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1990

Samsudin A. R. (1990). Broadcast satellites and national integration. In AMIC-DEPPEN Seminar on the Socio-economic Impact of Broadcast Satellites in the Asia-Pacific Region : Jakarta, Jul 25-27, 1990. Singapore: Asian Mass Communication Research & Information Centre.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/92984>

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By

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Broadcast Satellites and National Integration:

The Malaysian Case*

by

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Introduction

The fruits of technological development have, in general, nourished the needs and wants of some innovators and end-users. Countries once burdened by communication problems arising from geographical factors, now count on the blessings of satellite technology to help unify their peoples, at least through system integration.

In the field of broadcasting, highly sophisticated technologies have been adopted in the hope of inducing greater flow of news and information of greater interest to audiences at large. In some ways, new broadcasting hardwares have made television programme productions less cumbersome but faster and more effective thus helping viewers enjoy their leisure hours with the electronic media. Nonetheless, new technologies have also created uncertainties among many in most parts of the world, bureaucrats or otherwise. The advent of satellite technology, for instance, has aggravated the problems of national sovereignty because one of the major characteristics of a satellite system is its technical capacity for

* Paper presented at the Seminar on Socio-Economic Impact of Broadcasting Satellite in the Asia-Pacific Region, July 25-27, Bandung, Indonesia.

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transborder data flow, including the flow of films, television programmes, advertising, periodicals and other cultural products. Satellite distribution of syndicated programmes is relatively inexpensive, quick and reliable, but most economically developing countries including Malaysia, are apprehensive about the impact of foreign programmes on society especially those that portray norms and values unacceptable to a large section of society. In addition, the problems of countries with heterogeneous populations are compounded because of the need to integrate peoples of multiethnic, multilingual, and multi-cultural origins.

This paper addresses the issue of national integration in relation to the use and application of broadcast satellites in the dissemination of news, information, entertainment, "infotainment" and other educational programmes through the medium of television in Malaysia. The writers choose to present their views and arguments based on the following premises:

1. That broadcasting satellites can serve to accelerate programmes for national integration provided other intervening variables come into play.
2. That certain broadcasting programmes may bind people together if they cater to the socio-economic wants and needs of the audiences.
3. That broadcast satellite technology, like any other technology, is not value free.

Before we discuss how broadcast satellites can help to promote national integration, there is a need to understand the concept of national integration within the context of the Malaysian environment.

This paper does not focus on the aspect of cultural integration per se but discusses the capability of broadcast satellites in their role as the mediated channels for television programmes which should idealistically portray the cultures of all members of society. The social and communication integration are dealt with in the three premises.

National Integration: Issues and Problems

National integration is a very illusive concept, a controversial yet crucial issue in Malaysia because the survival of the nation rests on how well its people can live in harmony, despite differences and disagreements. It is a complex process because it aims at an amalgam of the best characteristics of the various races which can eventually develop into a uniquely Malaysian identity. It also connotes a partial surrender of racial identity based on certain agreed principles acceptable by all members of the community. Intrinsically, as Samarajiva and Shields posit (1990, p.2), integration involves conflict and contestation. However, the question of compulsion and absolute assimilation does not arise. National integration is but a process requiring tolerance, open-mindedness, and acceptance of others without prejudice. Admittedly, there remains several areas of conflict that can still create schisms among members of the population, in spite of 33 years of independence from the British colonialists.

National integration may be discussed from the following perspectives:

- a. **Cultural integration** which refers to the ability to accommodate various elements of the various cultures in order to form a harmonious Malaysian culture.
- b. **Social integration** which refers to the process of bringing together various ethnic groups to form a common identity.
- c. **Communication integration** refers to the effectiveness of the communication networking, (including interpersonal linkages), which operates within a social system in disseminating information to the intended beneficiaries.

Cultural integration is evolutionary. Although the National Cultural Policy explicitly identifies the Malay culture as the core of the Malaysian national culture, it also incorporates elements of the cultures of all ethnic groups. Evolution of the national culture is henceforth based on the integration of all the virtues from the various indigenous cultures in Malaysia with the hope of developing a Malaysian identity and for the purpose of nation building (Fifth Malaysia Plan, 1986, pp.6, 19).

