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The Needs Of The Media:
How Does Communication Education Measure Up?

By

Zainal Abidin Ibrahim
THE NEEDS OF THE MEDIA: HOW DOES COMMUNICATION EDUCATION MEASURE UP?

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen.

Let us not be bored by definitions, details and data because I offer none.

The needs of the media in terms of human resources would be, simply put: creative and intelligent broadcasters. Those individuals who can sign on and work on the very first day.

The needs of the media, with specific reference to RTM are many and varied thus limiting the scope of the forthcoming discussion to those people in the production area.

THE INTAKE PROCEDURES

As any 'normal' government department the intake process would require people with college degrees but not specially those from the communication discipline. But with the challenges ahead I'm sure this will change. Specialization would be the order of the day in the very near future.

The situation now seems to be heading nowhere. There is always a certain amount of risk involved during each intake. More often than not those who are really interested and those who have certain background (theatre etc) make it to the 'top' while the rest lingers on.

Once taken in these 'rookies' would be put through a short process of on-the-job training plus a short stint (normally 7 weeks) at the training institute and then left 'on their own' too fend for themselves.
Any amount of training cannot make up for the lack of interest and creativity that a station really needs of an individual. But because, for now, the entry requirement is such, the station is dependent heavily on graduates from the institution of higher learning to fill in the vacuum for producers.

THE NEED OF THE STATION

It is basically to feed the 'hungry monster' for approximately 18 hours a day, seven days a week. Though foreign programmes seem to have dominated a few years back, the trend in Asia now is forwards local content.

Though RTM has always emphasized on message first and money second (MEMO) creative and innovative programmes are the vehicle for carrying both functions. Being a government vehicle the task of creating awareness and translating government policies is not necessarily easy but by no means difficult. This is where creativity and innovation play their role.

Having a panel discussion about 'the new economic policy and how the rakyat could support it' is not everyone's idea of an interesting program no matter how informative it may sound.

Serving the needs of the children, the teenagers, the urban and rural people, the commonfolk and the politician etc, is how RTM's role is perceived to be by the powers that be.

So you have a handful of programmes targeted forwards the masses juxtaposed in a commercially yet 'controlled' programming as the basic of those needs.
COMMUNICATION EDUCATION?

Who then are the people who can achieve these tasks for the station.

A I said earlier those who can work on their very first day. Having a training arm and providing on-the-job training is an inheritance that we could ill-afford in the future. As it is now it would be time-consuming with high expenditures incurred and no guarantees. Who then should train them?
Answer: Communication Education

As I see it there are various courses involving a lot of disciplines in the communication schools of most of the local universities and ITM. But the system practised by most would be to gear the students towards a master’s programme, generally speaking.

Theoretical beginnings and considerations are and should be of the utmost importance in any institution of higher learning, but where does it leaves the student in the hunt for jobs when they graduate.

THE APPROACH (MAYBE)

Towards a more professional approach. Students geared towards the job market rather than a general degree. Perhaps the approach towards the degree for doctors, lawyers and accountants, just to name a few, could be the starting point in communication education. Their 'internship' would mainly be for familiarisation more than anything else, for they have already been trained to perform the tasks.
As it is now those who do 'practical training' in RTM have no obvious task to perform other than look and learn. Those that do, perform simple routine functions as helpers to the production, simply learning how things function at a small corner of the organisation. More often than not this is achieved through the 'willingness' and cooperation of a few individuals who understand their needs and purpose for being there. Others would just follow the production crew taking notes wherever necessary to present to their lecturers later on as a prerequisite for their credit hours.

I say this because RTM is not a training organisation and will never be one. The "attachment periods" that the undergrads go through would be of more benefit if it is planned more carefully. Perhaps:

(i) A careful analysis of what the organisation can offer to undergrads be made first.

(ii) A specific 'chore' is designed for each in consultation with the station.

(iii) A continuous process attachment every year whereby the students can gain more knowledge each time they come.

(iv) The students are more prepared for the 'specific' function of the attachment.

Some of the above suggestion could only be implemented if the universities (ITM) themselves have the facilities for the 'proper' training and guidance of the students. It may suggest some heavy capital investment in terms of equipment and professional tutors. Alone perhaps it would be difficult but by pooling their resources maybe it can be done.
The students would benefit from that kind of training and would no longer be required to familiarise themselves when they come for attachments.

SUMMARY:
As you already know this paper doesn't even pretend to answer the issue put before us today. It does give a brief outline of the task expected of the organisation and our experience with students that come to us for attachments. Some suggestions are given but merely as issues for debate and maybe if we're lucky the debate could result in a friendly quarrel.
Thank you for your patience.