

Country report on Malaysia

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By

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SEMINAR: MASS MEDIA AND SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHANGE

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PAPER: COUNTRY REPORT ON MALAYSIA

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Seminar on Mass Media & Socio-Economic Change

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Some Background

A comprehensive history of the mass media and communication arts in Malaysia yet remains to be written. However, with the development of the mass communication programmes introduced since the early seventies in at least three institutions of higher learning (Universiti Sains Malaysia, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia and MARA Institute of Technology) we may expect such a valuable reference material to become available in the not-too-distant future. Likewise, we hope and pray that through the agency of these institutions more and better trained communication practitioners, teachers, researchers and administrators will emerge to meet the present acute demand-and-supply situation.

Meanwhile a very brief sketch of the background, historical or otherwise, of the various branches of the communication arts in Malaysia might prove useful in providing us with a better perspective of the Seminar discussions to follow on the theme of "Mass Media and Socio-Economic Change".

As a nation, Malaysia is still young, having just celebrated its 15th birthday on 31st August 1978. Previously, the states of Malaysia were under British rule, some of them for over 80 years. In 1957, the 11 states in West Malaysia became independent and were known as the Federation of Malaya. In 1963, Sabah, Sarawak and Singapore joined the Federation, which was henceforth known as the Federation of

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Malaysia. When Singapore separated in 1965, there were 13 states left.

There are two unique features about Malaysia, the first being its multi-racial composition and the second being the physical and cultural differences between East and West Malaysia. Both these features have had a close relationship with the origin, development and current status of the mass media in Malaysia. For example, the existing print media in Malaysia use the languages of the different ethnic groups and reflect their interests. It is also worth noting that the level of mass media penetration, development and sophistication is higher in West Malaysia than in East Malaysia.

In Malaysia, the three major communication media - print, electronic and film - have significantly stepped up their roles as agents of change, to inform, educate, motivate and entertain, each in its own way with differing style, degrees of intensity and, success.

a. The Print Media - the oldest:

Indeed clearly, the print media enjoy the longest history of mass communication existence in this country, dating back to the early nineteenth century with the emergence of such "newspapers" (if they can be so called) as the Chinese Monthly Magazine first published in Malacca in 1815, and the English-language Penang Gazette founded in 1838.

Subsequently over the years more English and vernacular-language newspapers, closer to the present day definition of the Press, came into print. The English-language press in Malaysia, as in many other Asian countries, came with the colonizers and, before 1957, it served the interest of Imperial Britain more than that of the general public underservably.

Because of the unique plural character of Malaysia's population, the local press tends to develop along multi-lingual and faintly racial lines, with newspapers available in the four major languages spoken in the country: Malay (the national and official language), English, Chinese and Indian. Other dialects for smaller minority groups also exist as, for example, in Punjabi

and Kadazan (a dialect of Sabah), the latter in the form of a daily supplement rather than a separate newspaper.

Infrastructure facilities in Malaysia are reasonably well developed to the extent that newspapers produced in the national capital (Kuala Lumpur) more often than not become available even in the smaller towns of mainland Malaysia and in the State capitals of Sabah and Sarawak by the same afternoon. Telecommunication facilities (phone, telex and teleprinter) including satellite links spanning the South China Sea between Peninsular Malaysia and Sabah/Sarawak also keep the 13 states of Malaysia in close and daily contact with one another.

Media "hardware" too have advanced to a fair degree of sophistication with offset and colour-printing firms. One newspaper group (The New Straits Times) has already adopted for some time now the latest technique in copy editing - using computerisation and the electronic screen.

