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<th>An exploratory study on the role of Malaysian media in facilitating a culture of peace in Malaysia.</th>
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FACILITATING ASIAN MEDIA IN PROMOTING A CULTURE OF PEACE

AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE ROLE OF MALAYSIAN MEDIA IN FACILITATING A CULTURE OF PEACE IN MALAYSIA

BY

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"The world is but one country and mankind its citizens."

WONDERFUL WORLD

By MON
AN EXPLORATORY STUDY ON THE ROLE OF MALAYSIAN MEDIA IN FACILITATING A CULTURE OF PEACE IN MALAYSIA

Introduction

An important historic event was held at the United Nations, or UN, Headquarters from August 28-31, 2000 when about 2000 leaders of the religions of the world gathered to discuss how to achieve world peace. Religion is a powerful force that governs the human society and religious leaders are effective instruments in the process of bringing about world peace and unity. These leaders signed a commitment at the summit to promote peace around the world together recognising that it could not be achieved in isolation as every action had an impact on others and the emerging global community.

The media is one institution that could be critical to helping individuals understand, order and act in their social worlds. Scholars suggest that the press could play a central role in shaping and reinforcing racial values and attitudes (Domke, 1997). Domke, citing Stuart Hall, argues that "news media produce representations and images of the social world, provide and selectively construct social knowledge, and order a complex world by making it seem natural or by distilling complex meanings into a 'common sense'." (p. 3) He suggests therefore, the press, functioning within the social, economic, political, and legal environment of a country, serves not only an agenda-setting role in public discourse but is crucial to establishing the range of criteria for constructing, debating, and resolving social issues.

In addition, scholars have theorised that "the press's selection and framing of language, news, opinion, and perceptions conveys and abets a social reality that legitimates the practices and ideas of the dominant class" (Domke, p. 3). According to this view, Domke argues, certain ideologies embedded in media representations and frames are presented as common sense, which means they are unchallenged, appear as natural or everyday reality, thereby encouraging their acceptance by the audience. Thus, there is the assumption that the language used in the media and the coverage given by the media on racial, religious, and political strife or peace efforts serves a role in how individuals understand their social world, and how they may behave. A study on the role of media in facilitating a culture of peace therefore is timely.

Malaysian media has been a part and parcel of the development process in Malaysia since achieving Independence in 1957. The government has worked with the media to promote the principles of the national ideology, or Rukunegara. The media has also explained to the people the aims and objectives of government policies, to ensure their
participation in achieving the goals of national unity, tolerance, integration, and national development. The Malaysian media may be said to have played a role in constructing, maintaining, and reinforcing values and attitudes that have contributed to social harmony and national stability. This multi-racial country has not seen any major inter-racial conflicts, except for a brief interlude three decades ago.

This study aims to determine perceptions of Malaysians of different cultures, races, religions, and professions, including journalists, regarding the role and performance of Malaysian mass media in promoting a culture of peace. It also aims to examine how often and to what extent media in Malaysia promotes knowledge and practice of the culture of peace.

Data was collected using a short self-administered questionnaire. It also includes a short qualitative content analysis of a sample of newspapers, radio and television news programmes over a period of three days from 10-12 November 2000. These two methods would elicit sufficient information to write a tracer report on how the Malaysian media promotes the culture of peace. The sample of respondents represented media persons, professionals, advocates of peace, representatives of various religious groups and civic organisations.

Environment in Malaysia

This paper includes a brief description of the environment in Malaysia (extracted from Kaur, 1997). Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural and multi-religious constitutional monarchy with an estimated population of about 22 million people. The male-female ratio is about 51% to 49%. It saw a rapid growth and transformation of the economy in the last 20 years, through the implementation of several economic policies. This was accompanied by expansion, and increased liberalization, of the media system; emergence of activism; and increased western influences\(^1\) in the local culture. However, the political system remains relatively unchanged and stable.

Political Environment

Malaysia is a newly industrializing economy in South East Asia, which gained its independence from British rule on 31st August 1957. The country is governed as a parliamentary democracy with a constitutional monarchy. The king, or “Yang Di Pertuan Agung”, is the nominal head of state. Executive powers are vested in the Prime Minister,

\(^1\)This resulted from increased western media programs on television, western education, and the growth of western businesses.
who presides over a cabinet, and is elected every five years. The parliament comprises two bodies, the appointed “Dewan Negara” (Senate) and an elected “Dewan Rakyat” (House of Parliament). The supreme law of the nation is the Federal Constitution, which can be altered only by two-thirds majority of Parliament. The Federal Constitution of Malaysia divides the authority of the Federation into its Legislative, Judicial and Executive Authorities. The separation of power occurs both at federal and state levels. (Information Malaysia Yearbook, 2000).

