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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Syed Arabi Idid.; Latiffah Pawanteh.</td>
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Media, Ethnicity And National Unity:
A Malaysian Case

By

Syed Arabi Adid
&
Latiffah Pawanteh
Introduction

As with most developing countries, media tradition is a relatively recent phenomenon in Malaysia. Although the development of mass media had taken place much earlier, since the beginning of the 19th century, most of the pre-independence media activities and coverage were urban-centred, closely reflecting the patterns of colonial interests and administration. What makes Malaysia distinct from other developing countries is the extremely precarious balance of her multiethnic population, which some observers describe as "a plural society par excellence" (Vasil, 1971). This plurality by its very nature makes the society prone to incessant ethnic and religious animosities and consequently, political instability. Any attempt to analyse the role of the media in the Malaysian society, therefore, cannot avoid addressing questions surrounding ethnic conflicts and national unity.

Before proceeding, it would be helpful to begin by providing a brief contextual background to the current media situation in the country. In line with the structural-functionalist paradigm, it is useful to view the media as a prominent and influential subsystem within the larger social system of the society. Since
mass media contribute most to the generation and distribution of information in society, they exert considerable control over the norms, values, operation and processes occurring within the community. Socially the role of the media in agenda-setting fits a particular pattern and varies according to the size, type, and complexity of the parent community. Hence, there is always the tendency to project and portray the ideals, and interests of dominant groups in society. As a consequence, the mass media are likely to affect and in turn be affected by public opinion (Tichenor, et. al. 1973). This is more so in the larger pluralistic society where dependence on the media as a means of communication among the various groups in society is inevitable. By the same token it is only natural that the character of the mass media in such society, like Malaysia, should reflect the tendency to expose competing ethnic claims. In this respect both the print and electronic media can be expected to mirror closely the realities of the diverse socio-cultural and economic environment in the multi-ethnic society.

**Malaysia: Its People and Government**

Malaysia has a land size of 127,581 square miles containing 16 million people. There are three main racial groups, the Bumiputras, the Chinese and the Indians, each group with its own religion, culture, language and practice.

The Bumiputra group is segmented into various communities, such as the Malays, Melanau, Bajaus, Kadazans, Ibans, and Muruts. The Chinese have also their subgroupings based on clan
identities such as the Hokkien, Cantonese and Teo Chew. The Indians are also heterogenous, composing of subcategories such as the Malayalam, Punjabis and Tamils. Other ethnic minorities that make up the Malaysian racial population include the Eurasians, the Sri Lankans and the Sikhs.

Malaysia has a constitutional monarchical parliamentary form of government. By law, the government has to seek a fresh mandate at the end of every five years. Malaysia is one of the few developing countries which has conducted elections regularly since the first election was held in 1955.

There has been political stability in Malaysia since independence despite predictions that given the communal structure of the population there would be incessant racial strife and chaos. Since 1955, the Alliance Party and its successor the Barisan Nasional, had been in control of the government.

Malaysian Mass Media

The roots of ethnocentrism in content, organisation and interests in the Malaysian media, can be traced to the heydays of colonial rule. The year 1805 saw the publication of the first English language newspaper in Penang. Known as The Prince of Wales Island Gazette (1805-1827) it served British interests in Malaya, particularly the communities in the Straits Settlements (Khoo, 1988). The first Chinese newspaper was the Chinese Monthly Magazine. It was first published in Melaka by William Milne, a missionary who worked for the London Missionary Society. The Society published the Chinese newspaper to propagate its
religious activity in mainland China (Tang, 1988). The Malay and Indian communities were relatively late in publishing their own vernacular newspapers. Both the Jawi Peranakan (Malay) and the Tangai Sineean (Indian), being the first two bulletins, appeared in 1876 (Habibah, 1988, Krishnan, 1988). The ethnic clientele of such newspapers, created a demand for, and consequently encouraged reportage of features and news items of ethnic interest. Thus the economics of publication itself propagated a structure of coverage which was heavily biased towards ethnic needs and concerns. This happened in spite of the fact that the three vernacular bulletins were published in Penang and Singapore, were relatively cosmopolitan and British in outlook.

