

Developments and trends in the rural media in Asia - case study Malaysia

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rural communication
Malaysia

Developments of the rural media in Malaysia, especially in the Peninsular has not been encouraging. This is a sad state of affair considering that about 60 per cent or 10 million of Malaysia 17.1 million population still dwell in rural areas. Also, since independence the biggest allocation of the national budget have nearly always been for rural development. Yet after more than 30 years of independence, the rural media in Malaysia has yet to make an impact or gain its proper place in nation building and rural development.

Also, this is despite the fact that Malaysian leaders have long perceive the country's mass media in what might be termed the classical role for media in developing nations. Newell Grenfell observed this in his book Switch On: Switch Off (1979). He quoted an address to a seminar of newspaper editors and publishers in 1974 by Tun Haji Abdul Razak, then Prime Minister of Malaysia:

"The press and other mass media act as [an] intermediary between the Government and the people. Their functions and responsibilities are more important and complex in a multi-racial country like Malaysia. All those concerned should take heed to ensure that whatever is published for the general public should not cause misunderstanding or be detrimental to certain groups. In this way the press and the mass media could help the Government foster the sprit of understanding and strengthen the

friendship among the people ... The press should also avoid publishing materials which give rise to tension among ... various parties."

In its white paper entitled "Towards Preserving National Security in Kertas Perintah 14 Tahun 1988 presented to the Malaysian Parliament, the government acknowledged the power of the newspapers. It stated that "Newspapers play a very important role in society by among other things providing news and comments, and publishing readers' views on certain subjects. Newspapers also have a big influence in the formation of public opinion. Those who own Newspapers and their editorial management can play this role in various ways." However, despite this expectation of the government, the mass media in Malaysia have not really gone rural as expected if it is to play their role more effectively in nation building.

A major reason for this unhappy situation is that the modern mass media in Malaysia is basically urban centered and oriented. Also, the modern mass media tradition in Malaysia, as with most developing nations is a relatively recent phenomenon.

The Malaysian mass media, especially in the Peninsular being urban-centred, closely reflected the patterns of the British colonial interests and administration. The print media, for example, emerged primarily to serve the commercial interests as well as the urban elites.

Also, the print media came to being to serve communal interests. The year 1805 saw the publication of the first English language newspaper in Penang. Known as The Prince of Wales Island Gazette (1805-1827) it served British interests in

Malaya, particularly the communities in the Straits Settlements (Khoo, 1988). The first Chinese newspaper, Chinese Monthly Magazine was published in Melaka by William Milne, a missionary who worked for the London Missionary Society. The Society published the Chinese newspaper to propagate its religious activity in mainland China (Tang, 1988). The Malay and Indian communities were relatively late in publishing their own vernacular newspapers. The first Malay bulletin, Jawi Peranakan first appeared in 1876. In the same year, the first Indian bulletin in Malaysia, Tangai Sinegan was also published. The ethnic clientele of such newspapers, created a demand for, and consequently encouraged reportage of features and news items of ethnic interest. Thus the economics of publication itself propagated a structure of coverage which was heavily biased towards ethnic needs and concerns. This happened in spite of the fact that the three vernacular bulletins were published in Penang and Singapore, were relatively cosmopolitan and British in outlook (Arabi & Latiffah, 1988).

However, before we go any further in discussing the developments and trend of Malaysia's rural mass media, it is important to have some knowledge about the country.

Malaysia in Brief

As a nation, Malaysia is relatively new. It was formed in 1963 and consisted of 13 states, that is, nine states in the Peninsular and two states in Borneo, namely, Sabah and Sarawak. All thirteen states had been under British influence.

Malaysia adheres to a kind of federal system. However, in Malaysia the federal or the central government has more say in many issues than the state government. Nevertheless, in land and forest matters, the state governments have more rights than the federal government. Also, for the two new comers that formed Malaysia, Sarawak and Sabah, they further have authority over immigration and other matters that are meant to safeguard the state interest.

Malaysia has a constitutional monarchical parliamentary form of government. The government, by law, has to seek a fresh mandate at the end of every five years. Malaysia is one of the few developing nations that has regularly conducted elections since the first one held in 1955.

Malaysia has been lucky to generally experience political stability since independence. This is despite persistent predictions that given the communal structure of the population there would be incessant racial strife and chaos.

