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The Press In Sabah And Sarawak:
A Brief Status Report

By

Abdul Razak
The Press in Sabah and Sarawak

A Brief Status Report

By Abdul Razak

AMIC Project Consultant for Southeast Asia

Forward

This Report for the Rural Press Consultancy Project was based on visits to Kota Kinabalu (Sabah) from April 15-17, 1990, and to Kuching (Sarawak) from April 17-19, 1990.

The appointments for interviews with the resource persons were arranged by AMIC through correspondence and phone calls from Singapore. But it seemed that the message did not get across to their fullest possible understanding of the Survey purposes so that when I arrived at Kota Kinabalu, they were not aware of the survey visit schedule.

During the very limited time available, the surveyor could only talk to Ms Noria Palalun, group executive for public affairs of Yayasan Sabah (Sabah Foundation). She was assigned by her boss, Mr Edward Sung Burongoh, group manager of the Foundation, to help in the collection of information.

She was interviewed as a resource person. Her authority as a resource person was justified by her direct involvement with the foundation's development policy planning and her observation of the Sabah newspapers.
She offered help to deliver the two sets of questionnaires to the editors of the three tri-lingual local newspapers - Daily Express, Sabah Times, and Borneo Mail. The surveyor could not personally meet with the editors because they were not around.

Nevertheless, they did not respond. Mr. Edward Sung Burungoh of Sabah Foundation wrote me, saying the three selected papers for interviews were not interested in the Rural Press Project. He said the papers could not qualify for the project since all of them are self-sustaining.

"The degree of their community service is basically equal," says Mr. Burongoh.

The other resource persons, Mr. Emir Madi of Sabah Times and Mr. J. Leong Sai Ho of the Institute for Development Studies (Sabah) were not around and could not be contacted.

Similar unfortunate schedule was also encountered in the visit to Kuching. Only one person out of two suggested resource persons was available for interview.

Mr. Zakariya Abdul Wahab, BERNAMA Bureau Chief, was interviewed in his capacity as a routine observer of the local newspapers which subscribe the agency's news services. He is therefore assumed knowledgeable about the status and problems of Kuching press.

Mr. Salleh Rafil, information director, was not around at the time of the visit. His secretary, Ms. Yoke Lim told me that the director was on leave to Kuala Lumpur from 16-23 April 1990.
SABAH

With a population of one million, which includes 700,000 in Kota Kinabalu, Sabah has ten daily newspapers — Sabah Times (using English, Malay and Kadazan languages; 15,000 copies), Asia Times (15,300 copies), Daily Express (14,600 copies), Merdeka Daily News (23,000 copies), Borneo Mail (15,000 copies), Morning News (Tawau, 16,150 copies), Overseas Chinese Daily News (KK, 10,800 copies), Sabah Shi Pao (5,000 copies), Sandakan Jih Pao (Sandakan, 12,000 copies), and Morning Post (Tawau, 14,150 copies).

Chinese constitutes one-fifth of Sabah population. This explains why the State has seven dailies in Chinese. Two papers, Sabah Times and Daily Express, use English, Malay and Kadazan in news presentation to cater to their readers.

Statistics show there are about 100,000 people of local tribes.

Newspapers in Sabah are not interested in putting up a rural press due to limited potential readerships and high operation costs to deliver copies to remote rural areas. It makes sense if the three newspapers listed in the survey schedule are not interested to participate in the proposed rural press project.

"All of them are already self-sustaining and their degree of community service is basically equal," says Mr. Edward S. Burongoh.

Newspapers from Kuala Lumpur like Berita Harian, Daily Tong Bao, New Straits Times, Utusan Malaysia are also found in newsstands in Sabah.
SARAWAK

The State has a population of 1.6 million, including 400,000 residents in Kuching, the State capital. There are 400,000 Dayaks and 250,000 Malays.

Despite the small population, the State is served by 14 newspapers, including four Kuala Lumpur-based dailies - New Straits Times (3,000 copies), The Star (1,000 copies), Berita Harian (5,000 copies) and Utusan Malaysia (2,000 copies).

Local dailies are People's Mirror (13,400 copies), Borneo Post (30,000 copies), Sarawak Tribune (18,000 copies), and Borneo Bulletin, a Brunei-based weekly, (15,000 copies). They are all in English.