The National Education Policy, emphasised greater access to education, the implementation in stages of Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction, the establishment of a common curriculum, and the use of Bahasa Malaysia and English in the national examination system (Fifth Malaysia Plan, 1986, p.483). The objective of the policy was to assist the government in its efforts at nation-building (Isahak, 1978, p.30). However, its implementation was delayed until 1970 "to accommodate the non-Bumiputera demands" (Zainal Abidin, 1987, p.4). Bahasa Malaysia has since become the medium of instruction while English continues to be taught as a "second language." As stated in the Razak Report (1956)(cited in Isahak, 1978, p.27):

The ultimate objective of the educational policy in this country must be to bring together the children of all races under a National educational system in which the National Language (Malay) is the medium of instruction, though we recognised that the progress towards this goal cannot be rushed and must be gradual.

The use of Bahasa Malaysia as a medium of instruction was implemented in the university system in 1983.

National integration has been a central issue revolving around economic, social and political decision making. One of the major causes of ethnic hostility that oftentimes breeds interethnic group tensions is the economic disparity between ethnic groups. Income growth for the Chinese and Indians are 33 percent and 31 percent respectively while the Malays' share of income growth is the lowest at 28 percent.

After the May 1969 hiatus, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was formulated as an attempt on the part of the ruling party to address the economic imbalances and to foster national unity through a more equitable distribution of income and economic opportunities between the various ethnic groups in Malaysia. Under the policy, the Malays and other indigenous people were given Government's assistance to own and participate in at least 30 percent of the country's trading and commercial activities. The government was convinced that the strength, stability, security and the very survival of Malaysia would be at risk if there was no NEP that could implement a programme of social justice within the context of Malaysia's complex socio-economic environment. The task which was to be achieved in two decades was deemed a key vehicle for the achievement of national unity but the targeted participation of the

indigeneous group has only reached 19 percent even in 1990, the NEP deadline.

In the political arena, the ruling National Front is a coalition of the mainstream parties of the major ethnic groups as well as assorted splinter parties. The grand coalition of eleven component parties was part of a political strategy for power-sharing among the various ethnic groups reflecting the needs and aspirations of heterogeneous Malaysians. The strategy was attributed to the late Tun Abdul Razak, Malaysia's second Prime Minister, who wanted to reduce politicking along racial lines (Zakaria, 1987, p.123) and to harness everyone's energy towards national development and national integration.

The pluralistic nature of the Malaysian population poses the greatest challenge to the concept of national unity and national integration. Most often, employment patterns and geographical location are identified with race. The Malays and other indigeneous people which represent 56.5 percent of the population are mostly engaged in agriculture and are to be found in the rural areas. In the urban areas, most find employment in government agencies or statutory bodies. The Chinese are synonymously identified with trade and commerce. They represent 32.8 percent of the population and are mostly urbanites. Majority of the Chinese are Buddhists by faith. The Indians whose ancestors are mostly emigrants from South India, are usually Hindus. They represent 10.1 percent of the population and many are identified with estates and commercial plantations. The ethnic mix in East Malaysia is as varied as West Malaysia. In Sarawak, the indigenous group accounted for 70.1 percent of the population comprising the Malays, Iban, Bidayuh, Kayan, Kenyah, Murut

and Bisaya. The Chinese in Sarawak forms 28.7 percent of the population. In Sabah, the Malays, Kadazan, Bajau, Dusun, Murut, and other indigenous groups form 84.2 percent while 14.9 percent are Chinese. Most of the indigenous people of the East Malaysian states are also to be found mostly in the rural areas. They either profess Islam, Christianity or are agnostics.

