

# MALAYSIA'S ROLE IN NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: MEDIA POLICY AND NATIONAL STABILITY

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## ABSTRACT

*The role of the Malaysian media in shaping public opinions and perceptions about political, economic and social issues has long been the subject of study, speculation, accusations and debate. This is an area in media studies that may be problematic because it is an area where we are caught in between neat Western theories of freedom and democratization and the realities and demands of the local geo-political situation. With such a complex and colourful socio-political background, the journalistic theories of the West are at times at odds with the nation's media practices. This research attempts to clarify the Malaysian media system and its role in shaping the perceptions and opinions of the people. Alongside that, the advent of New Media and its impact and influence, on said opinions and perceptions will be looked into in depth, with an aim to determine the direction that the Malaysian Mass Media will be charting following this modern phenomenon.*

*Key words: media policy, national development, media roles, Malaysian press systems.*

## INTRODUCTION

The Ministry of Information in conjunction with the celebration of the World Development Information Day has requested a presentation that would describe the role of the media in national development. Media scholars and teachers would immediately register the preference for the terms "role of media and national development" as the representative model for the media system in Malaysia in accordance with the four theories of the Press, the seminal work of Siebert, Peterson and Schramm in 1956. Maybe, observers and critics of the Malaysian press would also see this choice of words as a defense mechanism against a general but a number of opinions about the state of the media in Malaysia and the country's position in the various ranking systems by the international media watch groups.

Any newspaper reader in Malaysia would by now realize that Malaysians have an obsession with knowing where they are in the international ranking systems, the most recent being the world rankings in the higher education sector. The media world too has a world class ranking system and in almost all, such as the Reporters without Borders and The Freedom House, Malaysian media is considered not quite free.

## **ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF AUTHORITY AND NATIONAL ORDER**

The role of the Malaysian media in shaping public opinions and perceptions about political, economic and social issues has long been the subject of study, speculation, accusations and debate. It is widely recognized that what we know, suspect, think and reflect about the world around us is shaped by how events around the globe and at home are reported, constructed in the newspapers and communicated through the medium of radio and television.

This is an area in media studies that may be problematic because it is an area where we are caught in between neat Western theories of freedom and democratization and the realities and demands of the local geo-political situation. Media education in Malaysian institutions of higher learning would be pursuing a curriculum that would consist of the study of the global ethic of journalistic theories and ideology introduced by Western scholars evolving from the ivory towers of European and American academia, which are often laden with Western prescriptions of new journalism discussing theories, models and paradigms that would sometimes be difficult for media educators in their attempt to describe local realities to fit into the moulds of Western theories and concepts.

The relationship between the media and national politics and the media's role in the national agenda remains a crucial and popular subject for media research. Educators would often try to teach students how to access, analyse and act on information urging them to think critically about information.

### **WESTERN PRESS THEORIES AND MALAYSIAN PRESS SYSTEM**

An academic study of the theory of the press would discuss the seminal work of the four theories of the press developed by Western media scholars based on their philosophy and their historical, political and cultural environments.

From such frameworks, media educators would then try to project such values into their discussions of the various press systems in the Asian contexts. Ongoing studies amongst postgraduate students in the Media Studies Department University of Malaya would include research on the Japanese, Korean, Indonesian, Chinese, Iranian, Nigerian, Saudi, Oman, Yemen and Algerian press systems, media organizations and media industries of those countries. Most of the time the central question is trying to define the relationship between media and politics. Another area of concern is whether the media system is free from government control or is it actually a servant of the state.

Needless to say our discussions, coming from such a diverse tower of Babel often slips into discussions about how cultural traditions often tended to contradict the Western concepts of media freedom and democracy. The relationship between media and the role of media in national affairs forms a central research question in the Department. Discussion almost always would touch on the role of the media as an instrument of policy by the Government and how the media continues to shape and reshape opinions and perceptions.