The above pattern stood in contrast to the electronic media which did not develop a comparable diversity of ethnic content. All radio broadcasting for instance was controlled by the colonial administration whose emphasis was less dictated by the ethnic preferences of the market. The formation of the British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation in 1935, based in Singapore, laid the foundation to an organised fulltime radio service, which was subsequently shifted to Kuala Lumpur to become Radio Malaya in 1957 (Asiah, 1981). Like its successor, Radio and Television Malaysia (established in 1966), the earlier broadcasting agencies, were more interested in airing programmes which were mostly aimed at providing information on current affairs, educating the public and indoctrinating the audience towards the goals of national unity. There are currently thirty-five daily newspapers in Malaysia: twenty in Mandarin, 3 in Bahasa Malaysia, 8 in the
English language, 3 in Tamil. Besides newspapers, radio and television, Malaysians also have access to magazines which are either published locally or are imported. The local magazines are available in Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese, English and in Tamil. Thus the Malaysian reading public is exposed to an abundance of media materials, which have made the public more aware and conscious of the situation in which they live. Also there is a surge of economic issues being raised since the 1980's as a result of the slowdown in economic progress. The Education Policy which promotes the use of Bahasa Malaysia as the medium of instruction in schools, have brought about a rapid increase in the circulation of newspapers published in Bahasa Malaysia. As in mid 1987 Utusan Malaysia tops circulation with a total issue of 239,800, followed by Berita Harian which has a circulation of 213,600. The New Straits Times comes next with a circulation of 168,900. Its rival, The Star, boasts a circulation of 148,000 while The Malay Mail, an afternoon tabloid, numbers 63,400. Among the Chinese dailies Nan Yang Siang Pau tops the list dailies with a circulation of 149,000. This is followed by Sin Chew Jit Poh, Shin Min and Tong Bao. The Tamil language daily of Tamil Nesan has a circulation of 14,800, while Tamil Tinnamani 25,4000 (ABC News, 1988).

Privatisation of television came about in 1984 as a result of the Malaysia Incorporation move. TV3 quickly became a popular alternative if not the strongest rival of RTM1 and RTM2. Unlike many other societies in the Third World, Malaysians are now in the position to enjoy three major television networks daily. The privatisation move, however, is not extended to radio
broadcasting which remains under government control. Radio Malaysia in the Peninsular provides service in four main languages: Bahasa Malaysia, English, Chinese (plus the dialects) and Tamil, besides some time allocated for the Orang Asli languages.

**National Unity and Nation Building**

A plural society is defined as the co-existence of different ethnic entities with each group holding on to its own religion, culture and language (Furnivall, 1956).

As a multi-racial country, Malaysia's economic and political stability depends on the level of unity achieved among the people from different racial backgrounds.

The government's policy has always been to obtain and maintain, national unity at all possible costs.

One would not be far away from the main track if one were to associate synonymously the concept of national unity with nation building. National unity may not lead to nation building but nation-building requires national unity.

Nation-building entails more than just the setting of the machinery of state. It calls for the consensus of organisations within society to support this new political entity. New organisations are required in the fields of politics, economics, education and health.

At the psychological level, the individual is also expected to change and to comply with the new idea of nation-building.
Significance of Racial Issues

Racial issues can be divided into two, one being positive and the other being negative. The positive will lead to better recognition of the values and beliefs inherent in the practices of every racial group. It will be acknowledged that the good streaks of every racial belief will serve as common denominators in fostering and forging racial understanding.

Positive Racial Issues: Positive racial issues, in the eyes of the media, can be termed as light news or colourful stories. Examples are:

* the report of event during every festival, (Hari Raya, Chinese New Year, Deepavali, Christmas) where leaders will express their goodwill wishes and hold open houses in the spirit of racial harmony.