The other major cause of polarisation among Malaysians is regionalism. West and East Malaysia are not merely separated by 400 miles of the South China Sea but culturally, the customs, traditions, and beliefs of the people in the insular East Malaysia are distinctively different from peninsular Malaysia. Perception of uneven acceleration of economic growth and accusations of unfair treatment by West Malaysia have not contributed much towards Malaysianisation. Instead, such misperceptions triggered by political enthusiasts only aggravated feelings of anti federalism. In a recent media report, the Prime Minister had to issue a warning to Sabah political leaders not to exploit anti-federal sentiment in their political campaigns during the recent state election (nomination day was July 3 and polling July 16 and 17, 1990)(New Straits Times, July 11, 1990). In yet another report, three Sabahans were detained under the Internal Security Act suspected of being involved in secessionist activities (New Straits Times, July 10, 1990). Such unfortunate incidents do not augur well for national integration, let alone national security.

The Government has taken legislative measures to ensure national unity. The Malaysian Parliament had passed an amendment to the Constitution in 1971 making it seditious or criminal for anyone to

question the legitimacy of "sensitive issues" already established in the constitution. They include the sovereignty of Malay rulers who preside as the constitutional head in the nine out of the thirteen Malaysian states; choice of the Malay language as the national language with use of other languages for non-official purposes; citizenship granted to non-indigenous people; and the so-called special privileges of the Malays and other indigenous people as incorporated in the Constitution.

In spite of polarisation, economic imbalances and ethnic misperceptions, we in Malaysia are not living in chaos! There is a high degree of tolerance, understanding, and compromises among Malaysians. Feeling of solidarity does exist in many different ways. Sports heroes are revered regardless of their ethnic or religious background. Residents in urban or suburban areas do not stipulate their preferences for only a certain ethnic community. In general, we are a consolidated group when faced with a common external threat. However, within the country, we are yet to think of ourselves as Malaysians without referring to our ethnic backgrounds.

The Department of National Unity in the Prime Minister's Department is responsible for activities to foster unity and national integration.

According to the Department of National Unity (Negara, 1981, p.28):

An integrated society is created when individuals do not only share a common identity and values as Malaysians but also possess the feeling of belonging to Malaysia to the extent where the disruptive forces of communalism and regionalism would no longer be significant among the various ethnic groups.

Radio and Television Malaysia (RTM) is considered the main vehicle to disseminate information on unity and national integration. To achieve

this end, all local productions aired over RTM must adhere to the spirit of Rukunegara, the National Cultural Policy, National Language Policy, National Educational Policy and other national policies formulated from time to time by the Cabinet. In general, all these policies aim at national integration and national unity.

Satellite Broadcast in Malaysia

Malaysia is fortunate that it has the capability and the resources, both human and material, to use satellite technology in broadcasting. Use of satellite technology to link Peninsular Malaysia with its East Malaysian states was first implemented in 1975 with the establishment of a pan-Malaysian television transmission. The technological breakthrough enabled East Malaysians to receive two-way flow of television signals between the domestic Earth stations in Kuantan, Pahang (West Malaysia) via INTELSAT III and the newly erected Earth station in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah (East Malaysia)(See Figure 1). Transmission facilities at the Kuantan Earth satellite station were later improved and updated, and other Earth stations built at Lundu, Melaka (West Malaysia) and Semantan, Sarawak (East Malaysia) to accommodate the increasing needs of broadcasting stations to achieve their organisational and programming objectives. The Sabah and Sarawak broadcasters are now able to relay daily five-minute programme feeds to Kuala Lumpur to be transmitted nationwide.

In retrospect, television transmission was only received by the majority of viewers in most parts of the Malaysian Peninsula in the late 60's although Television Malaysia (TV1) was officially launched from its

