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Communication Education : Responding To Media Needs

By

Datin Sharifah Mariam Bt Syed Mansor
COMMUNICATION EDUCATION: RESPONDING TO MEDIA NEEDS
by Prof. Datin Sharifah Mariam bt. Syed Mansor*

Introduction

Almost ten years ago, from October 29 to Nov. 2, 1984, AMIC organised a seminar on the theme “Communication Training and the Needs of Mass Media Organizations in Kuala Lumpur. At the time of the mentioned seminar, communication education was just fourteen years old. Some of us who had been “in the business” felt then that we had arrived. Some new entrants to the business of communication education in the 80’s were Universiti Islam Malaysia with the department located in the Faculty of Revealed Knowledge and today in 1994, a communication program has taken off the ground at Malaysia's eighth university, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak UNIMAS.

Perhaps the time is right to review once again the paths where media and communication institutions have crossed and to ask a few questions. Have the communication institutions responded to the needs of the media? If they have, in what ways and what were the outcomes. There is also a need to flip the coin to look at the other side. Have the media responded to the needs of communication institutions? If so, in what way and how adequately?

Before we even hazard a guess to answer the questions, it might be worthwhile to look at terminologies. When I talk of the media, I do not mean merely the mass media of newspapers, radio and television but all the channels of communication from traditional to interpersonal to the mass media. The interpretation also includes source-controlled media such as those put out by public relations personnel and advertising executives, as well as the new media that is travelling over electronic superhighways, providing speedy and instantaneous communication.

In thinking of the issue of responses to needs, it is important to ask, “Are they necessarily the same?”. Academics had at one point felt that communication training and education should be geared to industry needs. It was felt that the acceptance of graduates into the media market was indicative of the credibility of communication education. However, such thinking runs counter to the traditional idea of universities as seats of knowledge and wisdom where students are taught to think and reflect, not to be prepared for some vocation.

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The First Decade: Cooperation

In the early days, communication programmes were designed to fulfil the shortage of trained journalists and other media practitioners. The Institut Teknologi MARA’s programme was primarily to prepare students for professional careers in the media. This was true to some extent of the universities, although they were constrained by the fact that many of their students were scholarship holders who had service obligations with their sponsors. Still, despite strong academic traditions, curricular offerings in most cases involved a good measure of hands-on training both on site as well as at media organizations. Acceptance of programmes and graduates by the media was enthusiastic probably because objectives of programmes to a great extent matched that of media industries.

Media’s support was further indicated by the direct participation of senior media personnel in the training of students. The ITM programme, for instance, had the support of senior journalists such Pak Samad Ismail (now Tan Sri), Adibah Amin and many more teaching on a part-time basis. Hence media had the opportunity to train students for the required skills, instil the appropriate values and transmit the media culture of the time. Their participation was a boon to academic institutions, suffering a shortage of trained staff.

Personalities also played a role in gaining media acceptance. For instance, the first head of the School of Mass Communication, was from RTM as were some of the initial staff from Universiti Sains Malaysia. It was not surprising that when BERNAMA was incorporated the Head of School of Mass Communication, ITM was invited to sit on the Bernama Board.

Students of the seventees had no trouble finding a place for practical training with any of the papers, magazines or with RTM or with public relations or advertising agencies in the country. In fact, many had jobs waiting for them long before they completed their final papers. Such was the acceptance and enthusiastic support that communication education had from the media.

One might therefore conclude that in the first decade, there was a kind of symbiotic relationship between communication training institutions and the media, at least for Institut Teknologi Mara.
The Second Decade: Co-Existence

By the early 80's, demand for communication education increased by leaps and bounds. Student enrolment increased as ITM was forced to double its intake from once to twice a year. Graduates were pouring into a rapidly saturating market. However, by the mid 80s there was a sudden downturn in the economy which resulted in massive retrenchment in the private sector and job freezes in the public sector. The public relations department was worse off as it was the first to go. The media became more selective in recruiting communication graduates. Graduates from other disciplines were entering the profession, people with in-depth knowledge in various fields, e.g. economics, politics, sociology, law etc. The media were no longer interested in 'generalists' because it was cheaper to hire high school leavers and train them in-house.

