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The Changing Media Environment:
Implications For Communication Education And Training

By

Tan Sri A Samad Ismail
THE RAPID PROGRESS IN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY IN AN AGE OF GLOBALISATION POSES CHALLENGES TO THE MEDIA THAT ARE EQUALLY DAUNTING TO PRACTITIONERS AND EDUCATORS.

THERE IS THE REALITY OF AN IMBALANCED RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE SOUTH AND THE NORTH, WITH ITS VASTLY SUPERIOR TECHNOLOGY AND FAR LARGER RESOURCES. DEVELOPING COUNTRIES LIKE MALAYSIA, FACED WITH THE TASK OF NATION-BUILDING, HAVE TO CONTEND WITH INCREASING PRESSURE FROM A LARGELY HOSTILE WESTERN MEDIA SEEKING TO PERPETUATE THEIR POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DOMINANCE.

HERBERT SCHILLER IN HIS BOOK "MASS MEDIA EMPIRE" DESCRIBES THE RELATIONSHIP AS A MANIFESTATION OF "COMMUNICATION IMPERIALISM."
HE SAYS: "A POWERFUL COMMUNICATION SYSTEM EXISTS TO SECURE NOT GRUDGING SUBMISSION BUT AN OPEN-ARMED ALLEGIANCE IN THE PENETRATED AREAS BY IDENTIFYING THE AMERICAN PRESENCE WITH FREEDOM - FREEDOM OF TRADE, FREEDOM OF SPEECH AND FREEDOM OF ENTERPRISE."

HE IS DISTURBED BY THE WAY THE "EMERGING IMPERIAL NETWORK OF AMERICAN ECONOMIES AND FINANCE UTILISES THE COMMUNICATION MEDIA FOR ITS EXPANSION TO LOCALES WHERE IT HOPES TO BECOME ACTIVE.

IN HIS BOOK HE EXPLAINS HOW THE MULTINATIONAL CORPORATIONS ACT AS THE ENGINES FOR AMERICAN EXPANSION. THE METHODOLOGY IS PROVIDED BY WHAT HE CALLS THE COMMUNICATION APPARATUS WHICH THESE INDUSTRIAL GIANTS HAVE AT THEIR DISPOSAL. WITHOUT IT, HE IS SURE THAT THE NEW IMPERIAL SURGE WOULD BE INEFFECTIVE, COMING AS IT DOES ON THE HEELS OF POLITICAL LIBERATION IN SO MANY FORMER COLONIES.

THE US-BASED TRANSNATIONAL NEWS NETWORK EVEN HAVE A WIDER REACH. JAMES WEST IN HIS BOOK "THE US MASS MEDIA AS
A MONOPOLY OCTOPUS" SAYS THAT ASSOCIATED PRESS OR AP ALONE SUPPLIED 100,000 FOREIGN NEWSPAPERS AND BROADCASTING STATIONS IN OVER 100 COUNTRIES IN THE EARLY 1930s. AP'S WORLD SERVICE DIRECTOR STAN SWINTON IS PROUD OF THE INFLUENCE THE AMERICAN NEWS AGENCY EXERTS. HE BOASTS THAT OVER A BILLION PEOPLE A DAY MAKE THEIR VALUE JUDGEMENT ON INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENTS ON THE BASIS OF AP NEWS.

MEANWHILE, HUGE ENTERPRISES IDENTIFIED WITH MILITARY PRODUCTION AND MICRO-ELECTRONICS ARE REPORTED TO HAVE ALREADY ABSORBED CULTURAL INDUSTRIES. STUDIES SHOW THAT THEY OWN, AT WORLD LEVEL, 90 PER CENT OF THE FACTS AND FIGURES ACCUMULATED IN DATA BANKS.

THEIR PRIZE POSSESSIONS INCLUDE 82 PER CENT OF MICRO-ELECTRONIC COMPONENTS, 75 PER CENT AND PERHAPS MORE OF TV PROGRAMMES, 65 PER CENT OF NEWS DISSEMINATION, 50 PER CENT OF FILMS, AND MORE THAN 200 SATELLITES CIRCLING THE EARTH, MOST OF THEM OF A SECRET NATURE. I HAVE CITED THESE FINDINGS TO GIVE AN INKLING OF WESTERN DOMINANCE OF THE WORLD MEDIA AND THE PERVASIVE INFLUENCE
EXERCISED BY THE ADVANCED COUNTRIES OF NORTH AMERICA AND EUROPE THROUGH THEIR CONTROL OF THE TOOLS AND CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION.


