

## Mass communications in Malaysia

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MASS COMMUNICATIONS IN MALAYSIA

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Malaysia is fortunate enough to be able to muster and utilise technological innovations of the mass media not merely to keep up with the Joneses, but really to keep up with the times in an honest-to-goodness manner as a developing and progressive nation. Whether the media as such has been used for ill or well and whether it is effective or otherwise in discharging its responsibility are not plainly academic or difficult questions to answer. But the answers should necessarily take into account political, economic, social and cultural realities and aspirations of the country. In the circumstances, the outcome can only be view points with varying degrees of accuracy or honesty depending on the examiner. That assumption is not necessarily an excuse for lapses in subjective or descriptive assessments in this paper on mass communications in Malaysia.

The older mass communications institutions like the newspaper and radio apparently came to be introduced for no particular social or political purpose or objective. The first newspaper which came into being around the middle of the last century seems to have been introduced more as a viable business venture rather than an organ for social development. Radio broadcasting was begun in Penang in the 1930s as a hobby only to be developed for propaganda and other purposes by the Japanese and subsequently by the British Military Administration after the Second World War and later by the Civil Administration to fight the communist terrorist insurgency at the psychological front

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during the 12 year emergency of 1948-60. Other conventional media instruments which developed in prolific numbers at this time were weeklies, dailies, monthlies, fortnightlies, journals and the like not only in the four main languages, viz, Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil, but also in other languages like Punjabi, Telugu etc. These, of course, had purpose and direction because of an increasing awareness of the political, social, economic and cultural needs of the communities to which the papers addressed themselves to in a changing Malaysia, as was the case supposed to be with TV when it was introduced in December 1963.

It is within the time scale of 1948-60 that there seems to have grown a recognition of the potency of the media for the promotion of ideas and activities of government and other institutions. That this was a wide based recognition is seen in the strengthening of the government department of information, its broadcasting services and a stepped up development in the information, publicity and public relations wings of established institutions and the decided search and use of consultancy services in this field by all and sundry. While it would be proper to evaluate the activities of all or some of them, any such attempt will require an exhaustive study of the media and the institutions that used them. Anything short of it would be a pretension and it would therefore be safer to discuss in rather general terms the development of media in the country.

#### Government Mass Media

The National Film Department and the Departments of Broadcasting (Radio and Television) and Information are the three operational departments within the Ministry of Information, the central agency for the regulation of mass

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media activities of the government. But all the same, there are an assortment of publicity, public relations and psychological relations and information wings in various government departments and agencies which are also involved in some general way with mass media work. But such work, it appears, does not get coordinated at any level probably because these units or wings have been specifically established within departments or ministries to serve the immediate organisations within which they are located.

Radio Malaysia was among the earliest components of the Department of Broadcasting in 1946. The Department has now within its fold Television Malaysia which was introduced and established as a separate department in 1963. In its early days, indeed until 1959, (2 years after independence) it was a Pan Malayan Organisation administered from Singapore. Although it was developed into a powerful propaganda arm of the government, particularly during the communist insurgency of 1948-60, the implications of being administered from Singapore were so obvious that it was eventually and rightly torn of that relationship and brought under the government of Malaysia. From then on it grew to be a substantially large organisation. Regional Stations were developed in Penang, Ipoh, Melaka and Kota Bharu in the first instance, and then in Kuat<sup>n</sup><sub>A</sub>, Kuala Trengganu and Johore Bharu by 1967. In the interim period, with the establishment of Malaysia, it merged with Radio Sabah and Radio Sarawak to be what is now known as Radio Malaysia.



In West Malaysia the broadcasts are mainly in 4

languages:

Malay	236 hours 17 minutes per week
English	116 " 10 " "
Chinese (Mandarin, Cantonese, Amoi, Hakka)	126 " 48 " "
Tamil	108 " 25 " "

There are broadcasts within the Malay network for aborigines in Temiar and Semai languages. The transmission times also include time set for schools broadcasts. There is also an Overseas broadcast carrying programmes in Indonesian, Chinese and English.

