

MEDIA WATCH

May 3 is World Press Freedom Day, a day proclaimed by the United Nations General Assembly in 1993, following the commemoration of the Windhoek Declaration two years prior - a statement of free press principles put together by the newspaper journalists in Africa during a UNESCO seminar in Namibia. It is a day for media professionals around the world to reflect on the issues of press freedom and professional ethics, with this year focusing on "Journalism without Fear or Favour". While the annual conference in The Hague, The Netherlands may have been deferred to October due to the ongoing pandemic, nevertheless, we celebrate the industry in our country that has been doing its journalistic job without fear or favour - going as far as compromising personal safety to deliver the latest and truest news to the general public.

TRICIA YEOH

AWAITING JUSTICE STILL

BY CELESTE GOH



THE BODY OF FORMAL POLITICAL AIDE

Teoh Beng Hock was found in the premise of Plaza Masalam in Shah Alam on July 16, 2009, having fallen from a window

of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) office on the 14th floor. This was following the custody he was brought into for questioning by the MACC the day prior, which allegedly lasted about nine hours, well into the wee hours of the morning.

Caught in the middle of this hubbub was Tricia Yeoh, who was then a research officer at the Chief Minister's office for the Selangor State Government. Merely six months into her job then, Yeoh was in charge of managing Teoh's case on behalf of the state government, and coordinating with Teoh's family, lawyers and the forensic pathologist team during the inquest.

When she left her position at the Chief Minister's office in 2011, the case of Teoh's mysterious death remained unresolved. According to Yeoh, it plagued her mind: "The case made an impact on me, because I was a personal aide to one of the state government leaders, [the then Selangor Chief Minister Tan Sri Khalid Ibrahim], just like him. The thought on many minds at the time was that 'it could have been me'. The fact that he was a young man full of hope, wanting to help a new state government that had just come into power in Selangor, was all the more tragic."

That very thought itself pushed Yeoh to apply for a grant from the Freedom Film Festival (FFF),

a 2003-established platform for filmmakers and activists to showcase and advocate their thought-provoking films to the Malaysian public. *The Rights of the Dead* premiered at the festival in 2012, a documentary directed by Yeoh herself, and produced by Pusat Komus.

"I felt that it was important to document the details of the case, so that it would continue to live on in the public's mind, especially for such a significant case that involved someone's death," Yeoh explains. "It was also important to me to highlight the way that federal government institutions at the time were used to advance certain political objectives, given that the Selangor government was controlled by a political coalition that was oppositional to the federal government."

In July last year, it was Teoh's 10-year death anniversary, and very much to the public's bafflement, the case remains open - even till this day. Five years after the 2014 Court of Appeal, which came to the verdict that "a person or persons were responsible for the cause of the incident, including MACC officers besides the detention," Selangor Police Chief Datuk Noor Azam Jamaludin has in November 2019 made a statement that Teoh's case will be reopened for further investigation; this time, with a special task force that involves the Criminal Investigation Department of Selangor, and the Bukit Aman Contingent offices.

Several public witnesses have been called to make their statements, including Yeoh, following her published column in the News Straits Times on the day of Teoh's death anniversary. Yeoh's career path may have led her to become the Chief Operating Officer of the Institute for Democracy and Economic Affairs (IDEAS), and presently, to pursue a PhD in politics at the University

of Nottingham Malaysia. She still keeps a vigilant eye on the case that was thrust upon her more than 10 years ago - despite being a mere side researcher, rather than a full-fledged investigative journalist.

WERE THERE ANY OBSTACLES DURING YOUR ANALYTICAL/INVESTIGATIVE PURSUIT OF THE CASE?

When I worked for the state government, the obstacles were plenty. Once, when I brought Thai forensic pathologist Dr Porntip Rojanasunan to Malaysia to assist on the case, I knew there were cars following us around. On the night after Teoh's body was exhumed for a second post-mortem, and after having dropped Dr Porntip back to her hotel, a car continued to tail me. I was not able to return home for a long time, fearing that they would know where I lived. Till this day, I am not sure who had hired them to follow me.