The recession also took its toll on the academic institutions. Budgets were slashed. The period indicated a declining direct involvement of the media in communication education and training as institutions no longer had the luxury to recruit part-time lecturers from the media. Furthermore, the staff they had sent for advanced degrees had now returned. There was also pressure to maintain academic credibility by recruiting only those with degrees to teach even part-time. Not many of the senior media practitioners then had the paper qualifications.

However, communication training institutions took steps to ensure that the contact and dialogue with media practitioners was maintained. They began to open their doors to experienced media practitioners who needed the paper qualifications, through off-campus programs. They established Boards of Study in which senior media practitioners were invited to sit. Some institutions invited media practitioners to serve as visiting professors on contract to help develop certain communication programmes.

They helped to develop training programmes for professional media associations such as the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia, The Malaysia Press Institutes as well as the Tun Abdul Razak Broadcast Training Institute (IPTAR); they participated in high level communication committees such as the first Committee for the Formulation of the Communication Policy of Malaysia in 1983; They studied practical training reports, noting comments made by the media on weaknesses of the students and revised the curriculum accordingly. They conducted research relevant to the media, for instance for BERNAMA, TV3, New Straits Times and so on.

Seminars on communication education were organized i.e. AMIC(1972), ITM(1977), UKM (1980), ITM (1982), USM (1983), AMIC(1984) Conference of ASEAN editors (1985) etc. These seminars designed to bring teaching/training organizations and media practitioners instead produced criticisms that the education and training received at institutions of higher learning was inadequate to meet the needs of the media.
Sometimes, negative character traits of some students tended to become confused with the training programme the student had received. The following comments, given by a senior journalist/editor with one of the largest national papers indicate this point.

- The training received in the universities is not good enough. Graduates have to be given additional training before they could be employed
- The personal quality of graduates have deteriorated. There is a lack of commitment and loyalty to the profession
- Lack of pride in the profession and treating it as just another job.
- Reporting is seen as just a stepping stone to a more lucrative career in a non-media organization.
- Overly ambitious, too impatient to go up
- Self-satisfied, no wish to improve themselves
- Poor reading habits. Some don't even read the newspapers

Such comments were apparently not peculiar to Malaysia. Vijay Menon in the 1984 seminar quoted a comment made on communication education in the United States.

"The melancholy truth is that journalism education is sunk in the morass of demoralization, low standards and self-contempt. It inhabits the poverty sector of academia. And this at a time when communications not only nationally but internationally have reached a new peak of urgency and complexity."

Vijay Menon despaired that "The teaching institutions are not in the forefront of change. They often struggle along at the rear" (Seminar on Communication Training and the Needs of the Media, 1984).

Concerned over the situation, UNESCO, through the office of the UNESCO Regional Communication Advisor, the late S.M. Ali, commissioned ITM to conduct a study on the state of communication education in Malaysia. The report was titled, "Communication Education and Training in Malaysia: A Study of Curricula and End-user Perceptions of Relevance to Industry and National Needs".

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This study examined the curricular offerings of the communication programmes of the various universities, surveyed graduate perceptions and highlighted some criticisms of editors and other media professionals on communication education. However, since the results of this study have been presented in a previous seminar and published in the proceedings, the detailed findings will not be presented here again. It should be pointed out, however, that of the 133 questionnaires sent out, only 42 responded, leading one to a vital question, “What about media’s response to the needs of communication training institutions?”

The Third Decade: The Context

Much has been said about the brave new world that we are about to enter. Buzz words like the information superhighway, the wired society, the paperless society, multi-media and interactive media have eased their way into our vocabulary. What futurists and trend watchers such as John Naisbitt and Alvin Toffler have agreed on is that a structural shift in the economic process is taking place from one that is dependent on physical capital to one that rests on the capitalization of knowledge.