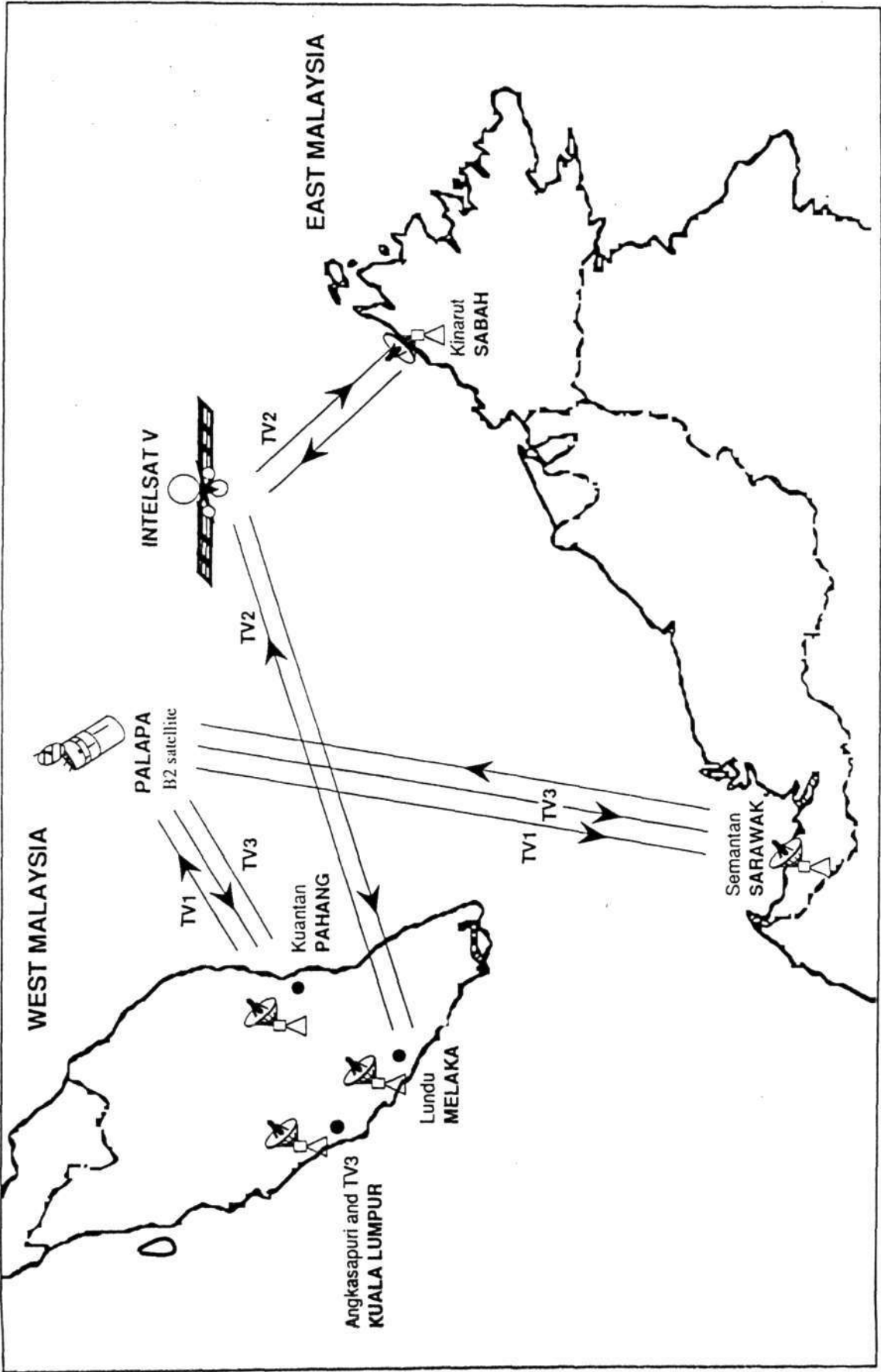


Figure 1 : Broadcast Satellite Transmission in Malaysia

temporary premises in Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur in December 1963. Problems of access to potential sites for transmitting stations, financial constraints and other factors, delayed the establishment of terrestrial links throughout West Malaysia. Sabah had earlier benefited from its newly-built transmitting tower in Kota Kinabalu in late 1971 which enabled a one-hour local East Malaysian programme to be aired. Certain areas in the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak were only able to enjoy television transmission more than a decade later. Television Malaysia's second network could only be shared by viewers in Sabah and Sarawak beginning August 1982. It is safe to say that RTM has achieved 75 percent reach, although the percentage is higher (about 90 percent) in Peninsular Malaysia and about 70 percent in East Malaysia. To date, in spite of technological innovations and adoption, there remains several pocket areas with low population densities that are not receiving any television signal from Kuala Lumpur. In these remote areas, satellite technology in the form of TVRO (Television Receive Only) system could be the answer to communication integration. In relation to TV3, the six-year old private network, its coverage has been expanded throughout most of the Peninsula but is still confined to some urban centers of East Malaysia. Given time, finances and infrastructure, TV3 would soon cover most of East Malaysia as well.

