

# Communication education : responding to media needs

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Draft for Discussion Only

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# Communication Education: Responding to Media Needs

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Every now and then, the education sector is confronted with questions relating to its functions and roles in national societies. More often than not, these questions touch some fundamental philosophical issues that have been answered rather vaguely and inconclusively. One of the more important questions is, must education respond to the needs of the industry that it is supposed to provide and train human resources for. Further, and in the first place, is education a responder of needs, or is education a leader of knowledge and a moulder of personalities.

In this paper, we will attempt to address communication education in light of the above consideration so as to encompass a broader and deeper discussion of the topic at hand. We will also attempt to provide a systemic perspective of communication education and examine it in view of the knowledge society that we are heading for (or are we already there?).

Therefore, before we deliberate on whether communication education should respond to media needs or otherwise, it is necessary to argue whether education should subject itself to merely fulfilling the manpower needs of an industry, or education should have the purpose to mould the people into good citizens. Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim suggests that 'education should never be purely utilitarian. We want to cultivate and produce good citizenry, meaning that there must be cultural, spiritual and moral dimensions that need to be embedded in the education system' (New Straits Times, Sept. 25).

### **The communication industry**

The communication industry has a significant role to play in a nation's development. In Malaysia, the mass media, especially newspapers, were at the forefront in awakening nationalism to achieve independence. In the same manner, the mass media have played a significant role in mobilizing the people to participate actively in post independent development activities. With regard to activating economic activities, the mass media alone were able to generate a revenue of RM1,398 million from advertisements.

The success of development policies was partly due to the active support given by the mass media in disseminating information to inform and motivate the people to accept changes and respond to challenges that were created to improve their livelihoods.

The electronic media, radio and television, until mid 1980s were government owned. It acted as the long arm of the government to disseminate development policies to the people. The newspapers, although privately owned, were serious newspapers, full of social agendas. Until recently, things have slowly changed both in terms of media ownerships and its purpose.

The high economic growth rate that the country is experiencing has led to the overall improvement in the quality of life. It is not that we are complaining. Nevertheless, the bright side of economic well being has been blurred by the much publicised deterioration of social values. This means that our social development is not at par with our economic development. In fact, many believe that we have retrogressed in terms of social and moral values.

The Prime Minister Dato Sri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad has on several occasions stressed that we are not going to emulate the west, where they succeeded in terms of economic and technological development but at the expense of social development. The Prime Minister wants Malaysians to retain and practice their good traditional eastern values while at the same time experiencing economic success.

At the recent briefing on dadah abuse, the Prime Minister was told that there are 180,000 registered dadah addicts in the country. If a ratio of three dadah addicts unregistered for very one addict registered, the overall number of addicts could easily reached half a million. It was reported that 9,000 youth joined the rank of addicts annually over the last 10 years.

Among school children, it is said that there is an increase in indiscipline, notably truancy, disrespect toward teachers, a general disregard of time management, untidiness in appearance, and an overall lack of social manners.

Frequent coverage of social issues in the media has generated public discussions on the issues. While some fingers are pointed to parents and government policies, there are substantial fingers directed at the mass media. Media, especially television, was accused as the main culprit in inculcating alien values through its programmes.

The introduction of a private television station TV3 in 1984 and its ability to chart an impressive growth of audience resulted in RM92 million advertising values within four years of its inception has sparked severe competition from RTM. To compete for advertising revenues, TV stations are airing popular imported programmes which in many instances included scenes of violence and sex.. By the end of this year another private TV station will be in operation, that is Metro TV (TV4). Soon after that there is going to be subscription network services (SNS) television with three channels of news and sports programmes.

Although we are yet to have cable TV, video rental market is providing 'cable' network worth about RM240 million. The video and laser disc rental outlets are flourishing all over even in remote and smaller towns. According to the Minister of Information, Datuk Mohamad Rahmat (1994), video outlets have about 60,000 subscribers for Chinese serials alone.