Trend forecasters have almost all focussed on the Asia Pacific Rim as the area which will see spectacular growth. If in the late 70s and the early 80s, UNESCO had anguished over the imbalance of flow of information between the developed west to the less developed east, futurists say that East will lead the way in the future. If in the past, editors agonised over the failure of regional media networks to balance, if not reverse the flow, today, networks such as ABN have been able to bring Asia’s business voice to the rest of the world.

With Thailand and Indonesia having a fairly well developed satellite and cable system, Malaysia is increasing its broadcasting time with imported news programmes and reviewing its ban on satellite dishes. However, the launching of Malaysia’s satellite, MEASAT, next year holds great promise for emerging communications and information technologies in this country.

The thread that binds the university and the media is that both institutions have as their core activity the processing and dissemination of knowledge. The forms by which knowledge is being processed will indeed be driven by state of the art technology. Educationists have observed this trend since the 80’s and with the introduction of technologies for distant and instant communication such as teleconferencing, multi-media and interactive media, electronic mail and voice mail, educational institutions are turning their attention to alternative delivery systems such as distance learning and the open university.
Today, experiments are being carried out successfully in the area of producing multi-media magazines on CD-ROM, such as that developed by Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore, which was demonstrated at the third annual AMIC Conference on Communications, Convergence and Development in Bangkok in May this year.

The New Media Environment

As we enter the decade of the nineties, the growth of the information and technology dependent industries brings into focus a new reality, which is, that in the future, the nation's human capital will be its most important resource. As the new technologies begin to tear down social and commercial barriers creating a kind of global, borderless world of instantaneous communication, the need to develop a technologically literate and competent work force becomes of paramount importance. Like Naisbitt, we see a global paradox that as electronic highways connect people all over the world with giant electronic networks, power will reside with the smallest players. Hence, the need to develop human capital to become entrepreneurial and competitive, imbued with strong moral and ethical values in line with our rich cultural heritage.

Like other organizations, the media has embraced the new technologies with passion. Newspapers such as The Wall Street Journal and Herald Tribune use satellites to transmit pages to printing plants far from where the news were gathered, written, processed and dummied up. The Sarawak Tribune, whose operations are modest compared to semenanjung papers, have been able to produce high quality publications using high speed computers, scanners and servers.

The face of corporate Malaysia has also changed with fewer people needed to produce work. Computers, electronic and voice mail, facsimile transmissions, handphones and pagers, and teleconferencing free the corporate executive from the tyranny of time and place. If anything, the new slogan of the corporate executive is "Have notebook (computer, that is) will travel." With computers as work horses of the corporate world, the executive is free of the drudgery of routine work.

The new technologies are also witnessing changes in the academic arena. If in the past the academic required a dedicated assistant to decipher his usually unintelligible writing in order to produce a paper, this no longer applies in today's universities. Academics have to be computer literate, be able to connect or network with colleagues nationally or globally using facsimile transmissions or E-mail. He has to know how to access large databases to update himself with developments in his area.
The UNIMAS Corporate Mission and Vision

It is within this context that the eighth university of Malaysia was born. Established in 1992, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) took in their first batch of students in August 1993. The communication programme was started in July 1994, as one of six programmes under the Faculty of Social Sciences. The University's corporate mission provided the direction for the program. The mission is:

"The university's mission is to establish itself as an exemplary university of regionally acknowledged stature and as a scholarly institution of preference and choice for both students and academic staff through the pursuit of excellence in teaching research and scholarship. It will do so by offering a range of opportunities in education, training and scholarly services and through the strategic and innovative application of knowledge to enhance the quality of the nation's culture and the prosperity of its people."

Our Goals and Objectives

The university sees itself as a "fifth wave" university and response to the new vision of the future course of the nation. It sees itself as producing graduates with a wider range of competence, a broader field of vision, a complex understanding of the intellectual, professional and social contexts of their specializations and a shared idealism for a better future.