Indonesian	54 hours 15 minutes
Chinese	14 hours
English	17 hours

This broadcast was introduced during the confrontation days with Indonesia. Soon broadcast in Thai language will also be introduced.

In East Malaysia the air time for Sabah is 126 hours with broadcast in Malay

54 hours 45 minutes
English 25 hours 45 minutes
Chinese 18 hours
Kadazan 16 hours 15 minutes
Murut 5 hours 15 minutes
Indonesian 2 hours
Bajau 1 hour 45 minutes

The total air time for Sarawak is 281 hours which broadcasts in 7 languages namely:

Malay	112 hours
Chinese	39 hours 30 minutes
English	39 hours
Iban	33 hours 15 minutes
Bidayah	33 hours 15 minutes
Melanu	1 hour
Kenya/Kenyah	3 hours 30 minutes

All these broadcasts, domestic and foreign, are currently by 15 Short Wave and 21 Medium Wave transmitters in various centres linked by VHF and Micro-wave circuits. The transmitters vary in strength from 10 kw to 100 kw.

An analysis of programme content, in broad terms indicates the pattern of broadcast in the country.

	<u>Malay</u>	<u>English</u>	<u>Chinese</u>	<u>Tamil</u>
News	11.3	6.7	14.6	8.7
Entertainment	58.1	79.2	63.5	69.2
Information	15.5	11.9	10.5	6.7
Education	9	1.7	10.4	11.9
Others	6.1	0.6	1	3.5

While the general pattern is quite similar, the above analysis obviously shows that each language broadcast's contents are dictated by what the planners assure<sup>m</sup> are the needs of the different communities in the country. There is, certainly, no uniform approach although all broadcasts emanate from the same source and get co-ordinated at a central level.

The measure of the problem can be readily recognised in the 4-language domestic broadcast pattern of the country, which in effect is a 4-station operation from a single source.

Despite the foregoing facts one would be quite interested to know the extent to which the broadcast medium is used for effective social, economic, political and cultural goals. It requires a study in depth on the content of broadcast material and the extent to which these reflect national ideas and ideals. Often enough (public comments being rare and private criticisms intense) comments have been both complimentary and critical of the role that broadcasting has played thus far in forging a national character through the promotion of national ideals such as

unity, harmony and tolerance among the varied cultural stocks from which the country's citizens are drawn. No matter what the views or comments, ethics and codes broadcasters have set for themselves in this country indicate sufficiently that they are aware of their responsibilities in the profession. The following Broadcasting Code which was adopted by all Asian broadcasters who met in Kuala Lumpur in 1962 and to which Malaysia solemnly pledged its adherence is testimony to this awareness.

We recognise the immense power of Radio and Television for both good and evil and the solemn responsibilities thus placed upon all broadcasters.

We believe, therefore, that the following cardinal principles should be enshrined in the policy and practice of all Broadcasting and Television organisations:-

- To ensure the objective presentation of news and fair and unbiased comment;
- To promote the advancement of education and culture;
- To raise and maintain high standards of decency and decorum in all programmes;
- To provide programmes for the young which, by variety and content; while inculcate the principles of good citizenship;
- To promote communal harmony, religious tolerance and international understanding;
- To treat controversial public issues in an impartial and dispassionate manner;
- To respect human rights and dignity.

In practice adherence to the above ideas will depend on the material, manpower and ideological resources and framework within which the Department is to operate. It may not be satisfying to all.



In the case of TV, there are telecasts in 4 languages, viz., Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil in West Malaysia over 2 channels to capture the widest possible audience. It is now on the air for 89 hours a week. Roughly 60% of its programmes are foreign, syndicated and canned programmes. Some of these are supported by Malay sub-titles.

By the end of 1971 Sabah in East Malaysia will also have TV and soon after Sarawak should follow suit. There too the telecasts are likely to be in a number of languages, Malaysia and its component states being multi-racial in character.

At the moment TV is housed at Angkasapuri in Bukit Putra, Kuala Lumpur. Soon Radio will move to the complex with the completion of studios and offices of Radio House.

Although state-owned, both Radio and TV, also carry commercials which earn the government substantial revenue besides licensing fees.