In Malaysia, the media system is an important agent of socio-political, economic and cultural change in our society. We are aware that its power, influence and impact has no limits and if wrongly managed may disrupt and destabilize our society. Therefore,

we in Malaysia must think hard and creatively about the role of media in bringing about stability and pushing towards making Malaysia a developed, strong and prosperous nation.

## PAST LEGACIES

The question of the role of the media system, especially in the print and broadcast news media dominated discussion at both national and international levels. Granted that the Malaysian media is still within the state-owned and state-controlled domain but to think that it is totally lacking in the efforts to strengthen our socio-cultural and ideological foundations is not doing justice to the state. The Malaysian media has to a certain extent assisted us to build confidence in the economy and faith in our values. The Malaysian Cultural Policy emphasizes the importance of producing cultural contents that enhance national identity, promote national integration and unity and maintain racial harmony. The media's role in building up pride in our history and our culture has generated respect and stature amongst the international community and especially among the developing countries.

With Independence in 1957 the Malaysian government seeks directions for ethnic management and as an independent country the young Malaysian nation had to come to terms on all aspects of inter-community relations as well as the commitment to nation-building and in ensuring peaceful co-existence of the multiracial population.

There is an urgent need to form a consensus among the ethnic groups about the character of the nation. There is also a need for consensus among all communities for the spirit of give and take, sharing of power and empowering all ethnic and religious groups.

Thus much of our early history is about how our government and society seeks to address and manage our diversity and we all are too well aware of the fact that managing a society with different ethnic groups, religions and cultures is a demanding task.

Researchers have often referred to this management of the demanding political situation in Malaysia as one that appears similar to the consociational model. Development plans in Malaysia are often drawn up with a nagging and obsessive reminder of the objectives of maintaining political stability and managing the divisive nature of the heterogeneous society. It was pretty daunting and the subject of ethnic relations remained as an obsession until this very minute.

Thus it may be concluded that throughout the 1990s and well into the millennium, impressive progress has been charted and delivered in terms of the transformation of the structure of the economy and the betterment of life of every Malaysian regardless of ethnicity.

However, despite a promising start, it is noted that Malaysians are now exhibiting signs of polarization along ethnic and religious lives. There are social movements triggering a change in our thinking. This may be detected in the media, in the interaction between our minds, transforming us all in what was referred by Castells (2000) as "mass self communications." Half of the world's population is now connected through the wireless communication, forming a mass self-communication.

## MODELS IN THE MEDIA SYSTEMS

There are various ways to typify the roles of media. Scholars such as Currans (2000) identified four types. The first type is represented by Russia, a system of media domination by the economic elite who control private media and fund political candidates while the second model is represented by countries such as South Korea, Taiwan and Malaysia (Chan, 2002). In this model, the leading group is the political elite who have considerable influence through the media. The third model is represented by the media system in some Latin American countries while the fourth model belongs to the typical liberal corporatism in contemporary Europe, especially Sweden and Britain. As mentioned earlier, the main school of thought describes the four theories of the press to describe the media systems in the West. More and more scholars (Merrill, Neuron, and Hachten) have problems in trying to fit the Asian media systems into such moulds especially when Asia is undergoing such tremendous change, especially in political and economic reforms. De Beer and Merrill (2004) raised the importance of the family in the Asian ideology, quoting the former Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew who attributed the success of countries like Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia to the fact that the societies there have the "obedience to authority, hard work, and family savings and education..." (Fukuyama, 1999).

One particular attempt introduced the concept of developmental journalism where the media is seen as a prime mover in nation-building. The problem is that this theory outed the government's role in controlling the media by claiming that all is done for the sake of nation-building. The international media watch group, The Freedom House identified the Japanese and the Korean presses as two role models of the libertarian press within the western concept of free and liberal press. Japan and Korea received very good rankings and it is thought as that it represent proof of Asian nations reflecting the concepts of Western democracy.