* Activities conducted by Rukun Tetangga or those organised by the Department of National Unity.

* Every year the Department of National Unity will organise the Neighbourliness Workshop. In December 1987 the Prime Minister visited such a Workshop and called on the young participants to be tolerant (New Straits Times, December 12, 1988).

* Declarations of the need for national unity and the lessening of racial sensitivities viz:

(1). It was reported that efforts were being made to formulate a national unity policy to promote better relationship among the various communities (Raja Ariffin, NST, March 3, 1988).
Two Teacher Associations supported suggestions on racial prejudice to be included in Secondary School Curriculum (Star, November 16, 1987).

Exhibition and ceremonial get-together:

(1). A Unity Exhibition was held at Muzium Negara in August 1988.

**Negative Racial Issues** Negative racial issues can be termed 'hard' news, items that grab the attention of readers.

Such issues are generally raised by political parties in their quest to obtain support from their own group as against other communal groupings.

The political issues have developed in such a way in Malaysia that the reach for the "legitimate" rights of a particular race means touching the sensitive spots of the other races.

Questions on education, language, culture or economics impinge the sensitive parameters of every racial group. Each group finds it necessary to make its position clear or to make declaratory statements to "ward off" any intrusion of outside interferences.

It is well known that "negative" racial issues have all the ingredients of making the headlines. "Positive" racial issue are relegated as minor news items. Perhaps our definition of what constitutes news may be redefined. In the discussion of the New World International Order, some scholars have already called for a redefinition of news because the Western world has too often deemed negative issues like coups and disasters in Third World Countries to be news and neglecting report of positive
achievements. Likewise we might consider whether we should highlight more the positive, and play down, the negative communal issues, yet accept the positive items as being newsworthy.

Ethnic issues would not have mattered much if they were not related closely to national unity. As Malaysia has a plural society, any threat to racial harmony will be a threat to the stability of the country.

Political leaders have come out claiming any form of racialism or racial disharmony as a paramount problem. The Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department, Raja Ariffin bin Raja Sulaiman described unity as a core problem in Malaysia (Berita Harian, August 16, 1988).

When political leaders speak to a mixed audience, they are likely to call for racial harmony. It is only when they are in midst of their own kind that they tend to be "mischievous". If their popularity needs boosting up, a good topic would be to champion the "rights" of their own communities. When this is reported in the press, the other races will feel their "rights" have been threatened. Thus will begin the replies and counter replies, and subsequently the accusations and counter accusations. The issue becomes sensitive and everybody is worked up.

Societies faced with internal divisions would take two alternatives in an endeavour to maintain cohesion. One would be to point out to an external threat (creating an external enemy perhaps), and thereby mobilise all segments within to sink their differences to face the common enemy. Such external forms, even
if artificially created, may be counterproductive. First it is expensive to maintain readiness against the external threat. The country may be forced to buy arms, the population may be mobilised to prepare for war as a result of which the resources of the country may be sapped for non-productive ventures.

The other alternative is to plan by establishing institutions that would, in the long run, desensitise racial issues and nurture national sentiments. Admittedly there are no concrete plans for any country to implement. If there were blueprints governments would find themselves sitting in cozy chairs as they see national unity being achieved under their administration as they implement rigidly the plans laid down. But there are no plans but only ideas prescribed and subscribed to by leaders as they meander through with programmes to achieve racial understanding.

A look at news items on race relations in 1987 and in 1988, indicates several concepts were used, albeit taken to have similar meanings. Politician or community leaders use such concepts as 'racial polarisation', 'inter-ethnic ties', 'inter-ethnic understanding', 'racial co-operation', or 'racial understanding'. The end product of national unity or such kindred proclamations are prosperity (generally economic prosperity) and the well being of the nation to mean national unity. Several terms were also used such as 'national integration', and 'national solidarity'.