In its teaching, the university's objectives are:

- to identify special opportunities, competitive strengths and promising niche areas and build upon them centres of selective excellence
- to offer courses that are market-driven, sensitive to changing social conditions and relevant to the needs of the nation
- to reach to a wider clientele by conventional and innovative course delivery systems

In research, hopes to:

- achieve excellence in research through innovative research groups, research institutes in niche areas of prospective scholarly excellence.
- encourage the application of significant research findings to important problems by synthesising and disseminating information
- respond to outside expectations and market opportunities
In terms of quality assurance, it hopes to:

- foster the total development of the learning student by encouraging academic and human competence, capacity for informed analytical reasoning, and inculcation of self-reliant skills and cooperative attitudes in their personal and professional outlooks.

- to involve prominent academics and professional from industry in the continuing evaluation of its curricula and performance

- to establish quality in teaching and training through an academic staff development programme and establishment of appropriate standards and guidelines for academic performance.

- to create a distinctive identity and position itself through strategic planning and marketing

As our Vice Chancellor has stated in the UNIMAS blueprint:

"Starting from scratch a new university has no existing strength to build upon, there simply is none. It therefore has to identify areas of opportunity and carve out a strategic position within the national university system."

The Making of the UNIMAS Communication Programme

When I was invited to design the communication program for UNIMAS, I had no clear idea what the program should be like. I also did not know then that I would eventually join the team. Would it be more of the same? At the time, the temptation to merely unload the program that I had grown used to in my 25 years at Institut Teknologi MARA was indeed strong. Or do I build a better mousetrap? However, from the brief phone conversations I had with the Vice Chancellor, some words and phrases appeared more often and consistently than others:

* The approach must be technology based,
* must involve management, entrepreneurship and competition
* must involve practical skills, innovation and creativity
* a coherent cultural grounding of social, political and moral outlook.
* contemporary in character and forward looking in outlook

One of the first things I did was to visit most of the media operations in Kuching to create an awareness of the communication program at UNIMAS. Prior to this seminar, I tried to conduct a fax poll among media gatekeepers in Sarawak and three in peninsular Malaysia to find out media expectations of the programme. Only one responded, despite several reminders and resending of faxes. Further efforts made through phone interviews provided some rather sketchy input.
The media gatekeepers who were successfully contacted observed that the need for communication graduates was in the region of 20-30 in the next five years. Editors were not duly concerned with the disciplines that graduates had majored in as long as they had a flair for writing.

A knowledge base comprising areas that are socially relevant, integrated, adaptive and ever widening which would enable graduates to contribute to intelligent questioning and discussion on current issues was indicated. More than the learning of techniques or mechanics of journalism, media employers would like to see graduates with a sound knowledge of the following areas of knowledge:
- Economics,
- Social science,
- Business,
- Law, Social anthropology
- Psychology
- Mathematics and Statistics
- Political Processes
- Languages (Bahasa, English, maybe a third language)

The university was also expected to develop in the students a positive attitude, an attractive personality, ability to work independently and as a team player, confident and having strong interpersonal skills and at ease with the use of relevant computer packages for media work. The curriculum was also to have a strong component of practical training.

The following points summarise media's expectations:

a. The media do not need universities to train generalists. Graduates are expected to be knowledgeable in a variety of disciplines.

b. Graduates are expected to be fluent in Bahasa and English. A third language would be an advantage.

c. Graduates should be computer literate. Familiarity with a word processing, graphics and desktop publishing package is essential.

d. The curriculum must include a strong practical base to enable students to receive hands-on training.

These comments are not exactly new. In fact, they were almost a repeat of the findings of the ITM 1985 study. However, as has been mentioned, the scenario is changing. The type of services provided by the media is also changing. We needed media to assist us in our forecast of the next generation of communication professionals that media would need in the next five to ten years.
Looking around, we decided that it was futile to compete with those universities whose strengths are already well tested and proven. The mass media indicated that the number of mass media graduates they needed would be small as they also wanted to recruit others from a different discipline. However, as a communication programme, it was almost an expectation that we must train people for the media, despite the reduced demand. Hence, courses to train people to write for the media have been included in the curriculum.

More importantly, we decided that what was seriously lacking was a cadre of corporate / management communicators who might or might not work in public relations, or marketing or personnel. Looking at the growth of corporate sector, and the low quality of corporate communication in many organizations, we decided that this would be our niche, our strength, our position.