IN HER BOOK, "THE MANIPULATED PRESS", OFRENEO SAYS THAT AMERICAN INTERESTS HAD UNQUESTIONED DOMINANCE IN THE CONDUCT OF INTERNATIONAL COMMUNICATION BY THE EARLY 60s.

SHE SAYS THE SIZE AND RANGE OF US-BASED TRANSNATIONAL CORPORATIONS INVOLVED IN MEDIA DEFY THE IMAGINATION.
CBS, for example, operated in 100 countries, controlled 72 overseas subsidiaries and provided programmes in 94 countries in 1973. NBC had direct investments in 13 TV stations in eight countries and sold its programmes to 80 countries.

And she expects worse to come. As technology becomes more sophisticated and therefore more capital-intensive due to revolutionary advances in the field of computers, satellites and telecommunications, she believes that it will become more and more the purview of giant transnational concerns like IBM, ITT, ATT, General Dynamics, Control Data and General Electric.

Western domination of the global information system has resulted in discriminatory and unfair treatment of news about developing countries like Malaysia. It is fortunate that our nation's political, economic and social progress has provided us with the resilience to withstand continuous pressures from the Western media.
WESTERN CONCEPTS ON THE ROLE AND FUNCTIONS OF THE PRESS CONTINUE TO INFLUENCE THE MEDIA EDUCATORS IN THE COUNTRY. MASS COMMUNICATORS STILL THINK THAT THEIR PRIMARY FUNCTION AS JOURNALISTS IS TO BE THE WATCHDOG FOR SOCIETY VIS A VIS THE GOVERNMENT.

IN THE PHILIPPINES WHERE COMMUNICATION EDUCATORS PATTERN THEIR SYLLABUS ON THE AMERICAN MODEL, MORE AND MORE JOURNALISTS ARE SAID TO HAVE COME TO BELIEVE THAT UNFETTERED FREEDOM WITHOUT A DEEP SENSE OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY CAN HARM THE WELL-BEING OF THE NATION.

AS FOR OUR OWN COUNTRY, I THINK WE SHOULD GO BEYOND OUR CONVENTIONAL ROLE OF BEING MERE RECORDERS OF EVENTS AND ISSUES. WE SHOULD DELVE INTO THE POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, SOCIAL AND CULTURAL DIMENSIONS AND HELP READERS TO UNDERSTAND ISSUES AND EVENTS THAT TOUCH UPON THEIR LIVES AND VITAL INTERESTS. IN A SOCIETY UNDERGOING RAPID CHANGE SUCH AS OURS, JOURNALISTS SHOULD TRY TO IDENTIFY AND ANALYSE CAUSES AND IN THIS WAY ASSIST THE PEOPLE TO
RECOGNISE PROBLEMS AND PERHAPS MOTIVATE THEM TO ACT COLLECTIVELY TO OVERCOME THEM.

IDEALLY THE MEDIA SHOULD CREATE THE CONDITIONS THAT ENABLE THEM, IN CONCERT WITH NGOs, TO MOBILISE PUBLIC OPINION ON CRITICAL PROBLEMS AFFECTING THE NATION. THERE SHOULD BE RAPPORT BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND PUBLIC ORGANISATIONS AT EVERY LEVEL OF SOCIETY TO ESPOUSE POPULAR CAUSES IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST.

THE MEDIA ARE ESSENTIALLY A POWER BROKER. THEIR BASIC FUNCTION IS, OF COURSE, TO DISSEMINATE INFORMATION. BUT APART FROM BEING PURREYORS OF INFORMATION, THE MEDIA HAVE THE RESPONSIBILITY OF HELPING TO BRING ABOUT A BETTER QUALITY OF LIFE FOR THE PEOPLE. THEY COULD CONTRIBUTE MEANINGFULLY TOWARDS BROADENING THE DEMOCRATIC POWER BASE OF THE PEOPLE AND RESTRUCTURING POWER RELATIONS IN SOCIETY.