If national prosperity is the endogenous variable, then the quest for racial harmony should look diagramatically as follows:
Racial relations —— National unity —— Political stability —— Prosperity

Thus in diagram form again we have:

![Diagram]

There would be different approaches, at least theoretically if the policy has been for racial understanding, or racial co-operation as against racial integration. Nevertheless issues such as these are never discussed in the newspapers or given wide coverage in the mass media. Thus the 'living in a multi-racial society' forum on 3 April 1988 or the National Unity Seminar in Oct 4, 1986 were not given wide coverage as they truly 'deserved'. What were discussed were not deemed 'hard' news by the press.

Any threat, disturbance or challenge to the harmonious race relations by other institutions in society, including the mass media, will be construed to mean, therefore a threat and a challenge to national unity, political stability and (economic) prosperity.

The linear relationship of race relations, national unity, political stability and prosperity should not detract our attention to the contribution that are required by other institutions in society. Members of the society are prone to blame media every time there is racial tension in the air. The
messenger is easier to blame than the source of messages.

We can therefore illustrate as follows:

Media ------+ Race Relations ------+ National Unity

Education
Language
Culture

Religious issues

We would recognise that besides the media institution, there are other institutions (education, political, culture) that affect and influence race relations.

Although this paper is on race relations, one should not be oblivious to religious issues as they too affect national unity. We wonder of in today's Malaysia, of the two, religious issue may be predominantly more serious in affecting and influencing national unity, through their influence in race relations.

National Unity requires the giving up of some "rights" possessed by racial groups. National unity calls for the creation of national culture, national language, national education, among others. The Malaysian society will have to evolve itself toward national unity. The ground has been set by the acceptance and implementation of Bahasa Malaysia as the national language and the language of communication amongst the races. Gradually it will be possible to achieve a Malaysian race.

Media and National Unity

Malaysian print media are not only communal based but are controlled by political parties which in turn, owe their support from particular racial groups.
Ethnic issues have been raised by newspapers since the early days of the establishment of newspapers. It cannot be denied that each newspaper, in the beginning, raised issues with the aim of instilling consciousness among their readers at the plight that they were in. In midst of this, issues were also raised to defend their status and position vis-a-vis the other racial groups in Malaysia.

In the 1920's and 1930's issues that were rife were the position of Malays as the indigeous people and the creeping demands of the non-Malays that they should be given their rights as they had developed the country. We quote some news items as reported by Nazri (1988);

A Malay newspaper, Majalah Guru said in February, 1931.

".......... Orang Cina akan tinggal Cina juga dan tidak mahu mereka itu menjadi Melayu atau rakyat Raja Melayu dalam negeri Melayu".

("...... the Chinese will remain Chinese and have no desire to be Malays or to be subjects of the Malay rulers in the Malay State").

The Malay Mail of 4 January 1932 rejected the absolute power of the Malays by saying:

"...... the days of absolute monarchy has long since gone by the world being what it is. Today it seems so obvious that these people (non-Malays) have definite political right."
The struggle during the Malayan Union days and of citizenship rights were among the several issues that were highlighted in the newspapers. The reporting was frank and the issues, keenly debated, were highly inflammatory seen from current perspectives. Ahmad Nazri, 1988 attributed two causes for the then on-going debate; one because it was for the first time that Malays realised that the Chinese and Indians, once thought to be just contract workers, were here to stay and in the course of demanding their rights it was viewed as depriving the rights of the Malays.

The second reason was because the depression of the 1930's affected the economic livelihood of the people.

The struggle against the Malayan Union, the Communist threat and the imposition of Emergency lead the government in 1948 to pass the Printing Presses Act and Sedition Act. The press were more cautious but the caution was directed more at the government in its battle against the communists. Although racial animosities were not directly tossed against the other races across newspapers, newspapers still harped on sensitive issues such as Malay rights, language, education and royalty.