A South Korean PhD candidate in the Department is currently working on the press systems of South Korea and Malaysia and this thesis is eagerly awaited mainly with the intention of putting the Korean system through the magnifying glass. Does it really reflect a Western-style democracy or does it exhibit what is speculated as a hybrid form, a sort of a harmonization between the Western and Asian models. De Beer and Merrill (2004) observed that Japan and South Korea may have the best trained journalists but they "would rather choose to respect the government and big business..."

However Malaysia and Singapore are seen as countries that are not high scorers in the global press freedom ranking. As a matter of fact the media systems in Singapore, Brunei and Malaysia have been identified as the authoritarian presses in Asia. Means, (1996), uses the term, Soft Authoritarianism. The Malaysian government has maintained that Malaysia is a unique case due to its challenges as a nation with different ethnicities, religions and languages. Former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir Mohamed described the demanding nature of the Malaysian scenario in his book (2001:38):

Malaysia had been independent for 43 years – not a very long time for a country. During that time we had managed to keep the country peaceful despite the explosive mix of Malays, Chinese and Indians each professing incompatible religions.

It is therefore not surprising that the former Prime Minister believes in the social role of the media.

The Malaysian government had on many occasions recalled the need to respect the Asian values and cultural traditions as well as the demands from the geo-political realities of the nation, thus dismissing the labels given by the international media watch groups.

According to the late Tan Sri A Samad Ismail, who was appointed as Guest Lecturer in the Department of Media Studies from 1986-1989,

*Adalah mudah sekali memperkatakan bahawa hanya akhbar yang bebas sahaja yang berkemampuan menjadi akhbar yang berkesan. Soalnya, adakah akhbar sahaja yang telah menjamin kestabilan dan kemakmuran yang kita nikmati semenjak tahun 1957? Yang sebenarnya, yang menjadikan negara kita stabil selama 32 tahun ini ialah intipati politik kita ataupun "watak kebangsaan" kita, bukan akhbar bebas per se.*

(It is easy to claim that only a free press would be able to become an effective press. The question to ask here is whether only a free press would be able to ensure stability and peace that we had enjoyed since 1957? The truth of the matter is that our country had been stable for the last 32 years due to our intrinsic political values, or our "national character", not the free press per se).

## MALAYSIAN SOCIETY AND MEDIA SYSTEM IN TRANSFORMATION

Society is always undergoing a state of constant change. Therefore there is never a state of a fixed relationship between any one social group and the mass media (Throwler, 1999). In Malaysia too we witnessed the time when the country faces the onslaught of the waves of globalization of the media and anxiously monitored the impacts on the audience and the market-place. We saw the transformation of and the fluid nature of identity as well as the social construction of meanings. Some may choose to see it as the world is getting smaller and cultures are beginning to be homogenized while others rejoice in the plurality of forms. Some feared for the people, especially the young who are exposed to huge bombardment of foreign media content, images and politics.

The Government needs to think about these new kinds of transformations, maybe by reinventing a new kind of politics to deal with new challenges in all its complexity.

Another form of transformation in the Malaysian context is the rapid development of communication technology which supports the development of the mass media. From an earlier role of providing news, media is now an educational tool, strengthening the needs of an information and knowledge society. In the universities, the media contribute to the transformation of society to advance stages of knowledge and scholarship. We just need to continuously remind ourselves that in order for the media to continue to contribute to the development of the Malaysian society, and the transformation to an Infocomm society, the media must remain true to the spirit of the freedom of the press, free-flow of information and pro-social content and freedom to access and acquire information in order to create and disseminate knowledge.

## WHAT IS IN THE FUTURE?

After WWII, television became a powerful new media and broadcast television became a powerful political apparatus, used to garner support and deliver the votes. Today, Malaysia has again entered a new and important era, the introduction of the Internet which is more transformative than earlier forms of broadcast journalism. We heard so much about media convergence and the fact that the Internet, satellite television, transmission to cell phones, MP3 players and email brings so many capabilities to media that has never been seen before.