Malaysia has a land size of 127,581 square miles. It is divided by the South China Sea into West or officially named as Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia. In term of land mass, East Malaysia is much bigger. However, in term of population, the number of people in Peninsular Malaysia is about six times more than in East Malaysia.

The total population of Malaysia is about 17.1 million. It comprised of three main racial groups, the indigenious people or known in Malaysia as the Bumiputras (children of the land), the Chinese and the Indians.

The Bumiputra groups consist of various ethnic groups such as the Malays, Senois, Semangs, Temiar, etc. in the Peninsular with Kadazans, Dusuns, Bajaus, Murut, etc., in Sabah and Ibans, Bidayuhs, Penans, Kelabit, etc. in Sarawak. The Chinese also have their own subgroupings based on clans such as the Hokkiens, Cantonese and Teo Chew. Also, the Indians are heterogenous. They compose of sub categories such as Malayialams, Punjabis and with majority Tamils. Other national minority groups include Sri Lankans, Pakistanis and Eurasians. Each of these groups have their own religion, culture, language and practice.

As stated, about two-thirds of Malaysians live in rural areas with more so in Sabah and Sarawak. Generally, a big majority of the indogenous people are located outside the urban centres where most of the Chinese dwell. A majority of the Indians are found in the estates.

Even though Malaysia is still a developing country, it is relatively rich. Malaysia's GNP per capita is about US\$1,800. The economy is stable and well recovering a recession with GDP growth of about 7.4% (Asiaweek, Jan. 6, 1989).

Malaysians literacy level is currently about 85 per cent, with the high side in urban centres and lower in rural areas. Literacy level is also slightly lower in East Malaysia, again with more so in the rural areas.

Malaysians are generally well expose to the mass media. Radio coverage is almost 100 per cent. Television has extensively penetrated rural areas with electricity supply. As for the print media, a 1982 study revealed that only 42 per cent of the rural adults read newspapers as compared to 72 per cent of

urban adults. It was also implied that the percentages for reading books and magazines would be much lower in the rural areas. For 1989, it is estimated that the number of adults reading newspapers and magazines would have increased by approximately 10 per cent. The estimation is based on the growth of newspapers and magazines circulations.

Mass Media in Malaysia

Malaysia's mass media systems is a mixture of government and private-enterprises. In order to be able to publish a newspaper or magazines one must get a permit to do so. The permit can be applied from the Ministry of Home Affairs. Publishers must seek for new permit at the end of every year. It is not an automatic renewal. As for operating a television station, so far only one company has been given licence to do so. Up to now there is no private radio station. Licence to operate the electronic media can be applied to the Ministry of Information.

As for the electronic media, radio is fully controlled by the government. In the Peninsular, Radio Malaysia provides service in four main languages: Bahasa Malaysia (the national language), English, Chinese (plus the dialects), and Tamils. Each of these languages are broadcasted through its own channels.

Also, about two hours a day are allocated for the Orang Asli (the aborigines of Malaysia) in the Semai and Temiar dialects. The Orang Asli are usually located in rural settlements, in the forest zone or its fringes. The broadcast are made from Kuala Lumpur and usually with the assistance of the Department of Aborigines.

Radio Malaysia in Sabah and Sarawak also broadcast in the languages of the two states indigenous people.

To ensure that the rural people are served effectively by radio, the Malaysian government has established a number of radio stations in the rural areas. Besides programmes on national airtime, Radio Malaysia also broadcasts local programmes from its regional stations in Penang, Ipoh, Kota Bahru, Kuala Terengganu, Kuantan, Johor Bahru, Melaka, Alor Setar, Kota Kinabalu, Kuching, Limbang, Sibu, Miri and Sri Aman.

RTM launched its regional station for the Federal Territory of Labuan on August 31, 1986

The government local radio stations are encouraged to produce local programmes and sometimes using the dialects of the main population of the particular area to ensure it meets the needs of the intended listeners. Subjects of the local programmes usually relate to the agricultural activities or the type of occupations that involved the majority of local population. Television Malaysia though centred in Kuala Lumpur, the nation's capital city does produce programmes meant for rural areas. These are seen in programmes like the locally produced agriculture segments, Islamic study and the like that are meant to attract and educate the rural audiences. Also, the Television Malaysia stations in Sabah and Sarawak are encouraged to produce their own local programmes which include magazine type programmes, dramas and musicals.