The ruling government, the National Front, or Barisan Nasional, is a multi-racial coalition of the three major racial parties: United Malay National Organization or UMNO (main Malay party), Malaysian Chinese Association or MCA (Chinese party), and Malaysian Indian Congress or MIC (Indian party), as well as a few smaller minority groups, and other parties. Drabble (1999) noted the need to retain support from other ethnic groups, for continued stability, gave rise to a political regime that “is neither fully democratic nor fully authoritarian but contains elements of both” (Crouch, 1993, p. 136, cited in Drabble, 1999).

There is also an Alternative Front, comprising a loose coalition of opposition parties like PAS, DAP, and Keadilan, which was formed only before the last elections in 1998. It is steadily increasing its support from sections of the public but this Front has yet to be an entrenched entity in the political system.

Cultural Environment

Race, religion, language, and national ideology, among other factors, influence the Malaysian cultural environment. This multi-racial, multi-religious, and multi-lingual society is divided along the ethnic lines of Bumiputeras, comprising the Malays and indigenous people (56%), Chinese (33%), Indians (10%) and others (1%). The main religions are Islam (also the official religion) primarily practiced by the Malays; Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism practiced by the Chinese; and Hinduism practiced by the Indians. Other religions include Christianity practiced by the Indians, Chinese and Eurasians; and Sikhism by the small Punjabi community. This cultural diversity has led several national leaders to refer to Malaysia as an “Asia in microcosm” (Gomes, 1999).

Bahasa Malaysia, or the Malay language is the official national language. English is the second language, and is widely spoken in the business sector. Mandarin and Tamil are also taught as vernacular languages at school. The literacy rate is about 91% (EPU, 1997, p. 8). In addition, college education is popular among the youth. The government stresses science and technology in the school curriculum to meet the rapidly growing demand for the skilled and managerial workforce as a result of the economic transformation.
There was a historical segregation of the three major races, under the British administration, into ethnic enclaves, "each occupying a separate and distinct niche within the social and economic framework" (Gomes, 1999). This contributed to the May 13, 1969 racial riots that shook the foundations of the Malaysian society. In an attempt to reconstruct the nation, the government introduced several policies. The two key policies introduced to shape Malaysia, were the "National Culture Policy" to strengthen national solidarity and identity, and the "New Economic Policy" to redistribute wealth. It also introduced a national ideology or "rukunegara".

The government introduced the National Culture Policy with the hope to establish a national culture that would transcend its separate ethnic cultures without compromising its cultural diversity. Gomes suggests, in effect, it politicized culture and made Malaysians more aware of cultural differences among themselves. He said this led to an on-going trend of cultural, especially religious, revivalism in Malaysia.

The "Rukunegara", or the five principles of the national philosophy, were formulated with the following goals (Information Malaysia Yearbook, 2000):

To achieve a greater unity for all her peoples; to maintain a democratic way of life; to create a just society in which the wealth of the nation shall be equitably distributed; to ensure a liberal approach to her rich and diverse cultural traditions; and to build a progressive society which shall be oriented to modern science and technology. (p. 31)

Five principles guide the above goals:

- Belief in God;
- Loyalty to King and Country;
- The Supremacy of the Constitution;
- The Rule of Law; and
- Mutual Respect and Good Social Behavior

The "Rukunegara" principles provide an underlying national philosophy of building a "caring society", a "mature, democratic" one, "with the highest of ethical standards", where "society comes before self" (Rampal, 1995, p. 156). These notions, particularly that of collectivism over individualism, have implications for societal behavior.

In 1991, the Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, tied the government's attempt to remove ethnic polarization (but retain cultural diversity) with its new national goal to become a fully developed country in his Vision 2020 Policy (Mahathir, 1991). He envisaged that Malaysia would be an industrialized nation with a united Malaysian race, or "Bangsa Malaysia" by the year 2020.

The Malaysian culture also deems social relationships to be important and therefore avoid open conflict (Asma, 1992). This non-confrontational manner to preserve harmony and
relationships would have implications for communication with different publics, including the activist groups.

The cultural environment is changing somewhat, especially because of first, an influx of western business in the last two decades through increasing multinational organizations, and second, Malaysians receiving their education in the west and therefore being exposed to western thought and practices.

In summary, the Malaysian culture is adjusting to adapt more universal characteristics, particularly those of the west. This has been viewed generally as a result of globalization and modernization.

