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Communication Education and Communities - Making Connections

by

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Communication Education and Communities - Making Connections

The danger to democratic values lies precisely in the gap which has opened up between the relative sophistication and power of media producers and media audiences. Media education is one of the few weapons any culture possesses for at least addressing - and hopefully beginning to close the gap.

(Len Masterman, 1995:7)

Introduction

The past decade has seen some exciting global developments in the area of communication education\(^1\). Numerous groups and individuals involved in communication education activities have come together to discuss how this field of study is approached in diverse cultural and media histories. While much of the early work on communication education adopted an innoculatory approach to protect young people from harmful and powerful effects of the media, an important turning point has emerged as communication education movements are engaging in conscientisation and action activities, linking this with people’s citizenry in an increasingly mediated environment. This conception of communication education takes on larger social issues like relations of social power and communication institutions, the production of media texts and meanings as well as reception by the audience. Both critical analysis of media and public participation in production and decision-making become elements of democratic empowerment of people. Taking this direction is seen as an essential step in producing knowledgeable and skilled citizens in various societies.

Currently, there seems to be a clear growing international interest to develop communication education rigorously, specifically in light of the rapid expansion of media regimes and the widening disparities between the media rich and the media poor in many

\(^1\) There are many labels to denote this field of study. Other common expressions include media literacy, media education, mass communication studies and journalism studies.
parts of the world --- in terms of groups of people that have access to media technology and media voice and those that do not. Indeed the focus on communication education is an important one as it can be used as a long term strategy to question media images, representations, value-orientations, communication processes and the democratic structures of society.

In this paper, I wish to argue that communication education in Malaysia appears to be oblivious of the recent struggles in the international communication education movement and the pressing need to understand media realities and social relations in contemporary societies. This paper outlines the key principles underlying Malaysian communication education and the emphasis given to practical activity in its curriculum. In this context, it is suggested here, the tendency is to produce graduates who will conform rather than question the legitimacy of existing media institutions and practices. This outcome is seen as a result of the wider education policies, the expansion of market orientations in the development process and the commercialised media ecology in Malaysia.

The Media in Malaysia.

In this section, I will highlight some key developments in the Malaysian media scenario which in turn impinge upon the form of communication education offered here. In the past two decades, the Malaysian media scene has recorded significant changes in terms of the quantity of media establishments. Between 1981 to 1985, the number of titles of local newspapers, magazines and journals in circulation increased from 56 to 102 -- an increase of about 80% (see Zaharom, 1994). Currently Malaysia is also experiencing tremendous developments in media technologies with the beginnings of cable and satellite television set to wire the nation. The expansion in media establishments, however do not mean the presence of a variety of people’s voices and choices. Indeed it is important to point out a distinctive feature of the Malaysian media -- that is the concentration of ownership in a few media conglomerates who are also closely aligned to political parties in
the ruling coalition. The media scene in Malaysia is thus one which offers media voice to a selected few as it is controlled by a few actors who aim to make both political and economic gains.

By making connections between the political-economy influences and communication media development, it can be asserted that Malaysia's type of media development sustains and perpetuates vested interests, which seriously infringe upon pluralist expressions and democracy. The greater commercialisation trends of the media and the increasing government control of the media do not promote the public's interests, rather it tends to exclude voices lacking economic power or resources and which are likely to criticise the prevailing distribution of wealth and power. Clearly, the market orientations here have not lead to the democratisation of the mass media but instead have reinforced the legal, political and economic controls of the media (Zaharom, 1992; Zaharom et al 1995).

In view of the enormous challenges in the Malaysian media ecology, it is evident that communication education here must strive to play a critical role to enhance responsible citizenship and to enable the formation of a discriminating public that can participate actively in creating alternative media voices and choices.