1. Broadcasting Satellites Can Serve to Accelerate Programmes for National Integration Provided Other Intervening Variables Come Into Play

In considering the use of satellites for national integration there are several factors to be considered, namely the tariff structure and information flow. The tariff costs and other related issues will not be discussed in this paper. Emphasis is more on the rapid flow of information as a result of satellite technology and whether that flow can have an impact on the unity of the people.

On the part of television broadcasting practitioners, several questions may be raised:

Should the networks produce specific television programmes with national integration objectives in mind?

If so, what are the so-called national unity programmes?

How should they be produced?

Should the message be explicit?

Would the programmes be well received?

How often should the programmes be aired?

When is the appropriate airtime?

Is national integration expected to occur after viewing?

These are but some of the many questions to be raised despite great technological advances in television broadcasting.

In using satellite broadcasting for national integration, there is a lesson to be learned from the experience of using mass media for development. Mass media had had little or no direct effect on people. Rather, the mass media only reinforced people's existing attitudes and behaviors. One of the reasons why mass media could not fulfill the expectations raised was the characteristic one-way flow of information

dissemination. The human element, participation by the grassroot level, necessary to solve basic human problems, was not present. Furthermore, so much emphases were placed on what the mass media could do rather than what they should actually be used for.

A lot of money had been invested on setting up television systems with the primary aim of "promoting the indigenous, national culture and strengthening the feeling of one people, one nation" (Hedebro, 1979, p.67). The objective turned out to be very difficult to achieve since most developing countries had to rely heavily on imported programmes. The resultant one-way flow of television programmes from the advanced and industrial to the less economically developing countries only served to project the pervasive influence of the West and tended to create false expectations and unrealistic demands among people in the lesser developed countries. In general, the medium has not been viewed as a source of information as the governments would like very much to believe. Instead, television has become **THE** popular entertainment medium.

Broadcasting satellites like mass media are therefore mere conduits that help bring about the **multiplier effect** of information dissemination. Given the opportunity to tune in to the same channel might instil some sense of nationness, but it will not automatically generate national cohesion and consensus. Feeling of oneness, tolerance and the ability to accommodate certainly need time to mature. At the moment, data are scarce to show us how far we have achieved in national integration, the types of constraints to be overcome, the resources that need to be exploited, and the levels of interethnic understanding and tolerance. Admittedly, these are too subjective to be dealt with in terms

of numbers and statistical data. However, the information is important because they could provide valuable input for programme planners and producers.

Programmes, whether informational, educational, entertainment or infortainment, that reflect the common needs, problems, interests, cultural values, and social environment of the audience may be able to inculcate more positive attitudes toward national integration. However, mere exposure does not suffice to generate the needed awareness that is greatly needed for attitudinal and perceptual changes with regards to national integration. Chaffee (1985) suggests that attention toward a certain media programme is a better prediction of knowledge gain compared with media exposure. To attract attention, media programmes must be relevant to the problems and needs of the audience of the audience.

Samsudin (1990) found that for a complex issue such as race relations and unity, there can never be "enough" information. Individuals would always seek additional information to augment their baseline knowledge (see Figure 2). It is therefore important for broadcasters to produce appropriate programmes that correspond with the needs and levels of knowledge of the audiences. For instance, after 33 years of independence there should be more informative and educational programmes to help create more awareness of the issues, constraints, and problems of national integration rather than repetitive reminders of so-called unity programmes that portray 'gotong-royong' projects, annual festivals, goodwill tea parties and multiracial neighbourhood public service campaigns.