The Malaysian Media

Hiebert (1992) observed that the classic theories of global communication, based on political ideology, had limitations in explaining the present media situation in the world. In classic media theory, “the world’s media were either authoritarian or libertarian, either privately-owned or government owned, either free or controlled, either responsible to society or responsible to the individual” (Hiebert, 1992, p. 119).

Siebert, (1963), suggested there were four theories to explain the world’s press systems, which were influenced by the political ideology of the country. These included the libertarian, authoritarian, social responsibility, and Soviet Communist theory. Altschull (1984) reclassified Siebert’s four theories to three, taking into consideration the new perspectives on political-economic systems. These were First World (liberal-capitalist), Second World (Soviet-socialist), and Third World (developing). McQuail (1987) added development media theory and democratic-participant media theory to the classic “four theories of the press” model. Hachten (1992) identified five types of media systems in the world. These included the authoritarian system, western system, communist system, revolutionary system, and developmental system.

The Malaysian media is a combination of some of these systems. Malaysia has a relatively “tame” media environment (Heuvel & Dennis, 1993, p. 149), with a relatively passive, or “protocol” press. The British started the first newspaper, more for commercial-related announcements. Radio grew in importance especially after World War Two, when the British tried to regain the confidence of the Malaysians in their rule; and to gain their support against communist insurgency.

Mass media in Malaysia comprises a mixture of private and government-owned enterprises. The print media is primarily commercial. The radio, which was almost solely

\[2\text{The Japanese army defeated the British and ruled the country from 1941-1945.}\]
government-owned until a decade ago, has now expanded to include more private-owned than government-run channels, especially as a result of the introduction of the satellite station, ASTRO, in 1997. However, news programs are primarily government controlled, and most of the other fare offered by radio is on entertainment. Television introduced in the mid-1960’s, has a mixture of government and private ownership, including private free-to-air, cable, and satellite channels.

However, most of the private media in Malaysia, including the private television stations are partially or indirectly, owned or influenced by political parties or their investment arms. The media are expected to cooperate with government policy and assist in development, despite the trend toward democratization of the Malaysian media (Hamdan, 1993, p. 264), which includes an environment that increasingly allows critique of government policies.

The Malaysian national ideology, "Rukunegara", forms the philosophical basis of the national press system, and the content and messages in television, film and advertisements are to some extent determined by this national ideology, media laws, ownership, professional, social, and religious constraints (Hamdan, 1991; Rahmah, 1992).

Dr Mahathir (1985), the Prime Minister of Malaysia explained the various guidelines for the Malaysian press were a concern to promote a "socially responsible press." He elaborated that the public good was sacred, which Patterson, (1992) said could be an indication of the ideological component of development journalism.

The government has used the media to mobilize people on development and other issues, and direct press censorship is rare. However, the press practices self-censorship, and reports “sensitively” on racial, religious and political issues. This is probably the result of the various media laws, and the government influence to reflect “Malaysian values” and interests (Heuvel & Dennis, 1993). According to Heuvel and Dennis (1993), reporting was honest and straightforward, business coverage was highly sophisticated in content, but investigative reporting on contentious issues was minimal. However, the authors noted that aggressive public-interest journalism was not entirely absent.

The ownership structure of the media is another limitation on freedom of the press and broadcasting in Malaysia. The major media, as stated earlier, are owned by the ruling coalition parties, or by financial interests closely affiliated with them. This is unlike the American media system, which espouses independent ownership separate from the political power structure (Heuvel & Dennis, 1993).

Print media

The print media is regulated by the Ministry of Home Affairs, and the electronic media, formerly regulated by the Ministry of Information, is now regulated by the Ministry of
Energy, Telecommunications and Multimedia. There are about 36 daily and 20 weekly newspapers printed in the major spoken languages of Malay, English, Mandarin and Tamil, as well as some other vernacular and indigenous languages. The newspapers reach about 2.7 million households in the country (Kaur, 1997).

Content in the newspapers includes coverage on major events in the nation, progress of government policies, entertainment features, sports, world news and events, development, scandals and violence. The local newspapers also carry "protocol news" about the rounds made by the Prime Minister and his Cabinet.

Radio

All official radio stations were government operated until recently. As part of the privatisation plan, a few more private channels were launched. ASTRO, the private and only satellite station, created an additional 13 channels. The content either promoted the government programs or was of entertainment nature, primarily.

Television Malaysia

There are two national government television stations (TV1 and TV2) and another two (TV3 and NTV7) that are commercial. In addition, the efforts to privatize the media and lend to its commercial transformation, included the setting up of ASTRO, the privately-owned subscriber-based satellite broadcasting service that commenced operation in October1996, and which however, follows strict guidelines set by the Ministry. A high percentage of the program content of TV2 and the other commercial stations (50% or more) is foreign\(^3\)--mainly entertainment and documentary programs. However, part of the reason for the Western programs was attributed to the background of officers managing the TV stations, who are mainly western-oriented gentlemen (WOGs), besides the available sponsorship for such shows, and the lack of good quality local fare (Hamdan, 1991).