To date, Malaysian dailies total 36, weeklies (actually Sunday editions) 10, bi-weekly and fortnightly publications one each - all private sector efforts. This number is separate from the daily bi-lingual outputs of Malaysia's national news agency BERNAMA and from 141 other regular periodicals of a generally educational, informative and entertainment nature published in the four major Malaysian languages on a weekly, bi-weekly, monthly, quarterly, bi-annually and annual basis. Without exception all these publications - dailies and periodicals alike - are required to carry a printing permit renewable annually called the KDN - abbreviation for Kementerian Dalam Negeri (Malay for the Ministry of Home Affairs which licenses all publications meant for public sale and consumption). Non-renewal of a KDN usually means cessation of the periodical concerned. Malaysian publishers have always considered this constraint unnecessary and have agitated against it on and off for quite some time now.

The state of financial health and, therefore, of physical progress and development of the average Malaysian newspaper and to some extent other periodicals too depends largely on advertising revenue rather than on street sales. In Malaysia apparently, the larger the established

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circulation figure, the higher the advertising rates chargeable and the more viable becomes the publication concerned. Like any other business, the saying "success breeds success" also applies to the communication industry.

b. BERNAMA - unique and non-profit-making

BERNAMA - Malaysia's national news agency - became operational as a non-profit-making statutory body in 1968 with policy-decision invested in a Board of Governors drawn from the Malaysian press and Government mass media in equal number. The Board is headed by a Chairman jointly appointed by both parties. It is, therefore, a unique cooperative venture between the Malaysian press and the Government mass media (principally Radio and Television Malaysia) all paying subscription fees to BERNAMA which provides a daily news service in Malay and English via teleprinter.

Apart from having an office or bureau in every State capital in the country, BERNAMA also operates a foreign correspondent office in Jakarta and Bangkok. Its plan to cover the ASEAN sub-region news-wise will become complete when an office is set up in Manila next year and if the Singapore Government approves BERNAMA's application to start a similar office in the island Republic.

Like any other news agencies and newspapers, BERNAMA supplements its regular staff with stringers located in virtually every district in the country.

In Malaysia, the international wire services (REUTER, AP and UPI) freely sell their news directly to local subscribers thus in a way competing with BERNAMA. In the case of the Agence France-Presse, BERNAMA has contracted to sell and distribute AFP world news - general as well as economic - to local clients.

BERNAMA's plan for physical expansion includes a Photo Service next year and Radio Teletype Service (RTT) within three years for overseas news transmission purpose.

e. The Electronic Media: a Government monopoly

The most significant mass media development of the century is in the broadcasting field - radio and TV. This is especially so since the 1950's when the impact of solid-state technology (transistorisation) resulted in cheap and portable radio receiving sets proliferating thus revolutionising mass communication. It leads to the concept of the "Global Village" when people the world over were enabled to enjoy one another's news, views and culture instantly at virtually little or no extra cost.

Before World War II, Malaysia already had some form of radio broadcasting of low power when the Malayan Wireless Society began thrice weekly transmissions from Petaling Hill, Kuala Lumpur, on 325 meters mediumwave in 1930-31, and when Station ZHJ of the Penang Wireless Society broadcast daily in Malay, Tamil, Chinese and English on 49.3 meters shortwave.

With the conquest of Malaysia (called "Malaya" then) by the Japanese military, broadcasting was developed professionally as an instrument of Japanese propaganda, with radio stations located at Penang, Kuala Lumpur, Seremban and Malacca and the transmitter power raised to a respectable 10 Kilowatts.

With the return of the British colonial administration and the beginning of the 12-Year Emergency (1948-1960) involving Communist terrorism, radio broadcasting especially after the 1957 Merdeka year began to develop rapidly. More stations and higher-powered transmitters ranging up to 750 kilowatt strength were installed and the broadcast hours and programme variety greatly extended to cater to all tastes and sections of the community. Today Radio Malaysia's transmission hours in 13 languages and dialects on a national, overseas, regional and local broadcast scale (including FM Stereophonic Service and regular programmes for schools) total nearly 1,000 hours a week. Its blanket coverage with overlapping mediumwave, shortwave and FM signals can be described as total and pervasive.

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Television came to Malaysia late in 1963 with a black-and-white 625 line system on a one-network and four-language basis initially. A second network soon followed in 1969. Presently the bulk of the country including the more populated areas of Sabah and Sarawak, linked via satellite and an extensive microwave network system, are exposed to Television signals. Colour transmission on the PAL system is scheduled to start in December this year.