Communication Education in Malaysia - Beginnings and Developments

Communication education in Malaysia is an area of study which is offered in institutions of higher learning. At this level, the study of communication is not simply an academic field. It is also a research area which is instructive for assessing existing patterns of communications and for determining policy. It is closely related to an immediate intent of putting research findings into practice. In Malaysia, this is also an important site for producing potential communication professionals. Various programmes on communication studies and media training are organised at this level to expose students to media

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2 Zaharom (1994) and Gomez (1994) offer a comprehensive discussion on the publication of numerous dailies and bi-weeklies which come under two local media giants -- New Straits Times Press (NSTP) and Utusan Melayu, which in turn are linked firmly with the ruling political parties.
knowledge and technical skills that will allow them to participate in media related activities. For example, students are trained and prepared to join as producers or journalists in the print and broadcast media, as development agents or information officers in government agencies, as copywriters or creative workers in advertising agencies or as public relations officers in both government and corporate sectors.

The beginnings of formal communication education in Malaysia has been closely linked to the needs of the priorities of the government and the media industry. The Higher Education Planning Committee (HEPC) report of 1967 which provided a framework for the development of universities, expressed distinctly that university education must respond to national development policies and identified the need for trained and skilled manpower to manage the economic development of the country. In the context of communication education, the rapid transformation of the Malaysian economy in the post-colonial period, required a very rapid increase in skilled workers to manage the media systems. The government has hence invested heavily in professional-oriented programmes in communication education, situating them in higher education to ensure that communication education programmes grow consistently with national ideologies for development and produce skilled workers to administer the media industry. This enterprise is guided by the modernisation paradigm -- a model which is accepted politically and ideologically, advancing that the media is an important tool of development that will enable the transformation of traditional societies into modern ones.

Following this, communication education was first introduced in Universiti Sains Malaysia and like most other programmes in the South East Asian region, it was set up in a frenzied hurry with very little planning (Goonasekera, 1995; Zaharom and Kirton, 1989; Lent, 1988). John Lent (1988), the first coordinator of the programme observes that little consideration was given to the staffing requirements, structure and organisation of the curriculum, building and equipment and library resources. Inspite of these limitations, he adds that there was a concern to provide academic knowledge and more importantly, to
offer media training courses such as 'Writing for the Media' and 'Journalism' to train skilled personnel for the communication industry.

The School of Mass Communication in Institut Teknologi Mara (ITM) was established in 1972 and it has been observed that many of the school's initial courses "seemed to be direct replicas of those of the United States, and more particularly, Ohio University" (Lent, 1988:110). The ITM school has focused primarily on media skills to produce graduates who will be technically competent in handling communication systems. This school further organises student internships in media organisations to enable students to be familiar to the organisations' production conventions.

A third communication department was set up in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia in 1975 based on a report that stressed the need for journalism courses. The Board setting up this programme comprised of academics, media representatives and members of other professional bodies. The rationales underpinning its curriculum appear quite similar to the one in USM as it has attempted to deliver both academic scholarship and the training of media skills. As in USM, there has been an evident bias in the curriculum to focus on the modernisation paradigm of Lerner and Schramm.

It is quite obvious from the accounts available that the need to provide media industries with skilled personnel offered the catalyst for establishing communication education in Malaysia. Arguments about fulfilling trained and specialised workers for media industries have become central to discussions on communication education in Malaysia. Some communication educators have further pressed for the utilisation of new communication technologies to improve communication education, suggesting that,

the would-be journalist who has 'hands on' experience with regard to basic computer functions such as word processing, data analysis and compugraphics will have a decided advantage over competing candidates who are equipped with a broad-based liberal education.

(Hamdan and Sankaran, 1987:2)
Moreover, media organisations claim that the teaching of communication education should not be too theoretical as graduates would not have sufficient practical knowledge to be of immediate use to them. This view has gained support from some leading communication educationists who stress on the need to produce graduates that would meet the immediate requirements of media organisations (see Hamdan and Sankaran, 1987). In one press feature on communication education, the heads of communication schools highlighted the emphasis to be given to media skills in the curricula of their communication programmes. One department head has noted a proposed strategy to introduce a year long in-house training during the final year of the education programme. The dean of another school stated that the students are attached to communication or information agencies for a period of six months so that this allows the students to gain from the experience and "knowledge of those already in the industry." This move has been widely welcomed by many media industries, including the Malaysian Advertisers' Association (MAA) and the Asia Public Relations Group ("Universities To Put on Emphasis on Practicals" - Sunday Mail, 12 December 1993).

