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Notes On The State Of Research In Malaysia

By

R Karthigesu
AMIC PLANNING MEETING ON
MASS MEDIA AND CROSS CULTURAL COMMUNICATION
SINGAPORE, 26 – 29 JULY 1993

Notes on the state of research in Malaysia

Introduction

-- Mass communication research, in whatever aspect one thinks of, is in an early stage of growth in Malaysia. Effects research is almost nil.

-- Teaching operates in this area by borrowing concepts, research formulations and findings from the West, particularly U.S. and Britain.

-- Government TV and Radio, as well as Information Departments have research units that conduct audience survey and unstructured "reach studies". For obvious reasons these are particularly alive during general and by-election periods.

-- Government TV and Radio as well as the lone private TV station, also employ audience survey agencies to study their audience reach and profile mainly for the purpose of convincing advertisers (SRM).

-- Private media are mostly concerned with readership surveys primarily for the purpose of convincing advertisers. (SRM and Audit Bureau of Circulation).
Cross Cultural Studies

-- Not aware of any indigenously initiated and designed cross cultural study.

-- In 1979 the International Association for Mass Communication Research undertook a study of Images of Foreign Societies as Depicted by Mass Media in several countries. The Malaysian study was conducted by the Asia-Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development with the Collaboration of the National University of Malaysia (UKM). (No conclusions are available)

-- In 1984 AMIC, the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, the Institute of Cultural Communication and the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies had convened a workshop on Information Revolution in Asia-Pacific, in which the Malaysian cultural concerns were also expressed. The discussions have been subsequently published in Jussawala et al. (eds.) (1986) The Passing of Remoteness? Information Revolution in the Asia-Pacific, Singapore :ISEAS. Deeply felt concerns were expressed by the authors of the Malaysian paper that foreign cultures are abrading local cultures, but no research evidence was offered for this phenomenon. However, the Malaysian government seemed to have acknowledged this erosion and had acted to curb this by formulating a national cultural policy.
In 1988 AMIC conducted a study on Violence in TV Programmes in Asia. The Malaysian case-study was conducted by the National University of Malaysia (UKM). The findings have been summarised in Goonesekara, A & Lock Yut Kam in "Violence on Television in Asia" in Asian Journal of Communication Vol.1 No.1 (1990).

Using those findings as a base, and placing them in the background of Gerbner's Violence and Terror in the Mass Media (UNESCO, No. 102 in the series of Reports and Papers on Mass Communication), this author wrote an article on the role of violence on Malaysian television (Dewan Masyarakat, Vol.32 No.9, 1992) by adding political and social interpretations of his own in the Malaysian context.

In 1991 the Islamic Centre of Universiti Sains Malaysia held the Seminar on Television: Towards Community and National Excellence. Many papers were presented but none based on substantial research. Many concerns were expressed that foreign material as well as local material formulated in the foreign television norms (sitcoms, police drama etc.), on Malaysian television are undermining local cultures. In tune with the sponsor's spirit, the Islamic values enunciated both in local and foreign programmes were also
scrutinised and a general dissatisfaction was voiced.

**Author's Own Interest in this Area**

-- I myself have been interested in this area and have written something that has quite deservingly been described, because of its lack of proper research methodology, as a "thought-piece". ("US Television Programmes and Malaysian Audiences" in *Media Asia*, Vol.18 No.2 (1991)). In an attempt to gauge what viewers might consider culturally "offensive" behaviour and values exhibited in programmes imported from US and shown on our television, I had asked my students to list what they may consider as such from a prescribed viewing period. The list was an interesting one and I have added some of my own thoughts as to why Malaysia continues to maintain and tolerate these programmes, in spite of a sense of repugnance on the part of the policy-makers. More basic issues such as why Hollywood itself continues to produce these shows that may be offensive even to American core culture were touched upon in that article.

-- The privatisation and deregulation of broadcasting, a recent development in many parts of Asia have also become an area of interest to me. Its connection to cross cultural communication lies in the fact that privatisation and deregulation invariably increase the flow of foreign, particularly Western programmes, into Asia. The Malaysian case has

-- More recently the phenomenon of "open skies" brought about by the advent of more liberal policies on DBS in many parts of Asia has become a concern. This phenomenon and the policy challenges posed by it to national governments in Asia have been discussed in my unpublished paper entitled *Globalization of Television: How Asia Acts and Reacts?* at the 42nd Conference of the International Communication Association, 21-25 May 1992, at Miami, USA. Two spin-off articles from that paper--have been published in a Malaysian newspaper: "Dish of Change sweeping Asia" *The Star*, 13 Nov. 1992, and "Global Television from Asia May Emerge" *The Star*, 17 Dec. 92.
Without a proper survey of studies and research projects at other universities, especially those which remain unpublished, I am not able to say what other research material there are on Cross Cultural Communication in Malaysia, but I strongly suspect there are some that have escaped my attention.

Conclusion

It is quite clear that there has been almost no research in Malaysia to collect empirical evidence on the effects of cross cultural communication in the country, although the country itself is open to influence from outside, particularly from the West.

However, the available writing in Malaysia suggests that there are deep concerns about the effects of cross cultural communication, particularly on its negative effects. This is somewhat ironical because Malaysia has traditionally been a multicultural society absorbing influences from India, China, Thailand, Java and the Arabic world. The concerns are perhaps more meaningfully perceived when the cross cultural phenomenon is seen in the context of East versus West.
These concerns are developing into a real dilemma as Malaysia pursues an ideal to become an industrialised country with a specific time frame in mind (by the year 2020) and with an open market policy in economy and trade. The state of being an industrialised country itself has historically been defined by Western notions with principally and predominantly material well-being in mind. Experience has shown that the industrialised societies of the West themselves have suffered deterioration in their cultural values. Can Malaysia, or any newly industrialising nation, avoid those cultural pitfalls?

Our effort at studying the cross cultural communication and the results that we may produce, are, if nothing, very timely for a nation like Malaysia to reflect upon.