Some measures were taken by the government to counter this "cultural imperialism" such as: to bar foreign ownership of mass media, to restrict and censor foreign media content, especially on TV and film, and to upgrade and increase local media content (Karthigesu, 1991).

The local television stations are striving for 70% local content. In fact, media ratings reported in the newspapers indicated that increasingly local Malay dramas have gained

\(^3\)In 1989, government television had 41% local programs and 49% imported ones compared to commercial TV3s' 70% imported programming (Karthigesu, 1991). This included programs in English, Indonesian, Mandarin, Tamil, and Hindi from the West and other Asian countries.
immense popularity.\textsuperscript{4} Television reaches about 93\% of the adult population (Information Malaysia, 1994).

The Malaysian National News Agency or BERNAMA

This agency was set up in 1968 to present news materials of public and national interest within and outside Malaysia. In the mid-1980s it became the sole distributor of news, including features and photographs, from foreign news agencies, as a result of a government regulation to monitor foreign coverage of news, with minimum censorship.\textsuperscript{5} It censors news items that belittle the government or that could cause unrest in the nation. However, the Internet has almost made this an obsolete exercise.

Video

The video is a useful communication tool for minority groups. Because of limited local broadcast programs in the Chinese and Indian languages, these groups turn to viewing video tapes from abroad, as an alternative. Also, they use the video to maintain close links with their home culture. Opposition political groups and other organizations, which lack access to the formal mass media, have also been known to use this medium to spread their messages to their supporters. In 1989, there was an estimated availability of video-cassette recorders in 44.2\% television households in Malaysia, which was an increase of 9.67\% from the previous year (UNESCO, 1989).

Media policies and regulations

Karthigesu (1990) pointed out that Malaysia does not have a broadcasting or communication policy specifically. In 1993, the government set up a representative committee of major groups in Malaysia, to draw up a National Communication Policy, which is still under government consideration. There are, however, an estimated 47 laws, imposed by the federal government, affecting the media (Hamdan, 1991). The three Ministries - Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of Information, and Ministry of Energy, Telecommunications and Multimedia - regulating the media impose content and non-content controls on the Malaysian mass media. Non-content controls of the media include licensing of the printing presses and newspapers, and; economic instruments such as proxy

\textsuperscript{4}Malaysia also shows filmlets of patriotic songs and jingles in between well watched shows and these have become popular with the television audiences. These jingles try to promote national culture, values, and unity and encourage participation in development efforts.

\textsuperscript{5}Information obtained from personal conversation with a BERNAMA editor, 1994.
ownership or direct control as in the establishment of a government broadcasting
department (Radio-Television Malaysia).

Various legislation pieces keep the press in check (Heuvel & Dennis, 1993). The
Printing Presses and Publication Act empowers the Home Affairs Minister to ban
publications deemed contrary to Malaysian interests, national security, or public morality (by
a 1987 Amendment). A 1974 Amendment to the Printing Act of 1948 stipulated that
Malaysian investments in newspapers should be more than those held by non-citizens. This
Act also required newspaper and magazine publishers to obtain a license to use a printing
press, as well as a permit authorizing the printing and publishing of materials, both of which
are renewable annually.

The Broadcasting Act of 1987 empowered the Minister of Information to censor or
remove broadcasting material deleterious to "Malaysian values." (The new Ministry of
Energy, Telecommunications and Multimedia is in the process of taking over most of this
function for the electronic media as a result of the Communications and Multimedia Act of
1998). Other content controls include the Internal Security Act (ISA) of 1960; the Sedition Act
of 1948; the Official Secrets Act 1972 (OSA); and Ordinance related to censorship
(UNESCO, 1983). The ISA and OSA are broad laws giving government control over
activities that would threaten the nation's security and stability. Section 22 of ISA covers
dissemination of information which would incite violence, encourage disobedience of the law,
promote feelings of hostility between different races or classes, or is prejudicial to the
national interest (McDaniel, 1994). The OSA hampered investigative journalism as
journalists had to prove information used in a story was not classified prior to publication of
story.

Most of these regulations can be viewed to be formulated toward maintaining
national unity, harmony and encouraging national development. Generally, the newspapers
and the broadcast stations steer a straight line by practicing self-censorship. This, however,
has been critiqued by Lent as one of the worst types of restraint because of its subtle,
insidious, and habit-forming possibilities.