THE MEDIA SHOULD HAVE THEIR OWN VISION OF THE KIND OF SOCIETY THAT THEY WANT TO HELP CREATE IN THE LONG TERM. THEY SHOULD HAVE THEIR OWN NATIONAL AGENDA THAT IS
REALISTIC AND ACHIEVABLE. UPPERMOST ON THE AGENDA SHOULD BE EFFORTS TO ACHIEVE GREATER ETHNIC INTEGRATION AMONG THE PEOPLE. WE SHOULD REACH A CONSENSUS ON THE PRACTICAL MEASURES THAT WE COULD UNDERTAKE COLLECTIVELY TO CARRY OUT OUR NATIONAL AGENDA.

ONE OF OUR MOST CRUCIAL TASKS TODAY AND IN THE YEARS TO COME IS TO BUILD UPON THE PRESENT STATE OF RACIAL HARMONY AN ENDURABLE AND STRONG FOUNDATION THAT COULD WITHSTAND THE RIGOURS OF POSSIBLE CRISIS SITUATIONS INVOLVING ETHNIC ISSUES.

THE GUIDELINES WHICH EDITORS ROUTINELY DRAW UP FOR THEIR STAFF HAVE PROVEN TO BE UNSATISFACTORY BECAUSE THEY DO NOT SPELL OUT DEFINITE STEPS FOR RESPONDING TO CRISIS SITUATIONS. THE GUIDELINES ARE TOO GENERAL AND MAY NOT BE REALLY USEFUL IN THE DAY-TO-DAY OPERATIONS OF THE NEWSROOMS WHERE JUNIOR SUB-EDITORS AND REPORTERS OFTEN HAVE TO MAKE SNAP JUDGEMENTS. EVEN EDITORS MAKE ERRORS IN JUDGEMENT. WHEN DEALING WITH A SENSITIVE SUBJECT, THE EASY WAY OUT IS TO BLACK OUT THE STORY OR TO PLAY IT DOWN,
RESULTING IN FRUSTRATIONS ALL ROUND. THE SELF-CENSORSHIP SYNDROME PLEASES FEW PEOPLE, AND CERTAINLY NOT THE READER SEEKING INFORMATION ON THE ISSUE OR EVENT IN QUESTION.

I THINK WHAT WE NEED MOST URGENTLY IS PROPER TRAINING FOR OUR JOURNALISTS ON THE TECHNIQUES OF HANDLING SENSITIVE STORIES INVOLVING ETHNIC ISSUES. SENSITIVE STORIES SHOULD BE HANDLED BY SENSITIVE JOURNALISTS, TRAINED TO REPORT IN DEPTH AND TO ANALYSE ISSUES.

MOST JOURNALISTS CAN REPORT EVENTS OBJECTIVELY AND ACCURATELY. BUT EVENTS HAVE TO BE ANALYSED TO HELP THE READER TO UNDERSTAND THEIR SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS IN A WIDER CONTEXT. TAKE THE CASE OF THE PIG FARMS WHICH HAVE BEEN WIDELY FEATURED IN THE MEDIA RECENTLY. THE WASTE FROM THE FARMS IS REPORTED TO HAVE POLLUTED THE SEPANG RIVER IN SELANGOR SO BADLY THAT IT HAS CEASED TO BECOME A SOURCE OF LIVELIHOOD TO THE KAMPUNG PEOPLE LIVING NEARBY. HERE IS A SITUATION THAT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO CAUSE ETHNIC TENSION. ON ONE SIDE, YOU HAVE PIG BREEDERS WHO ARE ETHNIC CHINESE.
ON THE OTHER, YOU HAVE MALAY VILLAGERS. WE SHOULD ASK OURSELVES WHETHER WE HAVE HANDLED THE MATTER WELL, WHETHER WE HAVE STUDIED IT IN DEPTH AND TRIED TO GET ALL CONCERNED TO LOOK AT THE PROBLEM IN PERSPECTIVE AND WITH CONSIDERATION TO THE FEELINGS OF BOTH PARTIES, AND WHETHER THE NEWS ORGANISATIONS HAVE WORKED TOGETHER TO TRY AND BRING REASON TO BEAR.

THE POINT IS THAT SUCH PROBLEMS SHOULD BE DEALT WITH SENSITIVELY WITH ALL NEWS ORGANISATIONS HELPING TO CREATE BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF THE ISSUES AND AMONG THE PEOPLE INVOLVED. THAT IS WHY I AM SUGGESTING THAT THE MEDIA AGREE ON A NATIONAL AGENDA SO THAT SUCH ISSUES OF COMMON CONCERN COULD BE HANDLED COLLECTIVELY AND EFFECTIVELY.