When I was doing research for the documentary in 2012, it was quite an emotional process, poring over the photos and case notes from three years earlier again. I remembered afresh the trauma of having worked in that same environment that eventually led Teoh to his demise. I even had several dreams about him, his family and the case during that time.

Otherwise, I have always been very careful in my work, making sure that whatever I say is accurate, and does not deviate from what the official reports have already stated. I'd ensure that proper procedures are followed: when

I interviewed MACC, I'd obtain the right letters, clearances and so on, making sure nobody is quoted out of context. These are the strict measures that someone operating in Malaysia must adhere to, especially in our highly politicised environment.

IT HAS BEEN MORE THAN 10 YEARS SINCE TEOH BENG HOCK'S DEATH, YET THE CASE REMAINS UNRESOLVED. HOW DOES THAT MAKE YOU, SOMEONE WHO HAS SPENT

HER TIME SEEKING POSTHUMOUS JUSTICE FOR HIM FEEL?

I must say that I am just a side researcher, and the family takes the hardest hit of all. That being said, I do feel very tired and frustrated. So many simple things could have easily been done, based on the good research of others like the Malaysian

Bar. In a way, the 2014 Court of Appeal's judgments have vindicated much of the work on the case. However, the case has not been "solved" as such, because no individual has yet been charged for any crime.

I am not sure how things will unfold from here on, except to call on the current government to ensure that the investigations reopened by the police in 2019 are done thoroughly to completion, and that they should reveal their next steps to the public. If the Court of Appeal ruled that "a person or persons" were

responsible for Teoh's death, the perpetrators need to be identified, and dealt with in accordance with the law.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE HARD-HITTING LIFE LESSONS YOU HAVE TAKEN AWAY FROM WORKING ON THIS CASE, WHETHER FOR YOUR CAREER AT THE STATE GOVERNMENT AND IDEAS, OR AS A HUMAN BEING IN GENERAL?

That essentially, we shouldn't expect life - and the various elements and forces that determine life's outcomes for us - to be fair. There are many things at work that determine a positive or negative outcome in life. Teoh's case just puts a strong emphasis on this, where the various government and political forces came together in a very tragic and unfortunate way.

At the same time, I also learned how to be savvy enough to deal with and manage very tense, sometimes opposing and multi-layered relationships with government bodies, which are not the easiest to understand. How to navigate, analyse, think about and manage relationships with complex bureaucratic institutions and political players - these have been important lessons for me, which have been very useful, not only for my work at IDEAS, but public policy research and advocacy in general.

"WHEN I WAS DOING RESEARCH FOR THE DOCUMENTARY IN 2012, IT WAS QUITE AN EMOTIONAL PROCESS... I REMEMBERED AFRESH THE TRAUMA OF HAVING WORKED IN THAT SAME ENVIRONMENT THAT EVENTUALLY LED TEOH TO HIS DEMISE"



Source: thestar.com.my

SARAWAK REPORT

GOING AGAINST
THE CURRECT

BY CELESTE GOH

DESPITE CLARE REWCASTLE-BROWN'S illustrious 18-year career in journalism, working at renowned networks in the United Kingdom, such as BBC, Sky News and ITV, her true calling was one that came from her birthplace in Sarawak, one that echoed halfway across the world since she was still in university.

"It was the period of rapid 'development', and I watched with my own eyes, how a careless and unsustainable 'gold rush' led an assault on our natural world and mass environmental destruction to the benefit of the few; the many, like the Sarawak natives, received little or nothing at all out of this so-called modernisation," she recalls. "Ever since the early 1980s, watching the scenes of Borneo burning on the news, I have considered this destruction of our living world as the biggest story of our lifetime, and one that is lamentably under-reported until very recently indeed."

After completing her tenure as a correspondent on ITV's *London Tonight* in 2002, Rewcastle's chance to finally devote her energy to the one issue that has been put on the back burner came, when in 2006, she was invited to speak at an environment and the media conference, where local journalists and environmental activists approached her to help with publicising the deforestation in Sarawak.