Chinese daily papers are Berita Petang (8,000 copies), Miri Daily (8,000 copies), See Hua Daily (50,000 copies), International Times (8,000 copies), Chinese Daily News (8,000 copies).

Circulation figures were given by the Bernama Bureau chief.

Most of these papers depend on Bernama for national and international news.

Mr Zakariya Abdul Wahab, the Bernama chief, says that most Sarawak newspapers are staffed with young journalists (aged below 30) recruited from Kuala Lumpur. "They need further training in journalism to uplift their skills," says the Bernama head.
Mr Solley Wong, who was a former staff of Sarawak Tribune, is now the editor of People's Mirror. He succeeded the former editor who was originally working with Bernama. The predecessor left the Mirror due to unsolved conflict over matters of journalistic principles.

About 90 per cent of People's Mirror are circulated in Kuching. The tabloid focuses on local news.

According to Bernama chief, People's Mirror works on a mission to counteract Borneo Post and Sarawak Tribune's opposition toward the government.

People's Mirror, which appeared for the first time in 1987, is viewed as a pro-Government paper. One of its shareholders is the sister of the incumbent Sarawak Chief Minister.

According to Bernama bureau chief, this paper still lacks expertise in editorial layout and printing facilities. "Training is needed to uplift the skills of the relatively young personnel."

Borneo Post, which started off in 1978, takes a neutral editorial stance in the following the State government of the day. The company, run by a Chinese family, also owns See Hua, a sister newspaper. The paper has greater access to government advertisements as a "reward" for its pro-State editorial policy. However, the paper still lacks experienced reporters, especially good Malay newsmen and staff editors.
Borneo Post, a broadsheet daily, presents news reports in three languages — English, Malay and Kadazan — in separate sections. The paper plays the role of "clean newspaper" by following the government of the day.

Like the other national papers, Borneo Post also relies on Bernama stories on matters of national interests. But in terms of rural news coverage, People's Mirror is better, according the agency chief. Borneo Post seldom assigns reporters to cover rural areas.

Sarawak Tribune, first published in 1945, was a pro-Government newspaper before the present Chief Minister's terms of office. Today the paper tilts toward the opposition and serves its "die-hard" readers from the opposition side.

As a "reward" for its pro-opposition editorial policy, Tribune is deprived of access to government advertisements.

Covering rural areas is next to impossible without the help of government facilities because of the distance and difficulties in transportation. Rural coverage gets good display only in papers whose reporters were invited to fly along with government officials aboard helicopter in a field trip to remote villages.

Illiteracy rates are high in Sarawak. "Radio and TV are more effective to reach out people in remote places," says Zakariya, adding that Sarawak radio provides news services catered to every community, the Ibans, Bidayuns, Chinese and Malays.
Bernama bureau in Kuching has a staff of ten to cover Sarawak. Its local coverage is also passed on to local newspapers. For papers lacking staff, Bernama is a great help. Zakariya was happy with the many Bernama stories run by the local newspapers.

In conclusion, Sarawak newspapers have a common problem of lacking in trained and experienced journalists. Most of them are young (aged below 30) and are needing further training to refine their skills and outlook.

The papers also lack experienced Malay reporters who are sensitive to and knowledgeable about Malaysians.

Plurality of newsreports is there in terms of reporting that favours government as well as reporting that questions the justification of official policies and actions.

Rural reporting needs further improvement. Setting up a rural based newspaper does not serve the rural people. It is also unfeasible economically due to the various factors that stand in the way. However, reporting rural issues and problems are politically justified to bring them to the attention of policy makers and responsible department officials in the government.
Recommendations.

1. Training is urgent to refine the skills and conceptual outlook of reporters. Refining reporter's knowledge is designed to enable them to look at problems from the various relevant dimensions, not just at face value.

2. Workshop type of training would be useful to help and transfer the knowledge and skills in setting up a future newspaper for readers in the periphery. Reporters from TV and radio stations may be invited to take part in the proposed workshop.

3. Proposed a seminar for Sarawak editors on subjects that would provoke them to review, retest and reformulate principles and concepts on the role of the press in a multi-racial society. The seminar may be held in coordination and cooperation with the local journalists association.

* end *

Singapore, 22 June 1990

* Synopsis of this report was presented and discussed in WORKSHOP ON RURAL PRESS IN ASIA, Singapore, 19-22 June 1990.