THERE ARE OTHER SOCIAL ISSUES THAT CALL FOR CONCERTED ACTION BY THE MEDIA, INCLUDING ENVIRONMENTAL DAMAGE, AIDS, DRUG ABUSE AND WIFE BASHING. THEY MIGHT NOT BOOST CIRCULATION FIGURES BUT THEY ARE PROBLEMS THAT CONCERN ALL LEVELS OF SOCIETY.
IT WOULD BE USEFUL IF SCHOOLS OF COMMUNICATION INCLUDE RACE RELATIONS AND THE MEDIA'S ROLE IN HELPING TO FOSTER THEM AND SOLVE ETHNIC PROBLEMS AS A SUBJECT OF STUDY. IT IS NOT ENOUGH TO TEACH MASS COMMUNICATION STUDENTS THE SKILLS OF THE TRADE, SUCH AS HOW TO GATHER FACTS AND WRITE A NEWS STORY FROM THEM.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO INculcate IN THE STUDENTS THE RIGHT VALUES AND ATTITUDES SO THAT THEY FULFIL THEIR OBLIGATIONS AS CITIZENS IN A DEVELOPING SOCIETY. LANGUAGE SKILLS ARE IMPORTANT BUT THEY SHOULD BE BALANCED BY A FACILITY TO ANALYSE AND INTERPRET EVENTS AND ISSUES. THIS PRESUPPOSES GOOD GROUNDING IN CRITICAL THINKING.

IN AN AGE OF RAPID PROGRESS IN COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY, STUDENTS SHOULD ALSO BE FAMILIARISED WITH NEW DEVELOPMENTS IN THIS FIELD. THE TRAINING SHOULD ALSO BE FUTURISTIC IN THAT IT HELPS STUDENTS TO ANTICIPATE THE CHANGES AND ADVANCES TO COME. IN OTHER WORDS, WE SHOULD RESTRUCTURE THE TRAINING SO THAT OUR STUDENTS BECOME NOT ONLY EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATORS BUT COMMITTED AGENTS OF SOCIAL CHANGE.
AS COMMUNICATORS THEY SHOULD BE FAMILIAR WITH THE NATION'S HISTORY AND CULTURE. WE SHOULD INSTIL IN OUR STUDENTS VALUES THAT ARE ROOTED IN OUR TRADITIONS, NOT THOSE THAT ARE BORROWED OR GRAFTED INTO OUR VALUE SYSTEM FROM OUTSIDE.

THERE SHOULD BE WIDER SCOPE FOR OPENNESS AND DEMOCRATIC PRACTICE IN CLASSROOMS AND BETWEEN LECTURERS AND STUDENTS. AND THERE SHOULD BE GREATER EXPOSURE OF STUDENTS TO THE ENVIRONMENT OUTSIDE THEIR CLASSROOMS TO ENHANCE THEIR AWARENESS OF SOCIETY AND THEIR OBLIGATIONS TO IT.

FREQUENT DIALOGUES BETWEEN MEDIA PRACTITIONERS AND EDUCATORS WOULD BE USEFUL TO BOTH. THE EDUCATORS COULD CONTRIBUTE IDEAS AND GIVE FEEDBACK THAT CAN HELP RAISE PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS. THE PRACTITIONERS COULD SUGGEST WAYS TO IMPROVE THE SYLLABUS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF THE MEDIA.

OURS, AS I LIKE TO REMIND PEOPLE, IS A PLURAL SOCIETY THAT IS DOING A GOOD JOB OF WORKING AND LIVING TOGETHER AND FORGING AHEAD JOINTLY. MEDIA PRACTITIONERS MUST BE
RESPONSIVE TO THE ASPIRATIONS AND NEEDS OF OUR SOCIETY. THEY MUST INVOLVE PEOPLE AT ALL LEVELS IN THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS.

IT IS THEIR DUTY ALSO TO ENSURE THAT THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS IS NOT LOP-SIDED. THIS MEANS CREATING CONDITIONS TO ENABLE ALL GROUPS IN EVERY CORNER OF THE COUNTRY TO ENJOY QUALITY INFORMATION ON MATTERS THAT AFFECT THEIR INTERESTS AND WELL-BEING. AN INFORMED AND ARTICULATE SOCIETY IS IN THE FINAL ANALYSIS OUR GREATEST STRENGTH IN FACING THE CHALLENGES OF GLOBALISATION.