Although there have been recent efforts to re-structure the curriculum in several departments, the market orientation rationale underpinning the field of the study here remains strong. For example, in USM, despite attempts to combine 'theoretical' and 'practical' components, problems still arise when the 'practical' courses are offered in isolation and are not linked to theoretical insights. While there are growing debates and analyses on cultural studies, the theories of dependency and political-economy in the theoretical courses in this school, these debates do not inform discussion on news values, formats and production techniques in media activities in practical courses. The direction of the 'practical' component which is bent on imitating mainstream radio, television or print media without challenging the reproduction of dominant forms of representing reality has come under criticism from several leading educationists in communication studies (see Zaharom et al, 1995).
At this juncture, it seems useful to examine the ‘practical’ component which has attracted much controversy among communication educationists here. For me, a conservative reading will formulate practical activity as the demonstration of media skills. It places emphasis on technical competence and the reproduction of dominant conventions in communication activities. It is highly concerned with the preparation of students for the competitive labour market, armed with skills which do not encourage them to question industrial norms critically or to attempt alternative expressions. Communication students are thus trained to accept media conventions in production unproblematically. Put differently, this reading leads students to be trained to plan or to produce communication programmes that conform to the existing status quo. The danger inherent in adopting such an approach in communication education is that it naturalises instead of attempting to problematise the dominant patterns in communication codes and conventions. This tendency leads to cultural reproduction and produces deference and conformity when students attempt to emulate profession communication practices rather than subject them to critical scrutiny (Masterman, 1991).

In other words a narrow view of teaching technical skills in a framework devoid of critical inquiry will not challenge existing value-laden practices in media production. It needs to be noted here that media institutions usually adopt programming that is based on well-tested formulae and formats that can maximise profits. If these conventions and production techniques are taken as unproblematic and reproduced in the teaching of practical media skills, then the interests of the dominant groups will be reinforced. The need for innovation, to reflect upon different ways of engaging in media practice and to produce alternative expressions will become non-issues. If communication students are trained to simply adopt these media production routines and practices without any critical questioning of values and ideologies, there will be a great tendency for them to write, to produce and to conform to what sells, where news and other media artifacts are commodities in the market. The idea that communication education serves to produce technically competent students who will reproduce industrial norms rather than students who will explore issues like oppression and social justice, particularly in the context of
development is profoundly political. A curriculum that is designed narrowly to the interests of the business industry will not serve the potential value of education and the developing society at large.

I have much difficulty with the primacy of this position where practical work is mainly seen in terms of reproducing technical skills as this may leave critical inquiry subservient to technical skills. It is imperative to remember that techniques like layout, reporting, filming, editing, camerawork, script-writing, lighting, sound and photography are not value-free and the performance of these skills cannot be deemed as objective or unbiased. Indeed production techniques themselves are not neutral and thus make interesting objects of study.

A more useful approach would embody critical inquiry and creative production where communication conventions and codes are deconstructed and alternative directions are chartered. By this, I mean students should question the communication process and the production convention in specific genres, assess the dominant patterns that emerge and think about alternative constructions that can be attempted. Applying the knowledge gained from their theoretical courses, they can choose to focus on particular forms or formats and attempt to engage in alternative constructions in media production activities. Such an approach in practical work in communication education denies the principal of transparency and makes problematic simplistic notions of communication practices - notions which neutralise and suppress vital questions of images, representations, meanings and values.

If students are to understand media texts and development communication projects as social constructions, this practical activity approach will obviously be helpful as it will not only sensitize students to numerous issues, but also give them hands-on experience and useful insights of their own construction process. Therefore, I contend that practical work which is not abstracted from the context of critical study of the media should be used in the interests of social justice, in empowering marginalised communities and in developing
people's citizenry. Communication education programmes could be sites for consciousness-raising and intellectual activity -- for challenging gender, class and other lines of oppression. It is conceivable to consider communication education as potential sites for critical or liberatory teaching. What I am proposing here is that both the critical and the creative components of communication education need to be developed - whether as theory or conceptual understanding and as practical work or skills. In this way, what is offered is an educational process which seeks students to think critically and participate creatively in communication activities. More favourably, this could also lead to what Costas (1991:13) discerns as,

.....part of the process of education for the organisation of individuals, for people to understand their rights and duties as citizens and for participation in fighting social injustices.