Sarawak Report was subsequently established in 2010, albeit anonymously at first. What started off as investigative reporting on the environment in Sarawak, quickly roped Rewcastle into the under-the-table corruption that has been walking hand-in-hand with the

country's politicians. Before long, Sarawak Report was deep down the rabbit hole, churning out a series of exposés in relations to the now infamous 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB) scandal - one of the first Malaysian media to do so, pitting her rather literally against "Public Enemy No. 1", former Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, who has since been hauled into court for funnelling billions from the state-owned fund.

"As a journalist of many years, I knew from the start that 1MDB had all the ingredients of a massive story that would highlight the wider issues I was so concerned about: how corruption is driving the destruction of our planet, and causing misery to billions of people who could thrive under better governance," Rewcastle says. "All journalists have an investigative instinct, and our job is to find out about things, and bring the information to the public. Finding out something

others want kept secret is the ultimate challenge; we need proper transparency in our decision-making process and accountability from those in positions of power."

WHAT WERE SOME OF THE OBSTACLES YOU FACED AS AN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST REPORTING ON MATTERS IN MALAYSIA, INCLUDING THE 1MDB SCANDAL?

I was very aware of the potential risks of exposing and criticising politicians and businesses that have made themselves secret

billionaires out of corrupt abuse of the people of Borneo; that was the reason why I wrote on Sarawak Report anonymously at first. Eventually, as the impact escalated, and I started receiving pushback and death threats in good measure, the advice became that I should state who I was, and challenge them in the open.

However, it also meant I was open to considerable vilification by highly paid professional operatives, hired to discredit me, and undermine my reporting against the corrupt political figures. It has made me a target for legal harassment, and private detective firms

and commercial investigators were hired to follow me and entrap me. On top of that, I have experienced multiple cyber attacks and hacking.

I have been banned from entering Sarawak, and my site was banned in Malaysia, as a result of the 1MDB exposés. Warrants were issued for my arrest under arcane Malaysian

laws that do not exist in the UK, and the former government even went as far as requesting for an Interpol Red Notice alert to have me arrested and extradited back to Malaysia to face charges.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE HARD-HITTING LIFE LESSONS YOU HAVE TAKEN AWAY REPORTING ON THE 1MDB SCANDAL, EITHER FOR YOUR CAREER AS AN INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALIST, OR AS A HUMAN BEING IN GENERAL?

It is important not to allow oneself to become unduly intimidated by bullies. If you know you are standing up for what is morally right, and in the public interest against wealthy but despicable, guilty people - then you have the stronger weaponry, not them. If you are going to put your life's energy into something, make sure it is something you consider to be worthwhile.

When an issue really matters to you, it is a far less difficult decision to stick to one's guns. **COMING FROM SOMEONE WHO HAS BEEN IN JOURNALISM FOR CLOSE TO 20 YEARS, HOW DO YOU THINK THE JOURNALISM INDUSTRY IS FARING IN MALAYSIA, ESPECIALLY IN THE INVESTIGATIVE BEAT?**

There appears to be no real agenda in the Malaysian media, when it comes to some of the more hard-hitting coverage like the 1MDB scandal. I suppose, that is owing to the history



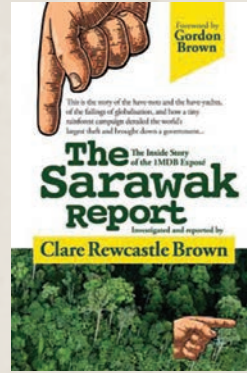
of danger in confronting the wealthy and powerful, and the dedication it calls for in time and effort to uncover the abuses of power, corruption, oppression and the rest. That being said, Malaysian journalists are subtly highlighting such issues where obvious corruptions are taking place, flagging them, and thereby drawing attention to them, without openly going so far as to criticise.