Although the government does not permit violence, horror and sex on television, such themes could easily be found in video tapes at outlets across the country. A study on loafing among Malaysian youths found that 40 percent of the 6,110 respondents admitted that their peers had the experience of watching x-rated videos which they could easily rent from the outlets (Samsudin, 1994).

Another area that needs to be mentioned is the film and video industry. The bottom line in the operation of production houses is to make profits through their involvement in the productions of films for cinemas as well as production of video for TV. Usually the production houses have to come out with a saleable formula which could appeal to the market segment such as youth as the main market for cinemas. The recent success of 'Sembilu', a local film production that generates RM 4 million ticket sales reinforces the box office formula that feature films should comprise popular local singers, glamorous life styles, and puppy love story line.

Direct broadcast satellite (DBS) is yet to come to Malaysian homes officially, although there are several hundreds illegal parabolic antenna especially in Sarawak. While the government might give its approval in years to come, the main concern is how does a nation guard against moral subversion, ghetto culture and unhealthy trend setting. According to the Minister of Information 'the delay in allowing DBS is for two reasons: to let the global networks settle down and understand Asia, and let ourselves expedite the education of the masses and entrench our Asian values and cultures among our younger generations so that in the 21st. century the world would be a better place because of us Asians (Mohamad,1994).



The rapid expansion of communication industry and rapid advancement in telecommunication technology not only requires trained and skilled manpower, but it also creates a situation whereby we as media consumers are vulnerable to media contents. As such communication education should not be limited to educating and training personnel to produce programmes and manage media organizations. Communication education should include educating media consumers to be media literate.

Communication education should encompass:

- a) Formal education at tertiary level to produce graduates who will join the communication industry,
- b) Non formal training (in-house and in-service training) for working and inspiring communication personnel,
- c) Formal media education incorporated in school curriculum to prepare young people to be media literate,
- d) Informal media education that requires the involvement of families, especially parents, in the homes.

According to Masterson (1983), media education aims to increase the learners' understanding of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they go about constructing reality. Such approach would enable media consumers to discriminate between the more worthy forms of popular culture and its more corrupting and valueless manifestations. The main aim of media

education is to enable the youth to respond and react to what they view on television and film, what they read in the press, and to what they listen from the radio.

Dessaucy (1980) encourage the partners of the mass media (i.e. the audience) to participate more fully with the producers (broadcasters, journalists etc.) in the process of mass communication. According to him, 'just as the public has the right to literacy training, so it has the right to education for communication through the media'.

One important aspect of communication/media education is to encourage the audience to write through the media. It signifies the skill to communicate and to express oneself in a variety of media. This is especially important for the younger generation since whatever news about youth are always written through the eyes of adults who acted as journalists, editors or producers.

A report on Media and Youth in Australia points out that youth are being given positive coverage especially in areas of sports and entertainment because they did not threaten and overshadow the success story of adults. Other than that, youth are being portrayed negatively as being associated with crimes, drugs, hooliganism and other negative social problems. Mus Chairil and Samsudin (1994) in their study of portrayal of youth in print media, found that 47 percent of youth that get prominent coverage in local dailies and magazines are pop singers, actors, and models. Not much coverage is given to those who have been successful in other professions. This may be one of the reasons why youth who are involved in loafing activities do not have role models to emulate besides politicians (Samsudin, 1994).

With such a situation, it is no wonder that the mass media is being blamed by all sectors as a corrupter of moral values and a source of social ills. Thus, in this paper, we wish to ask should communication education respond to media needs if media needs are not in concordance with the national aspirations of the country.

### **National Aspirations**

Three factors are at the forefront of Malaysia's aspirations - national development, well-being of the people, and racial solidarity. Over the last 37 years as an independent nation, Malaysia has formulated its national aspirations based on the country's multi-ethnics and multi-religions. The first real attempt at formulating a national philosophy was made after the May 13 incident, known as the Rukunegara. The Rukunegara encompasses unity, democratic way of life, a just and progressive society, and a liberal approach to the country's rich and diverse cultural traditions. The five principles of Rukunegara are belief in God, loyalty to King and country, upholding the constitution, rule of law, and good behaviour and morality.