Gender - A Missing Link in Communication Education

In this paper, I also wish to highlight that in Malaysia, two-thirds of communication students are females and this has been taken as an indication that there are no pressing gender problems in Malaysian communication education. One prominent male communication educationist makes the observation that the female students face difficulties in the profession when they get married. To solve this problem, he stoutly suggests that communication education in Malaysia should develop curriculum that “offer courses in effective family management for female students to enable them to cope as a wife, mother and a full-fledged professional” (Hamdan, 1987:198). Such comments do not only construct females as the problem but also reinforce the existing ruling assumptions embedded in cultural and institutional practices that continue to subjugate women. Clearly this is a perplexing situation which summons the need for a gender agenda, informed of feminist insights in communication education in Malaysia. Indeed gender disparities are linked to economic inequities and cultural barriers and these are essential frames of study in all disciplines, including communication studies.
It is therefore, important here to raise questions regarding the exclusion of topics related to gender in most core curricula of communication education. I would like to advance a concern regarding the absence of gender scholarship in graduate and undergraduate communication programmes. A recent study shows that gender controversies and problematic women-communication relationships in society are not taken as relevant knowledge in the development of curriculum and that women’s circumstances are rarely heard within the theorising and debates on human experiences, specifically in the realm of communication. The gender question invariably becomes obscured in the debates surrounding media development and communication education in Malaysia (Shanthi, 1995).

The way gender issues are defined and addressed in communication schools is important to make the gender connection visible and to promote wider consciousness towards the gendered values underlying media representations, media practices and policies. In the case of gender, both theoretical and practical components should engage students more productively to reflect analytically upon issues like the social construction of gender; feminist theories and communication scholarship; camera-framing of women; casting of women in news and entertainment content; genres for women; scripting women characters; constructing women as active actors in persuasive communication campaigns, institutional barriers to women’s advancement in the media profession and women empowering communication. It is important to articulate a reflexive framework that would allow gender conscientisation to evolve in communication education schools so that communication students may develop a capacity to engage in discussion and action on problematic gender-communication relationships in contemporary societies.

Communication Education and Communities -- Developing Connections

The profit-driven interests of transnational corporations and national governments have contributed to the tremendous expansion in media and information technologies. This media ecology at both the global and national levels give little consideration to media use and access by the majority of the people. The financial and technological indicators would
mean little if there is no concern to creating a more just and humane society. Given the alarming realities in the field of communication, strategic actions are needed to challenge mainstream media institutions and to re-structure media practices so that alternative dialogue and debate about all aspects of development can be encouraged.

In this regard, communication education has an important role to play to direct attention to the formation of intellectuals of subaltern social groups who will be capable of opposing and transforming the social order. The curriculum of communication schools can provide the basis for social development and can aim for its learners to participate in social activity. It is here that communication educators have a crucial role to play by presenting critical problems to learners to encourage questioning of underlying assumptions and values about dominant ideologies, knowledge and the ways of making sense of the world. Clearly if we wish to understand society and organise action for a more egalitarian order, the most fruitful course would be to adopt the point of view of the most underprivileged members, including women and communities that do not have access to media technology and media voice. It is important to reiterate here that if communication education aims to establish democratic communication and egalitarianism in society, the gender-connection is one that cannot be ignored and this dimension needs to be consciously forged by communication educators and researchers when examining social conflicts.

While there appear to be many efforts to connect with the media industry and the corporate agencies, there seems to be little genuine interest in communication education schools to make links with marginalised groups who have a critical role to play in influencing national and local debates. Very little scholarship related to communication education offers critique on power imbalances and themes on liberation, empowerment and people’s citizenry. Indeed both the course curriculum and research activities in Malaysia have very little to offer towards the creation of empowering discourses aimed at a broad cross-section of society. Struggles for alternative media voices linked to a citizen’s movement for democratic media reform must begin if communication education
schools wish to contribute to counter-hegemonic strategies designed to intervene in the present maldistribution of power and resources. This is certainly a direction to develop as we move quickly into the highly sophisticated and mediated environment of the 21st century.
References