#### Department of Information

This department was initially set up in 1945 as the Department of Publicity and Printing, but became the Public Relations Department in 1946 and eventually the Department of Information in 1950. The changing designation over a period of time is itself indicative of the government's awareness of the utility of providing proper information and in good time for effective communication. It has offices at State and District levels and it operates largely along the same pattern as adopted by Department of Broadcasting, in terms of languages, in both East and West Malaysia. At the Headquarters level it has currently the

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following divisions: Field Services, Press and Liaison, Public Relations and Visual Productions.

As part of its activity as the agency through which government information is released or coordinated it has also established an overseas information wing in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Department as a whole developed extensively during the communist insurgency of 1948-60 and in its programme of activities it has stage shows, film shows, dramas, publications of pamphlets and newspapers and civic and community relations. It seems to have achieved crowning success particularly in the psychological front, during the insurgency, and its modus-operandi has thus far been satisfactory.

National Film Department (Filem Negara)

This came to be established initially in 1946 in temporary accommodation with the procurement of equipment left behind by the American-British Army Film Units in South East Asia after the second world war. It was then known as the Malayan Film Unit as part of the Public Relations Department. Although it was separated for a while eventually in 1953, it was amalgamated with the Department of Information with the then growing recognition that there needed to be coordinated activity in the information front to fight communist insurgency. In 1968, however, it was again separated and it now continues to exist as a Department in its own right. It is housed in a ultra-modern building in Petaling Jaya and is equipped with modern film production facilities.

It produces films in Malay, Chinese, English and Tamil and Iban and Kadazan. They are mainly documentaries both in 35 mm and 16 mm gauges in black and white and colour. Feature films and educational programmes have also been attempted from time to time. A complete catalogue of its productions is available on request.

It exists as a service organisation providing a number of copies of its productions to be screened either at the ordinary cinemas or at special community screens organised by the Department of Information. It also serves commercial institutes by lending its facilities for negotiable rentals.

#### News Agencies

There are a number of News Agencies operating in Malaysia. The National agency is known as BERNAMA (Berita Nasional Malaysia). Others are Re<sup>u</sup>iter, AP, UPI, AFP, PTI, Antara, Central News Agency, and Thai News Agency.

Bernama, a non-profit making public corporation, established by an Act of Parliament in 1967 started operations on May 20, 1968. It is controlled by a board of governors on which newspapers and government are equally represented with 5 members each.

Bernama is a member of OANA (Organisation of Asian News Agencies) and is soon expected to send correspondents to South East Asian capitals to participate in the proposed regional news agency. It also hopes to start a commercial news service.

Bernama operates in 2 languages - Malay and English. It now transmits 25,000 words in Bahasa Malaysia and 20,000 in English <sup>daily</sup> to its subscribers: newspapers (21), Foreign News Agencies (2), Diplomatic Missions (6), Banks (2), University (1), Government Ministries (3) and others (4).



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Compared to earlier days there now seems to be a greater willingness on the part of newspapers to rely on Bernama coverage although these very papers it seems are of the view that there is a heavy dominance of government-oriented news in Bernama's coverage.

Foreign correspondents operate fairly freely with none or few restrictions. But they are sometimes labelled as "biased"; sometimes they are <sup>ce</sup>assured of misrepresentation, depending on whether one reviews their coverage from normal journalistic practice or factually incorrect reporting.

#### Private Mass Media

Newspapers and the printed word generally form the bulk of private mass media other than imported films shown in the cinema theatres. These papers are commercial in character and outlook. There are dailies in not only the four main languages, viz., Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil, but also in languages such as Punjabi, Malayalam, Telugu on a limited scale. The largest circulation (certified daily as over 200,000) is that of the Straits Times, the main English language paper published from Kuala Lumpur. The Straits Times group also publishes the Malay Mail which is a leading afternoon paper. The Sunday Times and Sunday Mail are week-end versions of these papers. They too lead the field of Sunday papers. The only other English language news paper in West Malaysia, Straits Echo of Penang, is largely a provincial paper catering for North Malaya and Southern Thailand. A number of other papers have appeared from time to time only to fail in commercial terms.