As such the published objectives of Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM) are as follows:

1. To explain in depth and with widest possible coverage.

the policies and programmes of the Government in order to ensure maximum understanding by the public.

2. To stimulate public interest and opinion in order to achieve changes in line with the requirements of the Government.
3. To assist in promoting civic consciousness and fostering the development of Malaysian arts and culture.
4. To provide suitable elements of popular education, general information and entertainment.

As seen in the ordering of RTM's objectives, the priorities are to inform and educate before entertain. Since, the level of literacy is lower in the rural areas, the Malaysian government has deemed it fit to utilise its electronic media to reach the rural people. This is especially so with coverage of radio 100 per cent. Also, television will be 100 per cent when the dish receiver established in Kuala Lumpur becomes fully operational in 1990. Nevertheless, when receiving programmes from all over the world, RTM needs to be selective otherwise it can become counter-productive.

As such, the Malaysian government recognizes that radio and television constitute two major forms of mass media which are important for communicating with the people, particularly those in the rural areas.

On the other hand, the government has allowed a television station popularly known as TV3 to operate as a private enterprise and strongly competing for audiences and advertisements against its own two television channels. Privatisation of television came about in 1984. It emerged as a result of the Malaysia

incorporation move. By its very nature of being a commercial creature, TV3 is urban centred and oriented to where its lifeblood is, the city and town folks as well as the advertising industry.

As for the print media in Malaysia, there are currently thirty-five daily newspapers: 20 in Mandarin, 3 in Bahasa Malaysia, 8 in English and 3 in Tamil. Also, a number of daily newspapers in Sarawak and Sabah published in two or three languages. For example in Sabah, the Daily Express and Sabah Times are published in English, Bahasa Malaysia and Kadazan. In Sarawak, The Borneo Post appeared in two languages, Bahasa and English.

All the national newspapers are published in Kuala Lumpur, the nation's capital. Only in the state of Sabah and Sarawak are newspapers published in its state capitals and other major towns. In Malaysia, it is these newspapers that are located outside the national capital that can be termed as the rural print media. In Sabah and Sarawak, these newspapers have seemed to survive satisfactorily.

On the other hand, in Peninsular Malaysia even regional newspapers never seem to prosper. This experiences have discourage entrepreneurs to set up rural press or community newspapers. For example, national newspaper organisations that have established regional newspapers like Bintang Timor in Penang for Utusan Group and Warta Tebrau in Johor for the New Straits Times Group have found their venture unprofitable and were forced to terminate their publications. Both of the newspapers have been in Bahasa Malaysia to cater to the needs of the majority of

the rural people. Conversely, The Star an English newspaper that began life as a provincial paper in Penang become a big success after turning national. Another, English newspaper, The Echo also originating in Penang, however, was not that lucky. It was surviving well enough as a provincial newspaper for the northern zone of Peninsular Malaysia until it became The National Echo moving its headquarters to Kuala Lumpur and quickly became insolvent.

Nevertheless, currently, the major national newspaper organisations like the New Straits Times Group, Utusan Melayu Group and The Star are publishing their newspapers to cater for regional and the rural people needs. For example, the New Straits Times Group published a northern edition, an eastern edition, a central edition as well as a Sabah and Sarawak edition. Each of these regional edition place special emphasize on the news of the particular region it is intended for. The slant or angle of the stories is also geared to the need of the region concerned.

Newspaper groups like Utusan Melayu and The New Straits Times have also established printing plants in certain regions of Peninsular Malaysia to facilitate publication of their regional editions. For example, the Utusan Melayu Group is now operating a printing plant in the East Coast of Peninsular Malaysia while The New Straits Times Group is also doing so for the Northern Zone of the Peninsular.

This development and trend in Peninsular Malaysia is expected to discourage the birth and growth of rural print mass media which have its roots in the rural areas. The adequate

communication infrastructure in the Peninsular would also provide the same effect.

As for Sabah and Sarawak, their inadequate communication infrastructure is believed to be one of the most important factor contributing to the birth and nurture of their rural print media. This is despite the fact that the literacy level in Sarawak and Sabah is much lower than the Peninsular. However, with the rapid increase of literacy in the two states the number of people reading newspapers is also expected to rise.