Teheranian (1977) said that the fundamental function of a responsible media system
in the development process should include: recognizing the needs and demand as well as
the constraints and possibilities of the socio-cultural environment; to tailor policies and
programs closely to respond to concrete social, economic and cultural needs; to work closely
with opinion leaders and institutions in a position to cooperate in the performance of the
media's duties; and to maintain a high level of awareness, autonomy and responsibility so as
to safeguard its credibility and effectiveness vis-a-vis opinion leaders and the general
audience.
In summary, the Malaysian media played an important role in aiding in the early national development. It continues to promote and maintain unity between the different ethnic groups, and to promote the government’s development plans. Privatization and the general economic transformation of the country, which contributed to the growth of businesses, have repositioned the media as a commercial enterprise. However, despite the numerous government measures to impose relatively stringent control on the Malaysian media, the economic rationale also prevailed leading to "loose" or flexible enforcement in many cases. As long as the media did not offend the general audience or the government it operated within the permissible structure without much interference. This contributed to the growth and modernization of the Malaysian mass media.

Potential for Activism

The different laws and regulations also inhibit activism in Malaysia. The Internal Security Act, and the Official Secrets Act, as discussed earlier under the section on media, the requirement to acquire a licence for a publication made available for public sale, and the Societies Act requiring registration of a society with the government, are a few examples. In addition, any group that wishes to hold a protest march, or demonstration has to apply formally for a police permit. Otherwise, the police could make an arrest for illegal assembly. Malaysians also tend to be culturally non-confrontational in their approach to a conflict. All the above factors contributed to a low level of activism, as described in the west.

However, even though the formal structures do not allow rigorous activism, informal structures seem to exist that support special interest groups. Groups form around interests that sometimes are seen to support national development policies. The range of social interests cover consumerism, the environment, women’s issues, and health related concerns, among others. There are organized labor unions in the public sector and in other large organizations. Professional associations also exist to promote and enhance the profession. In fact, the government provided assistance to set up some of the social groups. This included minimum financial aid, for example, to the federal consumer association, and the National Women’s organization, in the form of free or minimal rentals for office space, or some cash to defray administrative costs. Several local and foreign activists also provide skills training, including lobbying and training in how to use the media to draw attention to the issue.

Some of the common techniques the groups use include: dialogues and meetings with legislators, requesting representation on national- or state-level planning committees, writing to the media, and signature campaigns. The government also sometimes voluntarily coops leaders from these groups on their planning committees. The groups generally use
non-confrontational methods to achieve their goals. Sometimes they organize peaceful protests and demonstrations too.

However, active groups taking a more explicit and confrontational approach have emerged since the late 1970s. These include Aliran, the Consumers’ Association of Penang, the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia, International Movement for a Just World (JUST), the Institute for Social Analysis, and the Malaysian Bar Council. Aliran, formed in 1977, was the first social reform movement of its kind. It is multi-ethnic in its philosophy, policies, programs, and membership. Its purpose is to raise social consciousness, and encourage social action and social and economic justice. Membership of these groups is small, and led by a handful of dedicated and resourceful people. Considering the relatively restrictive Malaysian legal framework they have to work within, they have learned to make creative use of local and foreign media for their purpose. A popular form of expression for such critics of the government is through paperback books (S. A. Douglas & S. U. Douglas, 1992). The Internet has provided them with a new form of media to communicate with their members and the public-at-large. Many of them are beginning to run an on-line newsletter.

The Economic Environment

Malaysia has a per capita income of RM10,689 (Malaysian Ringgit) or US$4,259. The major primary commodity export earners are petroleum, palm oil, sawlogs and rubber. The manufacturing exports include textiles, clothing and footwear; chemical and petroleum; electrical and electronic products. Its main trading partners are Indonesia, United States, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, United Kingdom, and Australia (Economic Planning Unit, 1996 estimated figures).

Generally, the government introduced five-year plans including plans for economic growth, to serve national unity goals, and to encourage public participation and response to the various national policies. The major policies included the following: National Development Policy; National Education Policy; National Culture Policy; National Agriculture Policy; New Approach in Village and Rural Development; Leadership By Example; Clean, Efficient and Trustworthy Policy; Assimilation of Islamic Values in the Administration; Policy to Reduce Public Sector Expenditure; Malaysia Incorporated; Privatization; Look East Policy; National Industrial Policy; National Population Policy; and Vision 2020. These policies were to aggressively bring development and progress to the country. In addition, as mentioned in a previous section, Prime Minister Dr Mahathir introduced Vision 2020 as a goal for Malaysia to achieve developed status and a united Malaysian race by year 2020.