Radio and TV services in Malaysia, owned and operated solely by Government, are placed under the portfolio of the Ministry of Information which also controls the Department of Information Services and Film Negara Malaysia (Malaysian Film Unit). A recent 1977 survey by a private sector agency reported Radio Malaysia's daily audience at 5,088,000 and TV Malaysia's at 5,235,000 in a country of less than 12,000,000 people.

d. The Film Media - still not fully developed.

The film industry in Malaysia is a post-World War II phenomenon, begun by private companies (initially Shaw Brothers and Cathay Organisation in the case of feature films) and by the Government's own Malayan Film Unit in the case of documentary and publicity-type films. It is still beset with problems consistent with a somewhat painful period of adolescent growth, especially in the creative field.

Film output is still desultory and low in the case of feature films but there have been promising signs of growing sophistication in acting and production which augur well for this industry. Renewed interest in film-going among Malaysians now enjoying a relatively high-standard of living and exposed to a daily diet of syndicated TV programmes have something to do in kindling this development. The film advertising industry too has begun to be lucrative and competitive. It may well provide the necessary impetus to a more vigorous growth in the feature film industry as a whole. There are still abundant subjects and materials not to say talent in Malaysia ready for film exploitation.

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e. Public Relations - a late starter.

Public Relations is the youngest and as yet smallest mass communication industry in Malaysia. It may not remain so for long due to its beginning to be recognised by local organisation - both Government and private alike - as an essential ingredient in successful dealing with the public and in corporate image projections. Presently there is a national Institute of Public Relations set up in 1962 to look after the professional interests of its practitioners, drawing up guidelines and a code of conduct and providing local information and training for the industry as a whole.

f. Advertising - also relatively new

Though advertising has existed in Malaysia for some time, its development into an organised branch of the mass communication industry is relatively new. Presently there are some 50 advertising agencies and counsellors mostly Malaysian-owned. However, the big advertising agencies are foreign-owned or are local branches of foreign-based international agencies. There are two organisations looking after the interests of advertising agencies, namely the Malaysian Association of Advertisers and the Association of Accredited Advertising Agencies.

Government Mass Media - intense and pervasive

As stated earlier, the Ministry of Information operates and coordinates all Government mass media activities through its three main departments: of Broadcasting (Radio and TV Malaysia - the most pervasive), of Information Services (organising Government exhibitions, distributing pamphlets, obtaining feedback, operating Mobile Units, etc) and Filem Negara Malaysia. Its multi-media objectives are described briefly as follows:

- (a) to explain in depth and with the widest possible coverage the policies and programmes of the Government,
- (b) to stimulate public interest and opinion in order to bring about

- (c) to assist in promoting civic consciousness and fostering the development of Malaysian arts and culture, and
- (d) to provide suitable material for popular education, general information and entertainment.

In recent years emphasis has been given by the Ministry to programmes designed to help bring about the desired social change. To achieve this, increasing attention is being given to development-support communication. The machinery of all three departments is geared towards promoting national unity in keeping with the principles of RUKUNEGARA - the national ideology, ensuring that the people are fully aware of the aims and objectives of the Third Malaysia Plan and New Economic Policy and, finally, encouraging the people's participation in the various measures undertaken by the Government to help achieve the goals of national development.

The Third Malaysia Plan (1966-1980) and New Economic Policy

The central theme of socio-economic change in Malaysia, as far as the Government and its machinery are concerned, revolves on the New Economic Policy. A brief explanation of the NEP and its implications is, therefore, relevant.

A major assault on poverty, a vigorous and continuous effort in the task of restructuring society as well as strengthening Malaysia's national security are the triple thrusts of the Third Malaysia Development Plan involving a projected expenditure of M\$18.5 billion by Government and M\$26.5 billion by the private sector.