Despite the raging racial issues, fought fiercely in the press, yet there were no big racial riots until the May 13, 1969 incident. Ahmad Nazri (1988) attributes several reasons for this; one being that before and immediately after independence, newspapers were mainly read by the highly educated. The readers were in actual fact small in number. Each racial group did not possess as yet political power.
With the advent of independence and the granting of citizenship status a substantial number of non-Malays were immediately conferred the right to vote, to form political parties and the right to form a government. When political parties used racial issues to gain sympathy from their own racial kind, the battle was set. Every time a political party raised a sensitive issue, it was reported in the media. Temperature was raised among the readers. It needed a spark to conflagrate the May 13, 1969 incident.

The May 13, 1969 incident was a very valuable lesson learnt by all parties concerned. Politicians, community leaders, and mass media personnel took it upon themselves to ensure that a similar happening would not be allowed to happen again. The cost was too high for the country to afford another such a disastrous event.

In July 1969 National Goodwill Councils were established all over the country. In July 1970 the Department of National Unity and the National Consultative Council came into being. This was an attempt to win back racial understanding. Representatives of various religious, economic and political groups were nominated to serve on the Consultative Council so that matters affecting national unity could be discussed. The National Consultative Council, with its multiracial character, debated issues of national importance (racial issues and national unity).

The government realised that there should be clear guidelines on how racial friction could be met, and that all racial groups should appreciate the history of the country, the understanding reached among communal leaders at the time of
achieving independence, on the rights and responsibilities of each community toward others and the spirit behind the provisions entrenched in the Malaysian Constitution.

Each community was urged to understand the underlying beliefs and aspirations of the other communities within the context of Malaysian nationhood.

As a result of the deliberations, the government promulgated the national ideology, called Rukunegara (see subsequent section for elaboration). To redress the economic disparity among the racial groups, the government later on introduced the New Economic Policy.

In the aftermath of the May 13 1969 riot, the New Economic Policy (NEP) which declared national unity as the overriding objective was enunciated. The spirit was incorporated in the Malaysian national development programmes. This overall development policy was introduced with the objective of seeking to eradicate poverty among all Malaysians and to restructure Malaysian society so that the identification of race with economic function and geographic locality can be reduced and eventually eliminated. From this it should be emphasised that national unity is the declared superordinate goal of the nation. Thus, national unity forms the foundation for all efforts aimed at building a strong and united nation, but most importantly, for ensuring the stability and security of the nation in the long run.

In order to ensure that the ideals toward achieving national unity was not only upheld, but was also to be firmly
embedded in the hearts and minds of the people, the government propounded the national ideology, Rukunegara. Rukunegara comprises of five tenets with underlying values that are universal in nature. In principle, by virtue of its philosophical appeal, the Rukunegara should be readily acceptable by all irrespective of race, colour or creed.

The formulation of the Rukunegara shows a realisation on the part of government that coercive methods alone may not be effective towards achieving such superordinate goals. Existing mechanisms for social control must also be backed by a national ideology. As such, after declaring such ideological platform the government concentrates its efforts on three main areas: first, prevention of communal violence supported by efforts to promote ethnic relations. Second, to redress economic imbalance among the ethnic groups, and finally, to promote a sense of identity of, and loyalty to, the nation (Yew Yeok Kim, 1986).

These approaches represent broad strategies which thus far lack tactical programmes. It is at this juncture that mass media can play a meaningful role towards deliberate measures for persuasion in nation building. This, however, is not to suggest that there is a total absence of attempts at using the media and other outlets for propagating ideas directed at social integration. Although these avenues have been explored periodically through departmental press releases, they have not progressed beyond preaching for the goals rather than actually propagating realistic means to the same end. For example, there has been very little ideas given on how the younger generation might initiate occasions for interethnic mingling, nor even a
convincing rationale for ethnic interaction.

At the time of writing, the main thrust of Jabatan Perpaduan Negara is to foment social relationships through certain supraethnic neighbourhood programmes (for example: program semangat kejiranan).