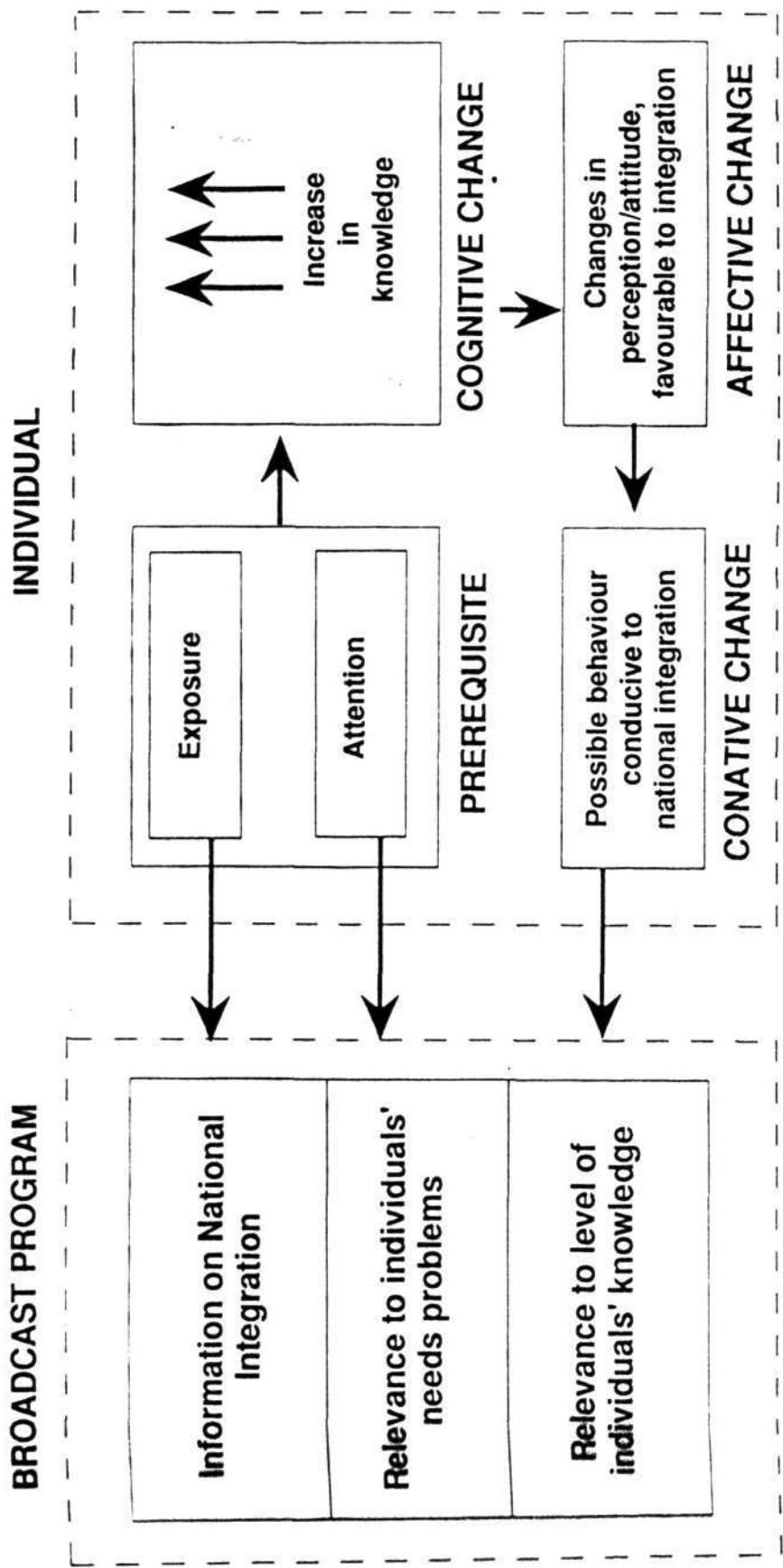


Figure 2 : Relationship between media attention and behavioural change

2. That certain broadcasting programmes may bind people together if they cater to the socio-economic wants and needs of the audiences.

Malaysian television audiences are fragmented by racial, linguistic, social, religious, ethnic, ideological, political and cultural differences including different habits and traditions in matters of food, dress and custom. This heterogeneity has had a great influence on the choice of media content and the shaping of the media culture in the country.