The New Economic Policy enunciated as an aftermath of the serious racial riots of May 13, 1969, and re-emphasised in the Third Five-Year Plan, aims at eradicating poverty among all Malaysians irrespective of race (whether of Malay, Chinese or Indian ethnic origin), and at restructuring society.

Restructuring aims at eliminating the present identification of racial groups with economic functions. Generally speaking, in present-day Malaysia, slightly more than half of the population i.e. the Bumiputras (Malays and other Indigenous people) comprising the poorer racial group, are engaged in agriculture. The other but more affluent half, Malaysians of Chinese and Indian origin especially the former, are to be found in the more lucrative manufacturing, industrial, professional and business fields of urbanised society. The New Economic Policy, therefore, places great emphasis on the need to redress socio-economic imbalance within the Malaysian society at the earliest possible without depriving any racial group in the process. Its basic objective is the creation of a socio-economic environment in which a united nation (though multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious) would evolve out of the daily interaction of Malaysians of all races in all sectors of the economy across the geographical regions of the country. There is, fortunately, an abundance of inter-racial goodwill and tolerance in Malaysia, very much more so than in say Northern Ireland, Lebanon and Ethiopia.

Communication Problems related to the New Economic Policy

Planned development through public sector spending aimed at correcting imbalance and restructuring society will tend to initially accentuate rather than reduce these imbalances. The initial benefits from the construction of multi-million dollar irrigation schemes, for example, will accrue to urban entrepreneurs and construction workers before they benefit the rural poor for whom these schemes are meant. On the same basis, it can be expected that efforts to urbanise and integrate the Bumiputras into the mainstream of modern economic society would also benefit the other communities first.

This process of planned public sector spending affects the speed of restructuring. It is important to understand and emphasise this. Otherwise the Malays and other indigenous people will become embittered because they

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are not receiving what they have been promised, while other Malaysians will also be embittered because the emphasis on the development of the Bumiputras deflects their sights from the benefits they themselves are already receiving from the implementation of these schemes. In the atmosphere so created, the whole purpose of the New Economic Policy will be retarded or reduced to nothing.

To explain away all these apparent contradictions to the people convincingly will certainly tax the entire machinery and talent of the Malaysian communication system. Hence in Malaysia, perhaps more than anywhere else in the world, national development and communication go hand in hand.

The Rural and Agricultural Sector

While poverty is found in both urbanised and rural societies nevertheless it is more prevalent, as elsewhere in the world, in the rural areas.

In multi-racial Malaysia, agriculture is considered the most important single sector - economically, socially and politically. It contributes over 45% of foreign exchange earnings with Malaysia as the world's biggest producer of natural rubber, palm oil and pepper. It employs nearly 50% (1,900,000) of the total work force....but, ironically, accounts for the highest incidence of poverty in the country.

About 69% of all poor Malaysian households (earning less than M\$200 a month) are engaged in agricultural pursuits with Bumiputras (Malays and other indigenous people) predominating. It is essentially in the rural area, therefore, that subversive and anti-national elements will find it easier to make headway.

To correct this socioeconomic imbalance, the Malaysian Government has allocated M\$4.7 billion to agriculture under the present Third Five-Year Development Plan (1976-1980), an increase of 98% over the Second Five-Year Plan (1971-1975).

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And as Malaysia will continue to be an agricultural society for a long time in spite of her present vigorous efforts at industrialisation, it is the rural area which necessarily demands all out remedial efforts at correcting socio-economic imbalances.

Media Role

While the Government media machinery in Malaysia is heavily committed to nation-building efforts as indicated earlier in this brief Report, private sector media are less energetic understandably. Nevertheless most are acutely aware of their social responsibility in a heterogeneous society and have acted positively and constructively as voluntary "protectors" of the environment, of the needy and distressed, publicly pointing out acts of discrimination, injustice, vandalism and other social ills, while going along with Government in its campaign against drug abuse and the rising crime rate.