It is able to capture individual viewers, bringing interaction and instant feedback from the audience, an important subject of this Forum too. This thus presents a challenge to the media industry. Google, as an example, sold more than USD6 billion advertisements and in 2007, Goggle's advertising revenues is estimated at USD11.8 billion.

Therefore the new media has the ability to displace the old status quo through its avenues of open communication, just like Castell's mass self-communication amongst the people, empowering them with the ability to be outside the control of the power centre or dominant ideology, or the elite owners of the media.

## CONCLUSION

For the first time, the *Barisan Nasional* (National Coalition) lost two-thirds parliamentary majority and the control of five state assemblies. Despite this loss and the recession that is believed to hit all of us, Malaysia's economic prospects remain healthy. Since Independence, Malaysia has achieved a number of national development goals as well as the Millennium Development Goals set by UN.

Today, Malaysia's development is still guided by the Vision 2020. Our Prime Minister has added on new growth corridors, the NCER, IDR and ECER to the MSC.

Alongside all these blueprints, the Malaysian media too play a leading role in building the Infocomm society. The Malaysian conventional print, audio and visual media play a crucial role in developing the transmission of data and information to the Malaysian public.

But change, transition, transformation and shifts in the status quo appear to be words that stay on in our minds and the government knows that Website servers move and shift about all over the globe. The power centre should then think about how the new media and civic journalism is taking a firm grip in the urban centres and might be eventually powerful enough to capture the imaginations of the masses.

More and more choices in the information landscape are offered to the masses. What then should the government agencies do to ensure a continuing presence and acceptability in the landscape? To remain in terms of engagement with the masses, the government should be mindful of at least the following current demands:

- i. Provision of real-time information on demand, from anywhere and any time.
- ii. The Internet provides open content and open communication, transparency.

iii. To reach and focus on the individual at any time at any place.

iv. Be the first to provide real-time and latest deadlines, old news are dead news!

But at the same time too, the two well-known international media watch groups that provide ranking of media freedom has consistently regarded Malaysia as an offender of press freedom as shown in the following tables:

**Freedom of Press World Ranking**

Free	74
Partly Free	58
Not Free	63
Total:	195

Malaysia : 150 out of 195

The Freedom House, 2007

**Reporters without Borders for Press Freedom, 2006**

169 Countries

Malaysia: 92  
Singapore: 168

Reporters without Borders, 2006

So, coming back to an earlier point of the hybrid nature of the Malaysian profile and as a final reminder to all I would like to present an international ranking that may show the dichotomous nature of development of the Malaysian media and the socio-politico-economic scenario.

**KOF Index of Globalization 2007**

- 1. Belgium
- 16. Singapore
- 23. Malaysia
- 59. Thailand
- 78. Indonesia

**KOF Economic Globalization Index 2007**

- 1. Luxembourg
- 2. Singapore
- 35. Malaysia
- 66. Thailand

80. Albania

#### **KOF Political Globalization Index 2007**

- 1. France
- 27. Malaysia
- 37. Indonesia
- 49. Thailand
- 76. Singapore

#### **KOF Social Globalization Index 2007**

- 1. Austria
- 2. Singapore
- 36. Malaysia
- 78. Thailand
- 96. Indonesia
- 122. Myanmar

\* The KOF Index of Globalization was introduced in 2002 and was created by Konjunkturforschungsstelle der ETH Zürich ETH Zentrum WEH. It measures economic, social, and political dimensions of globalization providing free access to country rankings and data on economic flows, economic restrictions, personal contact, information and idea flows. The three dimensions above are indicators for:

- i. Economic globalization, characterized by long distance flows of goods, capital and services, information and perceptions that accompany market exchanges.
- ii. Political globalization, showing the diffusion of government policies.
- iii. Social globalization, indicating the flow of ideas, information, images and people.

This paper has attempted to show the interplay between media, social, political, cultural and economic structures in the local Malaysian flavour. There are winners and there are losers. Malaysian history is replete with legacies of the past and Malaysian mass media policy makers and opinion formers need to make enlightened responses to the new demands.



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