relationships are developed.

The width of perspectives in journalism research (as in the study of news) must emphasize the critical necessity of broadening the scope of news itself, that is, in transcending the aesthetic/pragmatic dichotomy leading to the news as a mode of communication aimed at disclosing (and not enclosing) ideas and values and the world beyond. News can be seen as anchored by the rhythm of "clock time" - symbolizing place and space. Its design is the outcome of forces and movements in civilization. It is caused by industrialism and it affects industrialism.

As Tuan (1977) says of the architecture of a well designed product: it "teaches," (it) "is a key to comprehending reality." Similarly, seeing news as social construction of reality (like architecture), while at the same time asking the right questions aimed at idealizing an ideal design for news, could devolve the internal self as well as evolve the external self, both that of the scholar as well as that of society.

Illustrating one example of a study based on the perspective (or maybe a "point of view" as Rustam and Norani have put it and if I have so far correctly interpreted them) outlined in this paper, is an observation made of the reader, the reading, and the news (2).

At the heart of the process of reading the news from the newspaper is that it re-establishes our world on that day. We celebrate the day. Reading the news constructs and reconstructs our existence, and that of others. It constructs a sense of place, space, and time. It signifies our role and function. Or has it? It conjures factual fictional images. But we cannot ask questions. The news does not repond to us. There is no feedback, as in asking a friend "Apa cerita?" (What's new[s])

But news relates to the many "I"s - the public ego. News on newsprint is a public document. News on newsprint is an impersonal story meant for the "I" where individuality is lost, where imaginations are distorted, where reality is defective. News is where "reality is isolated and unconnected" (Phillips, 1976).

The story does not know me. The story does not recognize me. The story does not boost my ego, for it denies me the cognition, of what Carey (1983) describes as of "the subterranean and frequently glacial movements that provide the meaningful substructure which determines the eruption of events and the emergence of personalities that we now call news."

News has steered journalism away from being a cultural and an ideational art, to an industrial art (Carey, 1983). And therefore it is not targetted exclusively for me. However it creates me (and others). It makes me secure in a place lost. And I can say "I know that!" But do I really know? "You explain this world to me with an image," I unscrupulously borrow from Camus (1955). "I realize then that you have been reduced to poetry: I shall never know." Caught in a fiction of fiction, I am a stranger to myself.

The news creates people, creates events. I read about the "Mother of battles," and "Telegraph pole fined for speeding." A creative imagination on war, peace, deviance and conformity. But missing an event is not a story, it is not news. Veiled by processes, forces and movements, reality becomes bogus. It does not exist. It is an untold myth.

In *Space and Place* (1977), Tuan writes:

Myths flourish in the absence of precise knowledge. Thus in the past Western man believed in the existence of the Isles of the Blest, Paradise, the Northwest Passage, and Terra Australis. Now he no longer does. Myths are not, however, a thing of the past, for human understanding remains limited.

Tuan's idea of myths strucks parallels to the other empty portion of a glass of water. What is not known to the story-teller is not news. What has not been told to the story-teller is not news. Whatever does not fit into the format of the story-telling paradigm is not a story. It is a myth - a "fuzzy idea of defective knowledge surrounding the empirically known," as he puts it.

And so, what makes a story a story is that it is created, manufactured - crafted by words, ready to fit into a pre-set mould. News is the outcome of the manufacture of events.

And the story is the same everyday - with infinite diversity, infinite subdivisions of an event, or a process, infinite shadings, infinite differentiations. It is repetitive. The old experiences of man are gathered, processed, re-told, and re-read by an infinite number of "individuality lost" souls. And I, among the many, re-enacting the ritual.

And my experience is heightened (or is it?), by the created world, in the story that articulates experiences, that realizes pseudo-environments. I am captured in a glass booth - deaf, dumb, blind - empty of meaning - nothing arrives to me, through me; and nothing departs of me, from me. My senses are not able to penetrate the environment.