In the wake of the rising number of crimes related to drug addiction, JPN implemented the Rukun Tetangga (Neighbourhood Ideology). It was a strategy to overcome, or at least to minimise, security problems in residential areas. This strategy called for participation on the part of residents in organising the surveillance of their own community. Thus, all males between 18-55 years of age were required to participate in scheduled civilian patrols within immediate of their representative residential sectors. However in 1983, despite several successes in civilian arrests of vandals, drug addicts and petty thieves, the scheme ended with more problems and dissappointments than successes. The authorities realised that there was a lack of 'community patriotism' to respond to such calls for voluntary duties. Presently, members tend to treat their community as a mere stop-over and loyalty is still primarily towards the original place of birth or the neigbourhood of family residence.

Realising the need to instill community spirit, JPN moved into the implementation of yet another programme which was geared towards strengthening relationships among residents, and to inculate a sense of belonging to the community. This was the Neighbourhood Programme which involved the participation of residents in various activities ranging from house visits,
recreational activities, dialogue sessions to counselling on social, family and professional matters. It was then felt that a strong bond of relationships among residents, and greater sense of belonging to the community should be present before residents can voluntarily participate actively in these self-help programmes.

Such programmes if properly exposed in the media could increase awareness of the public on the various activities which are being organised to further interethnic communication. Unfortunately, as news items they have low sensational value and media appeal. Perhaps, it is for this reason that most of such programmes rarely get highlighted in the local media. What little exposure they get is only possible through occasional releases of government publications such as, in the case of Malaysia, in Jiran and Negara which are periodicals with small circulation.

It can thus be said that the mass media are both an instrument for, as well as a product of, communal division. The nature of media itself makes it an effective avenue for ethnic propaganda. Bearing in mind the volatile tendencies of ethnic aggravation, the underlying principles of the Rukunegara becomes the critical message which the media have not only to digest but to inculcate and disseminate throughout all of their presentations.

The Professional Reporter

The reporter gets his training from two possible forms. If he is a graduate from the Department of Communication or the
School Communication of the relevant higher education Institution, he obtains some formal academic training. He then undergoes institutional training like the rest of his colleagues when he is recruited as a reporter.

Basically institutional training is professionally oriented. The reporter is taught to appreciate the newsworthiness of events, to write it in a form that will appeal to the good senses of the editors and also to bear in mind the interests of the readers.

Subjects like multiracial sensitivities and national unity are not included in the practical training of a journalist. If he is conscious he would have taken several courses as relevant subjects during his student days. If not, the journalism courses at the tertiary level plus his practical lessons with the institution will make him technically qualified to be a reporter.

A reporter is aware of the existence of such fields as economics, politics, science but national unity and nationhood, concepts that embrace several disciplines, are too abstract to be absorbed in such short a period of time.

An issue becomes sensitive when the majority of readers deem it to be so. When an issue is portrayed in the media it becomes sensitive by the circumstances of events. In such a given situation the issue becomes newsworthy. It then becomes hard for the editor not to use the issue as news anymore. If he decides not to report the issue his competitors will. The question is not so much not to use or kill the story but to use it without invoking any emotion. It is to write it straight. Desensationalise it, say the general public.
Sensitive issues are mostly political. Reporters are expected to write the news items in an objective manner. To the politicians, reporters will say depoliticise the issue. But circumstances of events have a way of making mundane issues very sensitive. A veteran journalist once said that issues become sensitive as they are politically manipulated. He gave an instance of the case of the appointment of non-qualified Mandarin Chinese teachers as headmasters in National-Assisted Chinese Schools as being manipulated by political parties to serve their own ends. If the issue was not highlighted in the English press it was done so by the vernacular press. The issue becomes termed as sensitive.