A study on interethnic communication and the mass media showed that unity oriented programmes aired by TV1 and TV2 did not reach all sectors of the target audience. The Malays have a higher exposure to unity oriented programs than the Chinese and Indians. Men are more exposed than women to such unity oriented programmes. Exposure is also high for those proficient in English or Bahasa Malaysia (Yew, et.al, 1986). If the findings, which were confined to Peninsular Malaysia, are to be generalised to East Malaysia, they could imply that a great majority of the population are not exposed to information about unity and integration. It is therefore important for programme planners to pay more attention to suitable programmes that appeal to women, and non-Bahasa Malaysia and English speaking segments of the population so that they could also be exposed to unity oriented information. It is also invaluable to note that, as the study revealed, exposure to unity oriented programmes had a positive impact on interethnic understanding which positively correlated with interethnic communication.

Analysis of television programming schedules from 1964-1987 (Rahmah, 1989) showed that when TV1 was the only television channel in Malaysia, almost 50 percent of local network production was broadcast in Bahasa Malaysia. The other 50 percent were produced in English, Chinese and Indian languages, the bulk of which were news and current affairs programmes. With TV2, most of the local network programmes produced in non-Bahasa Malaysia were channelled to the second network except programmes which had been dubbed or had Bahasa Malaysia subtitles. Interestingly, about 40 percent of the Bahasa Malaysia programmes in TV1 and 51 percent in TV2 were news. With the birth of TV3, programming analysis showed that TV1 followed approximately the same local Bahasa Malaysia programming pattern, but there was a reduction of about 20 percent of TV2's Bahasa Malaysia programmes as the latter increased other language programmes for minority groups between 1986-1987. As for the private network, TV3, all of its local programmes were produced in Bahasa Malaysia during the initial entry into the broadcasting arena. This was later reduced to accommodate 30 percent of news programmes in English.

Although Bahasa Malaysia is used by the broadcasting networks in the hope of national integration, relatively few Chinese audiences watch Bahasa Malaysia or even English-language programmes, preferring to watch Chinese-language programmes instead. Studies by Boyd, Straubhaar & Lent (1989) showed that over 75 percent of video cassette recorders (VCR) in Malaysia were used by the Chinese community who favored video movies in the Chinese language because, as the authors claimed, there were predominantly Bahasa Malaysia programmes on the local television

networks which older Chinese could not comprehend. A 1984 survey conducted by the MARA Institute of Technology (cited by Salleh Mohd. Nor, 1987), also revealed a stronger move toward video cassette recorders among Chinese viewers, particularly because of the availability of video software originating from Hong Kong and Taiwan. This created a dilemma for the government especially in its efforts to integrate a number of cultures through the use of a common, national language.

Likewise, Malaysian Indians who consider the drama, music, dances and other cultural performances of India as culturally and spiritually superior (Rajoo, 1985, pp.172-173), clamour for imported films from India and continue to receive cultural experts, both classical and modern, especially from South India. The challenge to RTM and TV3 is how to attract non-Malay audiences to watch local Bahasa Malaysia programmes on television. On the part of TV3, the idea of the Chinese belt (6.30 pm - 7.00 pm) developed as an effort to draw the Chinese away from VCRs. In fact, scheduling of the Chinese belt was planned to suit their way of life. The idea of specific programme belts for Chinese and English language syndicated programmes were later adopted by RTM.

Television broadcasters realise that it is one of their prime duties to meet the government's national integration objectives. The principle seems simple enough to be carried out but as TV3's Chief Executive Officer, Mohd Nor Salleh said, the implementation can take years (1987):

We hope to identify the common ground, the largest common factor, not the smallest. It is certainly not easy to find the common factor between Chinese and non-Chinese, Malays and non-Malays, Muslims and non-Muslims. It is very objective. We can draw our conclusions based on our limited survey results and see whether there is any modification to be done.

The viewing patterns of Indian audiences or other indigenous groups cannot be ascertained partly because Survey Research Malaysia (SRM), a research agency, often excludes Indians because their numbers were said to be too small to be included. Likewise, SRM has always conducted media research in Peninsular Malaysia and no data are available on East Malaysian viewers. This is another shortcoming that needs to be corrected.