Also, what is expected is that the current development and trend of establishing printing plants away from Kuala Lumpur and the keen competition among the major national newspapers to offer regional editions would lead to the growth of rural journalism in the Peninsular. Further, it could provide journalists in rural areas the opportunities to give wider and comprehensive coverage of their regions.

Malaysians, besides having access to newspapers, radio and television, are also exposed to magazines which are either published locally or are imported. The local magazines are available in English, Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and in Tamil. Nearly all the local magazines are produced in Kuala Lumpur, with the rest being published in the various state capitals.

The Rural Print Mass Media in Malaysia

As stated the rural print mass media in Malaysia are basically located in Sarawak and Sabah.

Sarawak has 12 newspapers, one in the local languages (Utusan Sarawak), one in Bahasa and English (The Borneo Post), two in

"taking sides" should not be directed to the East Malaysian newspapers only, the national newspapers based in Kuala Lumpur fair no better.

This state of affair occurs because even though newspaper industry is generally a business concerns in Malaysia, political parties or individuals with strong political motivations or connections have been known to own newspaper companies or have a big share in the companies assets. For example, the youngest daily in Sabah, Borneo Mail is reported to be own by the current ruling party or someone very close to the party. As such, the news content are very much in favour of the current state government.

The birth of the Borneo Mail has also been strongly linked to one of the local daily taking a strong stance against the existing state government and giving coverage to serious allegations against it. As a result, the state government had directed all the state departments to stop subscribing to the concerned daily; its chief editor, a Malaysian but a non-Sabahan work permit terminated and the newspaper company sued in court. Further, another daily that had been seen as pro the ruling party is now seen as neutral and sometimes bordering on being too critical.

In Sarawak, one of the local newspaper that has been labelled as pro oppositions has been reported to have been bought over by individuals who are pro the current state government.

However, irregardless of ownerships, newspapers in Malaysia, urban or rural have been judged as generally having a liberal policy. This means, that newspapers in the country have

English and the rest in Chinese (see table 1) published by the private sectors. Malaysia's Information Department in Sarawak also produce four bulletins, two in Bahasa Malaysia, a monthly and a bi weekly and two in Iban (the biggest ethnic group), a monthly and a weekly.

Sabah has nine newspapers. Three of the newspapers are published in three languages - Bahasa Malaysia, English and Kadazan (language of the largest ethnic group in Sabah) while the rest are in Chinese (See table 2).

It is observed that the Chinese language newspapers are more in terms of numbers as compared to the other languages newspapers are linked to the Chinese interest in commerce and their tradition of giving importance to education. Therefore, it is of no surprise that a number of the Chinese newspapers are located in the other major towns of Sarawak and Sabah where they are of the majority and where most of them are involved in businesses.

In term of contents, there is not much difference between the various newspapers. Generally, they give emphasis on local news, followed by national news and ASEAN news and finally the world news. Also, the local newspapers do give importance to business news, especially if it has bearings on the local population. The same goes for agricultural news, especially if it touches on the produce of the local inhabitants.

Somehow, some of the newspapers are seen as "taking sides". They can be seen as pro government or the ruling party, pro oppositions and neutral. These allegations of the Sarawak and Sabah newspapers taking sides are seen from the slants of their coverages and their ownerships. However, these allegations of

generally tried to be fair to all parties involved by giving coverage to all considered newsworthy. This is so even for giving coverage to the underdogs, the lower income groups, the under privilege, rural people, etc.

a. Economic Viability of the Rural Media

In terms of circulation the rural newspapers in Sabah and Sarawak range from 3000 to nearly 39,000 copies sold daily (see table 1 & 2). Sarawak newspapers, however, have a higher circulation than the Sabah newspapers. The highest circulation in Sarawak is nearly 39,000 while in Sabah its only nearly 16,000 copies daily.

In Sarawak, the newspaper that has the most circulation is a Chinese daily based in Sibu an average size town about five hours by boat from the state capital. The daily entitled See Hua Daily News has three editions published in three regional towns of Sarawak and has a total daily circulation of 38,700 copies. The second biggest selling newspapers in Sarawak is an English daily, the Borneo Post with a circulation of 28,000.