The brief description of the economic, political, cultural, media, and status of activism situations are factors of the existing environment in Malaysia that may contribute to national stability, unity and peace.
Opinions on Performance of Media, Religious and Societal Groups, and Civic Organisations

Opinions were sought from a small but diverse group of people (45 respondents) representing different religious, racial, cultural and media groups on the performance of media and civic groups in facilitating a culture of peace (see Table 1). The majority of the respondents (60%) interviewed disagreed that news in Malaysia is generally negative in nature. However, the majority (60%) thought the Malaysian mass media gave prominence to conflicts between nations, wars, inter-ethnic strife and misunderstandings.

A qualitative analysis of a few days' newspapers showed that the print media carried very few such stories, unless there was a particular incident. Moreover, most of the coverage on wars and inter-ethnic strife was on international issues outside of Malaysia, and not of local cases. Very often such stories were straight news reports rather than analytical or opinion pieces. In addition, not many of these stories were accompanied by pictures or graphics. When photographs were used, they were either of politicians concerned with their duties or of scenes depicting demonstrators protesting, like holding banners.

Nevertheless, it seems like television images give a more vivid impression of violence. Thus, the perceptions of the respondents that the mass media gave prominence to these violent events.

About half of the respondents (51%) were of the perception that reporting about religions in Malaysia was not biased, imbalanced nor subjective. However, 13% of the respondents strongly thought that that was not the case. In fact, several respondents thought the media should give more coverage to all the major religions in the country, and a fair treatment in the relevant stories on religions other than the national religion, Islam.

The majority of the respondents (71%) agreed that religious, societal groups and non-government organisations had performed well in promoting peace, understanding and tolerance. There was the general feeling that only a few groups were doing so actively, and that there was a need for more groups to participate in this effort.

Respondents were split in their opinion of whether the religious and societal groups had established good relations with the Malaysian media. Fifty percent strongly agreed or agreed there was good relations between the two groups. The other 50% disagreed, strongly disagreed or were not sure if such a relationship existed between the said groups. However, almost all the respondents (94%) said that all parties concerned had to work more closely to promote a culture of peace.

Generally, there is some ignorance among the NGOs, religious groups, and the media about each other's operations, which has led to some mistrust of each other. One senior representative from a religious group thought the media needed to have a moral rectitude of conduct. There was also a general feeling that there was a need for more
positive stories to counter stories on violence. On the other hand, some respondents thought that the media by highlighting conflicts and wars, play an important role to remind people of atrocities by mankind and thereby caution people to avoid inter-ethnic strife. On the overall, the relationship between these groups and the media is positive.

**Perceptions about Good Practices by Media in Promoting a Culture of Peace.**

Most of the mainstream media in Malaysia, including newspapers, magazines, radio, and television, have been sensitive in their reporting on religions. Some have had weekly columns on the issue; for example, *Sunday Mail* ran a successful column on inter-faith issues. The *Life and Times* section of the *New Straits Times*, the *Star* and other vernacular press have also carried some features on the said issue. Television and radio too have guidelines to ensure sensitivity in depiction of religions. However, some respondents pointed out these guidelines were more toward not upsetting the larger Muslim audience, and more still needs to be done for the audiences of other religions too.

In addition, one of the respondents said the media, for example NST, condemns religious extremism and fanaticism and that was a "good practice" of the media in reporting about religions. There were a few other respondents who thought that there was no need for the newspapers to actively "harp" on religious issues, and therefore, their minimal coverage on this issue was a good practice.

Nevertheless, some of the respondents interviewed thought that the majority of explanatory stories focussed on Islam, and that there was a serious need to include more stories about the other religions to ensure developing greater tolerance and respect for each other's religions. The media tend to highlight stories during the different festive seasons, but respondents thought most of this coverage was superficial reporting. The stories were written more for entertainment value than to meet educational or informational needs. There were respondents who thought there was a more active practice to promote a culture of peace to the public by NGO publications, such as Aliran Monthly and Just Commentary. In addition, Hindus, Christians, Sikhs, Buddhists, Bahai's and other groups publish their own respective newsletters, which explain principles of the respective faiths.

Generally, the "good practices" in reporting about religions by the Malaysian media could be summarised as: their efforts to keep such reports to the minimal and not interfere with religious matters; run periodic inter-faith columns on different major religions; condemn religious extremism; and highlight stories during festive seasons on the respective religion.

The majority of the respondents thought that the Malaysian media have made some contributions to the promotion of peace, mutual understanding and tolerance. The media has done this through the periodic, but infrequent, columns, features, spot news, and
programmes; co-organised and participated in talks and activities on world religions with several NGOs; and carried advertising and public service announcements portraying intercultural events and harmony among the different racial groups.