The UNIMAS Communication Program

We are a program in the faculty of Social Science. This limits us to the number of specializations we can have. But in line with the mission of the university, it is not the purpose of the university to have hundreds of courses which are not competitive. More important is it for us to identify one or two niche areas and to position ourselves as leaders in those areas.

We do not have the numbers to stream students into specializations. The current enrolment for the first batch is 10. The current course enables them to have a good introduction to the field of communication. Students do not specialise in one area but have an integrated knowledge of communication and other fields of knowledge.

In designing the programme, our response to media needs was addressed not narrowly to mass media institutions but to communication needs in general. The approach is broad-based with two areas of specialization, the first addressed to the current needs of the media while the second focuses more on management / corporate communication. It is in the second area that we wish to develop as our niche area as it is more consonant with the mission and vision of UNIMAS. It builds strategic competence in a specific area of communication that is in high demand from the dynamic corporate sector. It is management related, information-based and people directed.

(Please see attached for details on curricular offerings)

We have not gone ‘full steam’ into research although a few topics are being proposed. As a new university, the immediate task is focussed on the setting up the programme content and structure, designing syllabi, and getting the right people to teach the programmes. Among our research interests are the following topics:
1. Politics, Business and the Media in Sarawak
2. The Effectiveness of ASN/ASB/ASSAR Public Relations and Media Campaigns

In an effort to provide hands-on training as well as exposure to the management and production aspects of newspaper work, the program publishes a monthly paper, "Madah Samarahan". The paper is tabloid size and is printed by the Sarawak Press as an indication of healthy university and media relations. The first issue is now in press and is due to be launched on October 3, 1994.

In terms of providing exposure to our students to personalities in the media or corporate world, our location in East Malaysia has put us at a slight disadvantage, contributing to some degree of insularity. However, through the good office of the Malaysian Press Institute, we were able to expose students to media personnel in the local and international arena such as Carol Ann Bassett, American freelance writer and Ahmad Talib, Associate Editor New Straits Times.

However, we have been able to expose students and staff to the media environment in Kuching such as the major newspaper organizations, RTM and TV3, Kuching.

Thanks to an enlightened management, we now have for the use of our 10 students a Power Macintosh laboratory with 6 computers, one of which is fitted with a CD drive, with networking capabilities.

In the Pipeline is a new IBM laboratory with 6 computers with LAN and interactivity with the rest of the campus. The entire university will be electronically connected with each lecturer having his own computer, either desktop or laptop.

The Way Forward

It is our belief that in line with Malaysia's serious intent to develop the human resource base to capitalise on the technology-driven changes taking place, that we should make a distinction between media industries in a narrow sense and the much larger communication industries for which no formal programs yet exist or do so in a rudimentary manner.

We also believe that as a national university, we do not solely address our efforts to the training of people for narrow parochial state interests. Equally important are the interests of the nation and the world. As communication workers, our students should be at home wherever they are posted.
While graduates must be prepared for the current market, we believe that we should also be market driving, anticipating future job opportunities and training people for them.

We believe that as long as the dialogue is maintained between media organizations and training institutions, as long as strong ties of cooperation are built, and proactive efforts made to increase effectiveness, the way forward for communication education is a positive one. I am thinking of more tangible collaboration such as the award of a chair for communication studies in one of the universities, preferably ours; collaboration in the production of relevant teaching materials such as books or new formats such as CD-ROMs and relevant high utility research projects which could jointly be identified by the media and carried out by the universities.