Journalists can always dive deeper into how a country is run differently in comparison to others, to the detriment of the public interest, and write about these comparisons to inform readers that things might not need to be as they are. The problem is not the lack of understanding, education or critical thinking, it is rather the timidity brought on by the authoritarian environment in which they work for. They do need to be bolder in challenging people in power, when their actions are

plainly so indefensible, otherwise such people will keep reckoning there is no penalty for doing such things.

WHAT DO YOU THINK THE LOCAL JOURNALISTS SHOULD START PRACTISING ON, LEST WE REVERT BACK TO OUR OLD WAYS WITH RESTRICTED PRESS FREEDOM?

There is a noticeable cultural tendency of deference towards the authority in Malaysia; whilst admirable in other ways, it can also weaken the ability of journalists to stand up to the rich and powerful. Obsequious use of titles and humble questioning are still trademarks in the country, compared to the UK or the US, where there is a clearer distinction between politeness and self-



abatement. Personally, I feel that this can put Malaysian journalists on a weaker footing when standing up for the public interest, and/or against powerful figures.

A lot can be done to encourage younger journalists to be mindful of their responsibility and the important role they play on behalf of citizens; they are the equal of the public servants they are questioning, and they should expect to also be treated with politeness and respect. The

previous authoritarian rule is at the heart of this problem, and young journalists need to look forward, not backwards, if they are going to play the crucial role of the fourth estate in a democratic nation ruled for the benefit of its wider citizenship.

R.A.G.E

YOUTH IS (NOT) WASTED ON THE YOUNG

BY CELESTE GOH

BY THE TIME IAN YEE took over the helm as editor for *The Star's* youth platform *RAGE* in 2013, he was at a crossroads. It was during a time when the country was in the midst of transitioning from traditional print media to the digital platform, and like the many news media halfway across the world in the early 2000s, Yee was faced with "a lot of those 'news aggregators', and their whole deal was to copy stories - most of the time, word for word - from news organisations."

He elaborates: "We would spend months

researching and investigating certain issues, and these sites would just swoop in, copy the entire text, rewrite a few paragraphs, and republish them on their websites with some super 'clickbait' headlines - it was some next level bullsh*t."

Yee was only 27 then, but he had to make a daunting decision for *RAGE's* future: while these so-called online news portals were pretty much stealing the team's backbreaking and time-consuming work, their numbers were high and people were coaxing *RAGE* to "if you can't beat them, join them".

In 2015, 10 years after the launch of the youth journalism platform under the editorship of Ivy Soon and Niki Cheong, Yee revamped *RAGE* into one that produces top notch investigative documentaries, going in a complete opposite direction from the aforementioned - without undermining what Soon and Cheong has taught Yee when he was just a freshie starting off his career in journalism.

"Even though *RAGE* was conceived as this almost teeny-bopper, college lifestyle product, [Soon and Cheong] were proper journalists," Yee says. "They constantly pushed us to use our platform for good, to create the kind of positive

impact that only a news organisation can, by taking on big issues like voting rights, freedom of speech, HIV awareness, disability rights, and so on."

"We want to remind Malaysians what real journalism can do: hold power to account, empower marginalised communities, and inspire change," he continues. "We decided we would no longer try to pander to what the older generation thought young people wanted, and focus on the big issues: human rights, politics, gender equality, social equality... everything we knew young people really care about, but just never had a platform to engage on."

Today, Malaysia can clearly see that *RAGE* has taken the right path in the name of proper, ethical journalism. Last year, the *RAGE* team piqued the interest of The Society of Publishers in Asia with its original documentaries *The Hidden Cut* and *Refugees No More*, winning the respective accolades for Excellence in Reporting on Women's Issues and Excellence in Journalistic Innovation at the organisation's SOPA Awards.

The *RAGE* team has won over 30 major awards since 2016, including the Asian Media Awards (AMA) for its investigative



Yee and fellow R.AGE journalists Claire Anthony (right) and Shanjeev Reddy

efforts in *Predator In My Phone* in 2017, as well as *Refugees No More* and *Student/Trafficked* in 2019. R.AGE was also the first-ever Malaysian team to be nominated in 2018 and 2019 for the prestigious Peabody Award, which has been honouring the most powerful, enlightening and invigorating stories in television, radio, and online media around the world for almost 80 years.