Reading a newspaper is like travelling through a time-zone of built-environment. The built-environment, again quoting Tuan (1977), "like language," defines sensibility. He observes that inclusions, and thereby exclusions are primary functions of pseudo-environments. What the news routinely excludes that "are as common as weeds will force their way into the village of public meanings as defined by conventional news values."

I am therefore trapped in a fixed pseudo-environment. I become the object - the literal and metaphorical environments which readily interplay with one another, forcing the story as metaphor. And I, nonchalantly emerging, feeling secure from the ertwhile untouched world in my sleep, have created myself in creating a language (or am I created by language?). Am I a metaphor of myself? In relating the news phenomenon, Merleau-Ponty (1964) writes: "True little incidents are not life's debris but signs, emblems and appeals." While he draws that to mean "the poetry of hidden truth in the prose of discourse," the "I" who read the news feel like the child of a tourist, where signs, emblems and appeals are no more and no less seen as signs, emblems and appeals.

Dean W. O'Brien (1983) in a beautiful discourse titled "The News as Environment," quotes Dean MacCannell's *The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class*, that in search of authenticity, tourists go from sight to sight, trying to break through the representations of the sights (the brochures, stereotypes, tourist trap stagings, etc.), which actually provide the aura for the sights, giving them mystery, meaning and importance.

The tourists' perception of natives along the route refresh the native's perception of themselves, their cultures and lifestyles, and presumably leading to self-awareness and improvement.

Seeing themselves as tourists see them undercuts the natives genuineness in the tourist's eye. For their part, tourists never find the untainted, unselfconscious, conscious, symbol-free, pure-novelty environment with no "pseudo" in it. "Although tourists adopt

the rhetoric of adventure, they are never independent of a social arrangement wherein a host organizes the experience of a sightseeing guest."

Thence the story, the story-teller, and I are the outcome of such a social arrangement. An instrument of the support systems perpetuating this "mythic construct," constantly in search of authenticity, travelling from one source even and sight to another, travelling from some fuzzy place and time to another.

And so the story, that pseudo-soul deposited in ink on newsprint, dissolves itself away from being. It has become a fiction created by the village of public progress, by the label of development, and by the legitimization of modernity.

The story, the story-teller and I are one and the same- framed by the experience of fantasy, of the subconscious architectonics of "fictional" place, space and time. A poetic discourse of social construct; anti-experiential, non-participative, isolated, estranged. And to borrow an episode title from "Star Trek - the second generation" - "Lonely among us."

In looking at the news, and in looking at the study of news, we may again glean from Rustam and Norani's suggestion on the need to look into "Hamlet's looking glass": "You go not till I set you up a glass, where you may see the innermost part of you." And perhaps devolving from the "stranger" persona in us.

Meanwhile I continue to read the newspaper in celebration, in search for enlightenment. The conventions of meaning are elusive, like water slipping through fingers. "That's the flaw with words," (or news), Castaneda's Yaqui sorcerer says (or seems to tell me). "... they always force us to feel enlightened, but then when we turn around the world they always fail us and we end up facing the world as we always have, without enlightenment." And surely enough, the ant disappeared from sight, perhaps on the way asking itself: "Where am I going? (Back to the heaps of sawdust?)"

Notes

1. This paper attempts to construct the oneness of the research paradigm, the researcher and the subject of research as products of the built-environment. It extrapolates insights from Tuan (1977), Nasr (1972), and Izutsu (1964). Much of their thinking revolves around the notion of levels of reality in its interactions with symbols, knowledge and the environment. I am particularly attracted to the parallels between news and architectural space (see Tuan, 1977: 101 - 117).
2. I am inspired by Giblett's (1985) fiction/article "Watching TV, Watching Yourself: The Viewer and the Gaze," *Australian Journal of Cultural Studies*, 3 (1). Here the researcher is the object of study - the researcher discovering and being discovered.

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