3. That broadcast satellite technology, like any other technology, is not value free.

Malaysia has not escaped the encroachment of Direct Broadcast Satellite (DBS) technology. Despite laws (see Part IV, S.21-24, Telecommunications Act, 1950) that clearly prohibit the use of unlicensed telecommunications, including reception of messages, Dawson (1987, p.1) reported in one of the national newspapers the presence of at least 10 illegal users of the satellite TV receiver system which could be used to tune in to some 259 channels worldwide, including the United States, the Soviet Union, Europe and India. The equipment had been purchased in separate parts from a foreign country with the aim of avoiding detection by the Department of Telecommunications, the regulatory agency for telecommunications hardware in Malaysia.

Broadcast satellite technology, like any other technology, is apolitical. In fact, when the United Nations Working Group on DBS met in 1969, the following objectives were outlined (cited in Signitzer, 1976, p.87):

1. To help in the advancement of principles and purposes of the United Nations.
2. To help increase knowledge, by the peoples of all countries, of current events in the world, and of each other's cultures, beliefs and social interests.
3. To increase educational and health benefits.
4. To induce greater flow of news and information of greater interest.
5. To encourage closer cooperation among people within and between countries.

In theory, a DBS system can accelerate programmes of national integration apart from economic and social development such as in agriculture and health, family and community development, as well as in culture. Satellite communication can also expand free flow of information, disseminate knowledge, and relay cultural exchanges assuming that these are conducted between consenting receivers and senders. Nevertheless, technology also has its intended as well as unintended consequences. As Jayaweera (1985, p.52) posits, ". . . Technology comes in a socio-economic-cultural and political package (which) by its very inner dynamic, seeks to integrate its users into the large system of which it is the expression and the tool."

As a rapidly industrialising country, Malaysia is very conscious of the information explosion that has become a global phenomenon of the 20th century. As part of an interdependent world, the policies and conditions of one part of the world is bound to affect that in other parts

of the world. Malaysia is also aware of the social benefits accruing from satellite technology. However, even without satellite technology, Malaysia is already concerned about the spillover of programmes from her neighbouring countries, namely Singapore, Brunei Darussalam and Thailand. Malaysians living in states bordering Singapore and Brunei were often lost to the neighbouring television stations because of their more attractive entertainment programmes imported from various corners of the world (Amelia, 1985; Azizah, 1984; Beins, 1983). RTM's problems were compounded because some of the audiences had felt that their entertainment needs were ignored. By the time RTM did show the desired programmes, they had already been aired by the neighbouring broadcasting networks. With RTM and TV3 relying on advertising revenues, the problem of defection will be aggravated if audiences have the world television networks at their disposal.

There is a general fear, particularly among the lesser developed countries, that unrestricted international broadcast programming would erode cultural values (a lot hinges on how this is defined), threaten cultural integrity and undermine local broadcasting systems. Leaders in power are also quick to envision the political risks entailed in DBS.

In combination with the socio-cultural-political-economic forces in the Malaysian environment, DBS could also result in an irreversible damage to the national culture and national sovereignty particularly if the use of broadcast satellite receiving systems is liberalised.

Conclusion

An integrated and united Malaysia may only be achieved when the basis for national unity has been examined, deliberated upon, and psychologically accepted. National integration can be achieved in 21st century Malaysia, provided our future generations are nurtured as proud, responsible Malaysians in spite of their physical differences and occasional disagreements, and in spite of those politicians who would choose any bait to gain power and influence.

For satellite broadcasts to have an impact on national integration, a more systematic social science approach to evaluation of programmes should be encouraged. The present viewership survey is not very suitable to evaluate programmes with national integration in mind. Popularity of a programme as indicated by its ratings should not be equated with effectiveness. Programmes could be evaluated at various stages to determine its effectiveness in terms of reach, appropriateness, understanding and knowledge gained.

Malaysia has progressed in terms of communication system integration. Through broadcast satellite technology, the majority of the population has been reached but in terms of cultural and social integration there are more to be achieved. It is time to reconsider the utilisation of broadcast satellites not merely for the sake of reaching the audience at large but to generate sufficient attention in order to bring about positive behavioural changes and sense of commitment towards national integration through effective broadcast programming.

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