HOW WAS THE CREATIVE PROCESS LIKE FOR THE R.AGE TEAM?

We usually have a dozen on-going projects or investigations at any given time. Most of the time, it's a waiting game; you can't expect drug mule syndicates, child groomers, or human traffickers to pop up when you need them. While we wait for breakthroughs in one project, we'd work on the other dozen or so projects. Always, we have to be committed and agile enough to spring into action and push the investigation over the line.

It's definitely stressful, not just because it's a lot of work to handle, (every investigation involves tonnes of footage, transcripts, documents, notes... you name it), but particularly because we know how important and urgent all of these issues are.

In some cases, we have communities who are placing their hopes on us. Take *Predator In My Phone*, for example, [which the first episode finally saw the light of day in June 2016 after a six-month long investigation]. We knew who were the child sex predators, yet we

knew we had to get enough evidence, produce a solid documentary, and engage the right stakeholders before we could release the story. In the meantime, they would obviously still be out there.

All we can do is stay focused, and trust the process. We have to do our jobs right as journalists, to investigate thoroughly, and have a solid campaign strategy in mind so that we can make a proper impact.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY ARE SOME OF THE OBSTACLES IN CONDUCTING INVESTIGATIVE JOURNALISM?

Investigative journalism always comes with challenges and risks; it's just part of the job, and we do our best to assess and mitigate the risks with every operation we do. It's what investigative journalists do across the world, and frankly, many of them face far greater danger than we do here in Malaysia, and yet they persist. We are fairly fortunate here, and we'd be doing our profession a disservice if we didn't make the most of it.

Nevertheless, safety is everything for us. We are painfully aware of our limitations (we are a small outfit, after all), and we work within them. That's why we're always collaborating with trusted officials, police officers and activists, so we know exactly what we're getting ourselves into, and how we can get ourselves out of it, if needed.

Of course, we do get emotionally drained at times, but we have a great camaraderie in the team, which has been really crucial to our success. There's a special bond once you've worked

together on a few investigations, because you know you have each other's backs.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE HARD-HITTING LIFE LESSONS YOU HAVE TAKEN AWAY FROM WORKING IN R.AGE, EITHER FOR YOUR CAREER AS A JOURNALIST, OR AS A HUMAN BEING IN GENERAL?

The world needs more empathy. There are so many issues and conflicts in the world that

arise simply from our failure to understand how other people feel, and to spend even just a second in their shoes. We're lucky, because as journalists, empathy is something we're constantly forced to practise. Every interview is a chance to practise empathy skills, to really immerse yourself in what the other person is saying and feeling. When you do that, naturally, you start to relate better with others, and focus on the things you have in common, rather than the things that divide you.

WHAT IS YOUR PERSONAL OPINION ON THE JOURNALISM INDUSTRY IN MALAYSIA TODAY, ESPECIALLY IN THE INVESTIGATIVE BEAT?

There's that old saying: "people get the government they deserve", and I've heard plenty of editors say the same about the media. If society as a whole doesn't appreciate or support good journalism, you end up having lousy media. It's as simple as that. I know plenty of Malaysian journalists who would love to do more investigative work, but will the public appreciate it? Will they pay a subscription to support it? Because if they don't, media companies can't afford to fund the investigation in the first place.

Where Malaysian media is right now, and where we go from here is, for a large part, a reflection of our society. If we want to fix the media, there needs to be some fundamental, long-term changes in society, and we all have to play our part. We have to be prepared to pay for online news and investigative journalism. Stop mindlessly reading whatever clickbait headlines pull you on your feed, and start actively looking for proper news - and for the love of god, stop forwarding fake stories on WhatsApp! **AM**



Yee at the Leaders' Asia-Pacific convening, where he was selected as an Obama Foundation Leader in late 2019.