Some of the examples cited by the respondents include a talk on world religions by a leading Chinese newspaper, Humanitarian aid activities for victims of war and inter-ethnic conflicts, sending reporters to a recent international peace conference, putting out messages of economic stability during the 1998 economic downturn. Besides these examples, the other examples cited included the catchy public service announcements by Petronas, Telekoms, and Malaysia Airlines particularly during the festive seasons, which portray images of inter-racial harmony and anti-discriminatory perceptions of different racial groups.

Several suggestions can be made as to how media and civic groups in Malaysia could work together to promote a culture of peace. These include having regular and continuous dialogues with relevant consultation groups to understand the issues better and to promote peace strategies. One suggestion was that the relevant groups consult with each other to develop a blueprint for promulgating the spirit of "muhibbah" or unity.

Responses given by some journalists suggest that the "unholy trinity of religion, politics and demography" in Malaysia would not encourage the media to work together with NGOs to actively promote tolerance and peace. The effort by media would be more of withholding of news and any open discussion on religions.

However, the majority of respondents agreed that all media have to be accurate and fair in their reporting. Respondents in this tracer study recommended that the media not marginalise minority groups but increase regular and fair reporting on other religious and cultural groups and their activities. The media could help to "air" issues dividing the people and facilitate dialogue on these inter-ethnic issues. However, media personnel need to check their facts when writing on religions and their practices so as to avoid offending any party, inadvertently.

The youth are a very important public in the promotion of future world peace, and the media and NGOs should involve the youth in programmes on peace. Unhampered by much of the history of the World Wars and other religious wars, they could contribute to identifying and building on commonalities among the diverse groups without eradicating the uniqueness of each group. Many of the respondents suggested the media could organise and co-sponsor joint activities involving the youth, such as drawing competitions, essay-writing, and photography competitions.

Both the legitimate religious groups and the mainstream media need to seek help from each other more actively. The former to explain and seek coverage on their activities, and the latter to get more accurate and updated information as well as greater understanding of the issues. The civic groups could request for a column or a programme on
A regular basis from the media and actively contribute articles or content for these programmes to the media. Generally, some Malaysian media are quite open to such a cooperative measure. Religious groups and other relevant civic groups could work more with the media to promote a culture of peace.

A Qualitative Analysis of Malaysian Media Coverage on Peace Issues

Part of this study involved a qualitative examination of the coverage on peace issues in the local newspapers over a three-day period on the weekend (10-12 November 2000). The leading Malaysian English language newspapers, Star, New Straits Times, and the Malay daily, Utusan Malaysia, were used for this purpose.

Domestic issues covered during this period were regarding the debate around the government’s initiative to set up “Vision Schools.” This is an attempt to increase interaction among the three major racial groups – Malays, Chinese, and Indians, by moving several existing vernacular schools of the three languages under one roof that provides common facilities like the canteen, and sports grounds. This project to integrate the three races and to promote social harmony and national unity is on a trial basis in several states and the schools are invited to be a part of the project. The schools maintain their own curriculum but share certain extra-curricular activities. Many of the schools selected for this project are also those finding it financially difficult to maintain their own premises.

However, the Chinese are divided on this issue. Some think that it would erode the current Chinese education system and slowly eliminate the Chinese medium schools. Certain factions among the Chinese community have expressed a strong rejection of this concept of the Vision School. There was news on this issue in every paper examined on the stated dates. This issue could be said to have developed into a racial one, suggesting undertones of racial conflict.

Another domestic issue that had some undertone of racial conflict was a suggestion by the Education department to introduce Mandarin as a compulsory language in the school curriculum. Several Malay groups objected to the suggestion. Generally, the newspapers treated both stories as news reports in a factual manner without providing any critical analysis.

Other domestic reports on local conflicts included that on the ill feelings between the two major Malay political parties, UMNO, in the ruling coalition, and the opposition Islamic party, PAS. There was also a straightforward court report of the on-going case against the Al-Ma’unah, a separatist Islamic group that had attacked an army camp several months ago. Another story on this same issue above and headlined, Islamic militancy “our biggest threat,” also suggests the mistrust of Islamic extremist factions by the mainstream Muslim group. All
these stories are examples of threats to domestic peace that were given coverage by the local media.

International stories on inter-ethnic conflicts and boundary wars, and which were mostly lifted from foreign newswires, were more common in the Malaysian newspapers. Several issues were reported with the main story among them being that of the Israel–Palestine conflict. Reports included those of Yasser Arafat’s call for an international force set up by the United Nations to be stationed in Israeli-occupied territories of the Gaza Strip and West Bank, and supplementary news reports on the support given by the OIC, Iraq and other Muslim countries. Since Yasser’s meeting with the UN was scheduled around this time, the story would have been considered timely at the time of research. Mention was also made of the number of deaths on the Palestine side and other related conflicts.