Although not as intensely used as Pancasila in Indonesia, Rukunegara has nevertheless made an impact as the essence of the nation's aspirations, in terms of what sort of nation the country intends to evolve. Rukunegara is used as the basis for the Malaysian Journalism Ethics proclaimed several years ago.

This is further strengthened by the objectives of 2020 Vision. The objectives of the 2020 Vision are, among other things, to develop a

strong Malaysian nation, a fully industrialised nation based on high technology, and to uplift the country's image so that it will be respected at international level. The Vision also identifies nine challenges to be faced by the nation. In all these, the media can play a very important role. The question of whether the media is playing that role now remains. Ideally, the media should be playing the role of fulfilling national aspirations.

The print media comprises the national dailies, the weeklies, and the magazines. The national dailies are also known as the mainstream newspapers --- their owners are giants in the industry, such as the New Straits Times Group, the Utusan Group, the Star Group, the Nanyang Siang Pau, etc. On the other hand, the weeklies are mostly relatively small outfits. In the Malay language alone there are more than ten -- namely Warta Perdana, Bacaria, Mingguan Wawasan, Buletin Utama, Era Baru, Mingguan Politik, Media Islam, Mingguan Tempo, Mingguan Utara and Pentas Dunia.

The role of the press is <sup>to</sup> inform, to educate and to entertain. The role of the press is seen not only to fulfil the needs of audience but also to mould their minds. This moulding of minds comes in two forms:

- i. intentionally
- ii. unintentionally

The mainstream press contributes more towards intentional moulding - through serious and educational articles. However, the tabloids, provide the unintentional moulding of minds through their more entertaining, sensational reporting, albeit negative moulding of minds.

The tabloids also tend to exploit audience for market, as a result the tabloid papers have to go for more sensational kind of reporting. Several of these tabloid newspapers are now facing court action because of defamatory reporting.

It must be remembered that the media industry is also a business. As such, it relies much on popular tastes and mass market. Must we blame the media for its nature? Certainly not, at least not fully. It is unfair to pinpoint at the media solely for all the ills of society. After all, the media is just one subsystem in the larger system of human society. There is definitely an arena where an intervention mechanism can be implanted, designed and devised so that society may know how to handle the onslaught of media messages, especially the negative ones. This arena is of course communication education. We would like to reiterate that communication education functions not just to pass on skills to meet the peculiar needs of the industry, but also to teach and cultivate among personnels and audiences alike a sense of moral responsibility, personal accountability, and social and civic consciousness.

Thus, we contend that :

- a. Communication education should not confine itself to developing specific skills. For example, a journalism course should include social sciences subjects (e.g. psychology, sociology) not so much of injecting the subject matter, but to make the would-be journalists understand about himself and about others who are going to be his audience.

b. Communication education should also include subject matters on government policies and social agendas. Its main purpose is to inculcate a sense of purpose for the media practitioners so that they will revolve around those issues when they plan their programme and news. For example, a TV programme or film should not be considered as successful just merely because it has a high rating or a box office success. Programmes or films, articles or books, purely for entertainment's sake do not contribute much to nation building. It has to be a blend of education and entertainment. Toward this endeavour, can we find the magic formula? What is the magic formula?

c. Primary and secondary schools should be encouraged to introduce media education in their curriculum. For example, school children should be taught how advertisements and commercials are created and why they used certain psychological appeals to attract consumers. By understanding the technique, children should be able to interpret advertisements and make decisions based on facts rather than pseudo representations.

d. Communication schools in universities and other higher institutions of learning need to include in their curriculum a formal and compulsory course on ethics, moral philosophies, and social responsibilities so as to create and nurture among communication students and scholars 'good sense, personal accountability, and sound moral judgement' as participants in a culture.

## Conclusion

To close, allow us to borrow a phrase from the management guru, Peter Drucker (1993):

"The educated person needs to be able to bring his or her knowledge to bear on the present, not to mention molding the future."

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