In Sabah also the largest selling publications is a Chinese paper called Asia Times. It has a circulation of about 16,000 copies. The second most sold publication is a daily, Daily Express a newspaper published in three languages (Bahasa Malaysia, English and Kadazan) and having a circulation of about 15 copies.

The prices of the rural print media range from 30 cents Malaysians to 70 cents Malaysian a copy. Somehow, the Chinese daily is more expensive per copy than for the other languages.

For example, the See Hua Daily News in Chinese is selling for 70 cents a copy while the People Mirror in English sells for 30 cents a copy while the Sarawak Tribune also in English is selling for 40 cents a copy.

All the rural publications carry advertisements. The amount of advertisements vary from one newspapers to the next. However, it is observed that the newspapers located in the larger towns do carry more advertisements.

To ensure that their publishing business is in good financial position, the rural publishers do seek out printing jobs from other business people in terms of publishing their occasional publications, calendars, business cards, greeting cards and other miscellaneous.

b. Professionalism of the Rural Media/Management

In term of ownerships the rural media are owned by individuals, family, political party, etc. Many of the smaller publishing company, especially for the Chinese publications, are usually owned and managed by family businesses.

However, the trend seems that as a publishing company expanded there is a tendency for it going public and influential personalities or representatives of certain political parties trying to obtain a substantial share in it.

Much can still be done to improve the professionalism of the rural media/management. For now, most of the managers and proprietors are self-made people. Hiring are conducted base on the experience of the pottential employees in relevant field. In

- certain cases, children of the proprietors have managed to secure relevant qualifications and training and being asked to manage the family businesses.

In term of editorial staff, also, much can be done to improve their level of competency and professionalism. All the participants of a five day workshop in "Training for Rural Journalists" conducted by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre together with local or national press institute in Sabah and Sarawak admitted that they sorely needed training. Nearly all of them have no formal training in journalism. They also admitted that their management or chief editors were self-made people. The participants felt that their superiors themselves needed training, especially in the running of a newspaper company.

c. Adoption of New Technology

In term of adopting new technology the rural media is generally slow in doing so. This is more connected to its costs than actually being ignorant about it. Most of the rural media company are not that well off and many are barely surviving. However, being more expose to world because of their responsibilities as media people the publishers are generally aware of the development in the communication world. Their regrests are that they cannot affort it. Also, a number said that they are waiting for the price to drop lower or more affordable to them.

Nevertheless, a few of the larger publishers in Sabah and Sarawak are begining to buy personal computers and other newer

computerised equipments. Those who have began to adopt the new technology are begining to gain the upper hand over their competitors and finding it indispensable. However, they also have to work harder to justify the cost and maintainence. They are seeking to do other publications or other related businesses rather than just depending on the publications of their newspapers.

d. Public Access to and Participation in the Rural Media

In term of radio stationed in rural areas the public access and participation to it is rather good. Personnels in these radio stations are encouraged to involve the people in their various programmes, especially in voicing their problems. In fact in many of these radio stations there are talk back programmes where people can voice their problems over the telephones. However, this is limited only to people who have telephones or have public telephones installed in their villages.

Nevertheless, journalists in these radio stations are encouraged to go out and meet the people and gives relevant coverage to happenings in rural areas. The people access and participation in radio can be further much increased though.

As for the print media in the rural areas, the public access to participation to it can also be very much improved. However, the rural media is not to be solely blamed for the situation. As participants for the workshops on "Training for Rural Journalists" lamented the communication infrastrucutrur are not very adequate. They themselves find it very difficult to reach these people. In Sarawak for example, journalists are only able

to reach some rural areas only with the assistance of the Department of Information personnels who are kind enough to accomodate them in their transports when the situation arises.

Stringers who stay in the rural areas also complained about the difficulty to send news fast when required and their news normally become "stale" by the time it reaches the relevant editors. Also, they complained about the attitudes of editors towards rural news. Editors, they said, do not give priorities to rural news and frequently used it only as fillers. On the other hand, editors complained about the quality of news sent to them by their stringers or rural journalists.

Further, it seems, the rural areas only get mass media coverage when something tragic or unusual occurs, and especially when ministers or other important dignataries visited it.

Much can still be done to improve the public access and to and participation in the Malaysian rural media.

NOTES

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- 1 Paper presented at AMIC Seminar on "Developments and Trends in the Rural Media in Asia".
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