Other news reports were of the demonstrations in Aceh calling for independence and protesting against the violence by the Indonesian army; protests in the Philippines; India-Pakistan conflict; aggression by Indonesian patrols at the Malaysian border against Malaysian timber entrepreneurs; protests in Indonesia; and a bomb blast in Laos in protest against a regional meeting being held there to foster cross-border cooperation with its neighbours.

There were also news reports that were reminders of the need for peace and tolerance, such as, Anti-Nazi anniversary demonstrations in Berlin to show the world that the Germans were prepared to fight racism; and local condemnation of extremist factions to maintain peace and national stability. There were hardly any photographs in the print media showing violence in these areas, with the exception of pictures of the protestors in Aceh. This suggests consistency with the findings from the interviews with the NGOs and media personnel that the Malaysian newspapers generally handle the issues on inter-ethnic conflict, violence and border aggression with caution.

Television and radio news reports carried almost the same stories as the print media. However, it may be pertinent to point out here that patriotic songs, which espoused social harmony and national unity and development, often accompanied the main radio news broadcasts on the government controlled station, or RTM.

Therefore, the main approach taken by the local mainstream media toward maintaining peace is its passive initiative, which is to minimise coverage that promotes or agitates the public to violence or aggression. Stories were mostly in the form of straight news reports rather than commentaries. Key personalities were politicians or national leaders involved in the issue.

The alternative media, particularly publications of the opposition political parties, and affirmative action groups- like Aliran and Just World- as well as online media like Malaysiakini, tend to be more critical of government policies, agitating for political reform.
rather than promote inter-ethnic violence or actively promote peace. Generally, except for publications by the human rights groups or religious groups, there is not much active facilitation by the media—mainstream or alternative—to promote a culture of peace. This is achieved by what coverage they omit rather than promote in the media.

Conclusion

News on race and religion is handled very carefully in the Malaysian media. The media assists, inadvertently, to preserve multiculturalism by giving just enough exposure on the different religious, racial, and other cultural groups to avoid upsetting them. News that may agitate the public or specific groups, or be used as a weapon against the ruling coalition is either suppressed or given a low profile, with minimum details. The media generally does not sensationalise issues that may affect the stability, peace and harmony in Malaysia.

There are more reports on inter-ethnic conflicts and warring factions in the “distant” international, rather than the “near” local, arena. However, international stories that may cause local racial or religious strife are also given minimum coverage. The media, in general, focuses more on development journalism and a brief analysis of several newspapers, radio and television news broadcasts over a three day period in early November 2000 showed that only minimal space was allocated to peace and inter-ethnic issues.

The stable political, economic, and cultural environment and the low level of activism in the country interact with the media, and are factors contributing to the facilitative role of the Malaysian media in promoting peace. The media does not presume the role to actively promote a culture of peace but indirectly contributes to it. Government policies and laws to be sensitive in its coverage guide the media. Stories on the issue are mostly either straight news or factual reports, not analytical pieces. Perhaps, with the call by NGOs for more responsible and civic journalism in today’s turbulent environment, the media could more actively facilitate a culture of peace.

As Bishop (2000) observed, journalists are expected to create a tenor of tolerance in their coverage of events. They also have the expected function to inspire readers and viewers to feel a sense of stories about loyalty and patriotism to help officials keep order until a policy emerged or a future direction was clear. The media in their guardianship role, are expected to assist to avoid commotion or controversy. In dialogues with the media, the religious and other groups promoting peace need to request that news organisations reflect on their framing activity at different levels to do justice to the groups’ goals.
References


<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance</th>
<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
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<td>News is basically negative in nature.</td>
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<td>17</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
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<td></td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>11%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mass media in Malaysia give prominence to events such as conflict between</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>3</td>
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<tr>
<td>nations, wars, inter-ethnic strife, and misunderstandings.</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reporting about religion in Malaysia is often biased, imbalanced, and</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>subjective.</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>47%</td>
<td>4%</td>
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<td>Religious, and societal groups and NGOs in Malaysia have performed well</td>
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<td>27</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
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<td>in promoting peace, understanding and tolerance.</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>27%</td>
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<td>19</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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<td>the mass media in Malaysia.</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>4% (Don't know</td>
</tr>
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<td>All parties concerned have to work much more closely to promote a culture</td>
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<td>16</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
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<td>of peace.</td>
<td>58%</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>2%</td>
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