The veteran journalist said that his newspaper had background articles to explain the issue in depth. This was an attempt to define the issue or simply to look at the issue from a non-racial perspective. Yet it fell on deaf ears among the politicians. Readers read the headlines and politicians read through the stories and made hasty judgements.

A discussion with several editors reveal the seriousness and the dilemma they constantly face in reporting sensitive issues. One editor said that if an incident to be reported is going to be sensitive he would rather not use the story at all, especially if it pertains to religion.

The electronic media are conscious of sensitive issues. The predicament by the producers in preparing television programmes that would promote national unity and also avoid hurting the feelings of various racial groups is illustrated vividly by
Vincent Lowe and Jaafar Kamin (1982).

The situation at present and in the future will make the editors face a different set of problems. The Bahasa Malaysia newspapers will inevitably find that their readers are not wholly the Malays but also of the non-Malays. Other language newspapers will face a dwindling circulation. Bahasa Malaysia newspapers will be entrusted with the high responsibility of setting the agenda on racial unity and national solidarity.

The role and influence of media on racial issues have not been fully distinguished. First, do media start and spread racial issues, and second, do media merely reflect the racial issues being discussed by members of society? If media were deemed to play the first role, the institution would solely be responsible for setting the public agenda. If the second role is accepted, then the public sets the agenda, and the media 'obediently' report it. Perhaps a third role can be specified, namely that the public sets the agenda but the media are able to minimise or to amplify the issue for the extension of the bigger public.

Whatever the role, studies on the agenda-setting have suggested that during periods of stress, the press are relied upon for information. The agenda thus makes the public to think about particular issue, even if the media do not influence what public to think (McCombs and Shaw, 1967).

Malaysia is not alone in handling riot stories that have racial implications. Other countries also have similar experiences. It should not mean that reporters should shy away from covering racial issues and that they focus only on "the
bland, the pleasant and the non-controversial" (Haddad, 1967:35). That would be anathema to journalistic norms. Editors and reporters can always be conscious of the implications and repercussions when covering racial issues.

Haddad (1967) quoted some guidelines in suggesting the Reporting of Civil Disorders, among them are:

* Scare headlines, scare bulletins and sensationalism of other kinds should be avoided in magazines, newspapers, radio and television;
* No report should use superlatives or adjectives which might incite or enlarge a conflict, or cause a renewal of trouble in areas where disturbances have quieted.

What is required therefore is the appreciation among newspeople on how to report issues of national importance without making them appear racially sensitive.

**Media Ethics in Theory and Practice**

With the national ideology in mind and in hand, the journalist is further guided by the code of ethics laid down by the National Union of Journalists. This code of ethics is similar to the American Canons of Journalism of 1947. Apart from being given the responsibility to receive directives from his employer, the journalist is made to feel his responsibility to the society. As such, he must be aware of the "sensitivities" of the public. These 'sensitivities' refer to the need for special attention to be given to ethnic and religious issues,
while at the same time to be aware of all government policies (Lowe, 1983). It also calls for efforts at depoliticising controversial issues which have escalated to runaway proportions.

However, media code of ethics are declaratory in nature and thus, not binding. It is used to instill a conscientious and responsible practice which should progress to the higher goals in the art of journalism. It is a set of statements promulgated and sanctioned by the professional journalists association to ensure a high standard of practice and to discourage any tendency for abuse in the profession. In the case of Malaysia, the areas susceptible to such abuse includes mostly subjects which have ethnic qualifiers. For example, it would be difficult if not impossible for a Malay journalist to get information on programmes and in-house conduct of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce. Similarly, the problems of access may also be familiar to those who try to do a coverage on the conduct of certain government agencies which too often is wrongly protected by the Internal Security Act or are too often sentenced to the doldrums of departmental confidentiality.