Among the leading Malay papers are Berita Harian (Straits Times group), Utusan Melayu, Utusan Malaysia and the Warta Negara of the Penang.

The leading Chinese papers are Nanyang Siang Pau, Sin Chew Jit Poh, Shin Min Daily News and the China Press, and a number of other dailies. Almost all these papers are commercially viable and some of them are money spinners too.

The leading Tamil dailies are Tamil Nesan, Tamil Malar and Tamil Murasu. As in English, so in Tamil, a number of newspapers have appeared and disappeared.

Technically most Malaysian papers are of a fairly high order. They are printed on fast rotary press and well illustrated. Even in editorial terms the papers are fairly impressive. But whether they measure up to the classical concept of newspapers exercising the so-called freedom of the press in their contents is not only debatable but dubious too. It is true of course that newspapers will have to operate within the laws of the country (and there are stringent ones in the context of a multi-racial Malaysia and the experience of May 13, 1969), but whether they should appear to be information department's bulletins is worth some discussion.

The size of each of these papers varies from about 8 pages for Malay and Tamil papers to 12 - 14 for the Chinese and 16 - 24 for the English. There are assorted other weeklies, fortnightlies, monthlies, by-weeklies etc. which represent a fairly wide range of thoughts and interests. All the same there is room for more and improved versions of these.

The total estimated circulation is nearly 700,000 while estimated readership is about 4,000,000.

## Survey, Research, Training and Teaching in Mass Communication

### Survey and Research

Except for commercial organisations called SRM (Survey Research Malaysia) and FER0 (Far East Research Organisation) which service mass-com institutions on a subscription basis or at the specific request of an institution on special areas of study, there is no formal audience/viewer/listener/reader/survey by any of the mass communication institutions in the country. Monopolistic tendencies, and regionalism or provincialism so ably demonstrated in the contents of existing newspapers coupled with clearly defined interests and tastes, preferences and prejudices of the component communities in the country have probably contributed to these sad state of affairs. Obviously this is a field where there is great scope and is likely to be developed meaningfully by the recently established research division of the Ministry of Information.

### Teaching

The University of Penang, and MARA Institute of Technology have courses in Mass Communications in their academic programmes. These are new, being hardly two years old, but are expected to make salutary contributions to the cause of mass communications in this country since it is only too evident that there is hardly any, and if at all, few mass-com educated men on the job. There are of course a large number of mass-com personnel who are trained on the job which has made them good technicians, but there is certainly a great case for the professionally educated in this field. Such persons, hopefully, will be better equipped to respond to the economic, social, political and cultural realities of the society they work for. Their perspectives may be more maningful.

Training

All Mass communication institutions in Malaysia do not seem to have had faith in training (or if they did, there has been no demonstration of it) thus far although practical working courses in journalism, broadcasting, advertising etc. have been arranged by the South East Asia Press Centre, or the relevant parent bodies of these activities. The figures provided by SEA Press Centre on the number of persons who have gone through its courses are impressive, but the need to train mass-com persons more widely and in greater depth is now being steadily recognised.

In so far as broadcasting is concerned, while there have been departmental training schemes from time to time on an ad hoc basis for its varied staff and particularly for technicians who had to be provided basic training so as to equip them for statutory examinations, no formal institution for the training of broadcasting personnel was established until the early part of this year. This establishment known as National Broadcasting Training Centre will be soon mounting courses in various aspects of broadcasting including programming and presentation, engineering and operations, film and photography, stage and design, news and utilisation and research. For this purpose, the Centre at Jalan Ampang, has been conceived as a miniature broadcasting station with both radio and TV and their attendant facilities.

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Prior to the emergence of SEA Press Centre, the personnel of the Department of Information were regularly provided with courses to enable them to be effective in their work.

The National Productivity Centre and the Malaysian Institute of Management have also promoted seminars and short courses on communications role in effective management and increased production. But they have been on an ad hoc basis, although it is known that these institutions are willing and able to mount courses on a more continuing and meaningful basis.

The future is full of promise and possibilities. It is as much in the hands of those in mass communication institutions as <sup>it</sup> is in their brains.