The Malay-language press and its editorial policy are generally geared to the rural audience and, therefore, more aligned to Government thinking especially so in terms of the New Economic Policy. The English language press appears to address itself to the interest of a broader multi-racial and more sophisticated urban readership. The Chinese language and Indian-language press, on the other hand, continue to cater for their respective audience, less sophisticated than the English educated perhaps but, in the case of Chinese-speaking readers, generally more affluent and business-minded. One significant and snowballing development is the unifying force of increasing use and understanding of the national language by non-Malay citizens resultant from the present education and official correspondence policy. More and more non-Malays are reading Malay-language newspapers and periodicals now than ever before. It may result in the Malay-language press undergoing a fundamental change in its present character and policy.

Another vital point to note is that most if not all newspapers and periodicals observe the importance of promoting national unity, religious tolerance and inter-racial goodwill... mindful of the possibility of a

second May 13 (racial riots) otherwise. As such, news with racial undertones is carefully scrutinised and edited in this context.

A relatively new and apparently common ground for active press attention in present day Malaysia is consumer protection and education - perhaps as a contribution to fighting down inflation among other things. Several newspapers in almost all languages carry regular consumer columns apart from news items. The consumer movement is in fact gathering momentum and getting better organised and coordinated with multi-media support and consumer associations actively promoting it. This might be one of the reasons why Mr. Anwar Fazal of Malaysia - a very active consumerist - has been elected the first Asian to become President of the IOCU (International Organisation of Consumers' Union) with headquarters at The Hague.

Another discernible new development is multi-media support for ecological protection and preservation to improve the quality of life in Malaysia. The Endau-Rompin Tropical Rain Forest issue was a near-classic "Ombudsman" case of the local press and other media successfully agitating against logging companies working out their timber concessions there. Radio and TV Malaysia too entered into the fray.

What constraints?

The requirement of KDN (printing permit) renewal annually has been mentioned earlier. Perhaps it may now be necessary to mention about Freedom of the Press - more a Western concept and interpretation than otherwise.

There is no specific reference to Freedom of the Press in Malaysia's present constitution, but there is provision for freedom of speech and expression which, by judicial decisions, includes freedom of the press and circulation.

But, as elsewhere in the world, this freedom is not absolute and by the very special nature of Malaysia's pluralistic society (multi-racial, multi-cultural, and multi-religious) and the fact that the immigrant races

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almost equal the native population numerically, certain laws and amendments to the laws and to the Constitution have become necessary to limit this freedom. The Constitution, for instance, has been amended to restrict freedom of speech and expression on certain sensitive issues such as the national language, the status of the Malay Rulers, the special position of "Bumiputras" (Indigenous or native population) and the legitimate interests of the other races - Malaysians of Chinese, Indian and other ethnic origins. The Sedition Act has been amended to restrict speech and expression inciting hostile feelings between races and religions. There are also as elsewhere in the world laws governing libel and slander. and in Malaysia the controversial Internal Security Act relating to subversives and subversive publications exists. But even within such a restricted framework that the media are allowed to operate, there is plenty of scope for the Malaysian journalists to carry out objective and faithful reporting of events and issues and to criticise official policies and programmes affecting public and national interests.

Multi-media exercise

In Malaysia regrettably there are as yet very few opportunities for media practitioners, teachers, researchers and managers to meet periodically, if not regularly, the better to share thoughts, ideas and experiences. Such an attempt is being planned by the Malaysian Press Institute and hopefully responses from those concerned will result in Malaysian communicators benefitting mutually from such contact and exposure. The publication of a regular multi-media periodical for Malaysia devoted to technical and professional upliftment seems to be overdue.

Conclusion

The general picture of the state of the mass media and communication arts in Malaysia is very encouraging on the whole. Legal and other constraints do exist but these are more in the nature of challenges which communication practitioners and administrators will exercise their judgement and talent to overcome. As in other worthwhile and rapidly expanding professions, communicators in the various mass media fields need to constantly update their knowledge and skill, hence the need for higher training and exposure to modern thinking and techniques to keep up with the times.