**Mass Media and Law**

Several measures introduced by the government which bear the spirit of the preceding ideological precepts were promulgated to streamline media presentation in both print and broadcast. In discussing these measures, one has to firstly reflect upon the Constitution especially with reference to Article 10 (1) (a) which provides that "every citizen has the right to freedom of speech and expression." It declares the freedom to express
opinion, to organise meetings and to form associations. However, this freedom is subject to clause (2), (3) and (4) of the Constitution which further clarifies this condition of freedom (Refer to Constitution of Malaysia Part Two Article 10). Further, Part 3 of the Constitution is related to the granting of citizenship. Article 52 of Part 3 affirms that Bahasa Malaysia is the National Language as well as the official language of the nation. Article 153 lays the special privileges of the Malays and other Bumiputras while article 184 defines the sovereignty of the Royalty. Henceforth, guided by such articles in the Constitution, the Parliament has enacted several laws related to media operations which were deemed necessary and important for the well being of the nation. Hamdan Adnan (1987) listed several Acts and Regulations that limit the operating of mass media in Malaysia. The regulation of the mass media is aimed at three spheres, one, that the institution is owned mainly by Malaysians, two, that sensitive issues not to be raised, and three, that national secrets are not disclosed.

As far as raising racial issues are concerned, the relevant Acts are the Sedition Act 1948 and The Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984. The PPAPA is designed to "regulate the use of printing presses and the printing, importation, production, reproduction, publishing and distribution of publications, and for matters connected therewith."

Under PPAPA, the Minister is empowered to revoke or suspend a license if he is "satisfied that any printing press is used for printing any matter which is prejudicial to public order or
national security" (Section 13 (1).

Controls can also be imposed on what is termed as "undesirable publications" which refers to any publication that is likely to contain "anything that is prejudicial to or likely to be prejudicial to public order, morality, security, prejudicial to public interest or national interest (Section 7 (1) 10 of PPAPA).

In the interest of "security" or "public order", laws may be passed by Parliament to prohibit the raising and questioning of the four sensitive issues, namely:

(a) the position of the Rulers
(b) the special position of the Malays and natives of the Borneo States
(c) Citizenship rights; and
(d) the status of Malay as the National Language

The above sensitive issues are protected by Part III, and Articles 152, 153, and 181 of the Federal Constitution (Mohamad Ariff, 1987).

The Sedition Act, 1948 makes it an offence among others, to print, publish, sell, offer for sale, distribute, repontance or import any seditious publication. The term "seditious" is defined as any act, speech, words, publication, or thing "having" a seditious tendency, which is further elaborated among others:

* to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population of Malaysia.

Journalists are aware of the circumstances that they are in
when they report. Some have resorted to the extreme stand of avoiding events that are sensitive.

If we tie up with the discussion on the professional training of reporters, it would not be a bad idea if editors were to introduce a short formal institutional training on the proper way of treating and reporting sensitive racial and religious issues. Rather than adopt an indifferent attitude of not reporting anything that is racially sensitive, the authorities in the press should verse themselves in ways to report events that would educate the general public. One cannot will away the racial problems that exist in society. It would be a positive step if we could expose the evils of racialism, confront them and eventually blunt their dangerous threat. This is easier said than done. If editors are the thinkers in society, we are certain that they will be able to come out with some tangible suggestions.

Conclusion

In this paper we have attempted to discuss the interrelatedness of media, ethnicity and national unity. We have forwarded the idea that the media institution is one out of several others that can promote ethnic co-operation and understanding. Race relations is important in a plural society like Malaysia.

Like religion it is sine qua non to national unity and the country's economic prosperity and well-being.

We have endeavoured to indicate that the press face
difficulties in dealing with issues that have racial overtones. The circumstances of the time, the manipulation of events by parties external to the press system makes it difficult for editors and reporters to judge the sensitivity of any issue.

Yet the press as a message relaying sub-system in the total social system does play an important role, despite being circumscribed by several Acts and Regulations. It could desensitise and downplay the negative issues yet go indepth to portray the positive issues, thereby working in tandem with the other societal institutions to promote and advance the cause of positive race relations in Malaysia.
References