I leave you with a quote from our Minister of Education, YB Datuk Amar Dr. Sulaiman Daud, in the UNIMAS blueprint,

"We must not simply expand education but actually change it. Not only curricula but delivery systems and institutional structures must be redesigned if our education system is to be adequate to its future responsibilities. It will have to be practically oriented and sensitive to social needs: not just the demands of today and tomorrow, but to those of an unfolding future whose details cannot be anticipated. That is why the task of university education is not to prepare for ready-made experts in existing practices but for thoughtful, competent professionals, graduates whose training has made them flexible enough not just to respond to change but to master and direct it."
PENGENALAN

Program Kajian Komunikasi menawarkan kursus-kursus yang memenuhi keperluan tenaga manusia dalam dua bidang (a) bidang media massa dan (b) bidang komunikasi korporat. Dalam bidang media massa, program komunikasi memberi peluang kepada pelajar untuk menganalisis peristiwa dan isu dalam beberapa bidang yang khusus. Ini adalah untuk memenuhi permintaan pihak media terhadap wartawan yang lebih analitikal selaras dengan perkembangan negara. Antara tekanan yang akan diberi dalam jurusan media massa adalah kewartawanan ekonomi dan perniagaan, sains dan teknologi, alam sekitar dan kewartawanan.

Dalam jurusan komunikasi korporat, para pelajar diberi pengetahuan asas dalam bidang ekonomi dan pengurusan selaras dengan perkembangan pesat dalam sektor korporat di negara ini. Di akhir pengajian, para pelajar boleh menceburi bidang-bidang pekerjaan sebagai pengurus/eksekutif komunikasi korporat, perhubungan awam, setiausaha/attache penerangan di perwakilan negara di peringkat antarabangsa serta memainkan peranan sokongan dalam berbagai acara dan aktiviti korporat.

Dalam menyediakan para pelajar untuk kedua jurusan ini, Kajian Komunikasi mengambil kira sinario komunikasi masa depan terutama penembusan teknologi komunikasi baru yang canggih dan kompleks yang berupaya merintangi batasan ruang dan masa. Selain mengkaji signifikan serta dampak sosial teknologi maklumat ini, keterampilan dalam penggunaan teknologi serta perisian juga ditekankan.
KEPERLUAN TERAS DAN SOKONGAN

Teras Disiplin Sains Sosial

SSF 1013 : Pengantar Antropologi dan Sosiologi
SSF 1023 : Pengantar Psikologi
SSF 1033 : Pengantar Ekonomi
SSF 1043 : Pengantar Politik
SSF 1053 : Pengantar Pengurusan
SSF 1063 : Asas Perakaunan dan Kewangan
SSF 2013 : Metodologi Penyelidikan dan Statistik Sosial
SSF 3013 : Metodologi Penyelidikan dan Statistik Sosial II
SSF 3023 : Teknologi dan Perubahan Sosial
SSF 4013 : Latihan Ilmiah

Teras Kajian Komunikasi

SSK 2013 : Pengantar Komunikasi Manusia
SSK 2023 : Pengantar Komunikasi Massa
SSK 2033 : Asas Penulisan Media
SSK 2043 : Komunikasi Visual dan Penerbitan Video
SSK 2053 : Komunikasi Perucapan
SSK 3013 : Teori Komunikasi
SSK 3023 : Penerbitan Akhbar dan Majalah
SSK 3033 : Pendapat Umum dan Pemujuan
SSK 3043 : Praktikum
SSK 4013 : Perundangan, Etika dan Dasar Komunikasi
SSK 4023 : Komunikasi Antarabangsa dan Antarabudaya
SSK 4033 : Teknologi Baru Dalam Komunikasi
SSK 4043 : Seminar Media dan Masyarakat

Kursus Pilihan Komunikasi Massa

SSK 2163 : Penulisan Rencana dan Editorial
SSK 2173 : Pemberitaan Interpretatif dan Investigatif
SSK 3113 : Kewartawanan Ekonomi dan Perniagaan
SSK 3123 : Kewartawanan Alam Sekitar dan Pembangunan
SSK 3133 : Kewartawanan Sains dan Teknologi
SSK 3143 : Pemberitaan Antarabangsa

Kursus Pilihan Komunikasi Korporat

SSK 2063 : Prinsip dan Amalan Perhubungan Awam
SSK 2073 : Strategi dan Teknik Seranta
SSK 3053 : Perilaku Organisasi dan Komunikasi Korporat
SSK 3063 : Komunikasi Pemasaran
SSK 3073 : Pengurusan Acara dan Penajaan
SSK 3083 : Pengurusan Isu dan Krisis