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Media Response to Urbanization:  
the Malaysian Case  

By  

Rozima Ali
The media in Malaysia is proactive in promoting environmental concerns and awareness. The underlying philosophy in its response is the inculcation of greater public awareness and public participation in environmental issues. There is consensus that major change in the people's consumption patterns, lifestyles and attitudes will not take place without the mobilisation of the people.

The solution to environmental abuses and urban problems require a degree of public understanding and participation that even the political institutions do not know how to create. However, the media is a tool that can effectively reduce authentic and action-oriented participation.

Beyond the traditional role of providing information, the New Straits Times (Malaysia) has gone a step further by starting a nation-wide project called the "National Environmental Education Programme". One of the primary objectives is to make the younger generation aware of the complex nature of the environment and the ways and which environmental problems can be resolved. This will lay the foundation for generating a society that will have the knowledge, values, attitudes and practical skills to address the problem and act responsibly to protect the environment.

Launched on 22nd February 1992, this project has received the approval of the Education Ministry. Up to now, there are about 500,000 students from primary schools, secondary schools, colleges and universities who are actively involved in the programme.

Several activities are carried out under the programme:

1. Collection of old newspapers by the students to be sold for recycling. NST will collect these newspapers from the schools, using our own vans and lorries, and sell them to private companies dealing with recycling. Proceeds of the sale are given to the schools to be channeled into "green activities" while a portion of the proceeds is used by NST to supply our publications to the schools' resource centre.

2. School-in-a-garden is a nation wide competition organised by NST to see which schools could come out with the most innovative gardens from the environmental and educational point of view.

Students develop an environmental plan to identify problems within the school gardens and seek possible solutions. The greening of their schools require them to look at issues like waste reduction, recycling, energy conservation, landscaping to nurture wildlife, pollution problems, economical environmental management.
NST hopes that the school-in-a-garden project will show these students the way to green their homes, neighbourhood, workplaces (when they grow up), districts, cities and so forth.

3. Environmental Resource Material Competition Project requires the students to illustrate graphically their understanding of the environment. This not only provide information on the environment and conservation but it teaches the young to appreciate nature and give them constructive ideas on how they can contribute towards its protection and sustainability.

4. The fourth activity which is the cleaning up of drains, rivers and lakes, is done on a rather small scale but only because it has not picked up enough momentum as yet.

More activities are in the pipe-line. We believe the greatest challenge is in making people want to change the way they live so that it is more environmentally friendly. It is especially important to teach the young, our future generation, to be more aware of what they do and how they affect the environment.

One of the more recent initiatives is the preservation of forests. NST has set up the "NST-Belum Conservation Fund" to help protect and preserve the Belum Forest. We are excited about the discovery of Belum because of the immense diversity and richness of its flora and fauna content as well as its wild life habitat. Within a span of two months alone, the newspaper had carried two features on the Belum Forest, which carried different angles but nevertheless, aroused one’s imagination. The funds collected will be channeled to the "Malaysian Nature Society - Belum Trust" and will be used to provide scientists with facilities to continue their research and conservation work in Belum.

What I wish to emphasise on is that apart from being a source of information and a forum to identify critical issues of the environment and urbanisation, the media can also forge a creative partnership with institutions and NGOs to address these issues.

Other publications in Malaysia have also exhibited a great deal of alertness and sensitivity to urban and environmental problems. The Star and Utusan Malaysia (a Malay language paper) with collaboration from the corporate sector, have carried campaigns on the need to establish a caring society through extensive and innovative coverage on issues of the day such as child abuse, setting up a hotline to trace the missing girls who ran away from home*, and the 'Thanks Mum and Dad’ programme’.

In terms of coverage, most newspapers have an environmental beat, local authorities beat, an environmental page and a caring page (which carry features on issues relating to urban and environmental problems). In trying to articulate the appropriate response to these problems, journalists are confronted with a few problems and challenges:

1. The very fact that urban and environmental problems are multi-dimensional, interconnected and interactive requires journalists to be equipped with a fair amount of knowledge and to go beyond the task of mere reporting. An analysis of the issues is crucial.
2. Journalists are now required to identify the problems. Problems are not easily identified; they are not always on the surface screaming for attention. In terms of responding to urban crises, journalists have to look beyond the structures of the city and see the private commercial interests that shaped these structures, they have to adjudged for themselves whether the problems are due to civic apathy or to lack of political accountability or to the conscious shaping of private interests by certain quarters.

In wanting to create greater public participation in the bureaucrat's decision-making process, journalists find themselves treading in a new arena, that is, environmental politics. The media realises that there is a great deal of sophistication among the educated public who are increasingly reluctant to accept decision-making (on issues so central to their lives) which are cloaked in secrecy. The political leadership in Malaysia is not hostile to environmental concerns and because of that, the media has been able to nudge the bureaucrats towards greater transparency in their decision making.

Most of us are forced to venture into environmental politics but simply because environmental politics depart from the conventional framework of narrow interest group politics and is more concerned with a broad public interest.

It remains an open question on how the media should adapt to environmental politics which cover an array of issues and a multitude of interests; to wrestle with these interests objectively and allow public interest to prevail without appearing to be too militant or political; to sieve fact from emotion. It is challenging times for journalists for the future will see environmentalism and development issues contributing to progressive politics in the Asia-Pacific region.