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New Communication Technologies And Their Impact
On Mass Media Operation

By

Ahmad Mustapha Hassan
In the information and news-related industry, speed and accuracy are vital. It is more so with news agencies. They themselves are not the end-users but are involved in selling services to end-users. They have to deliver on time for the buyers to use them. It has become essential that they be equipped with the necessary technology in order to function as required.

2. When BERNAMA was first established - in May of 1968 - the operations were simple and modest. The demand was not great. BERNAMA was able to meet the requirements of the media. Most of the media were headquartered in the national capital and much of the news coverage too was concentrated within the capital.

3. But as we progressed and when coverage became nationwide, there was a need to introduce innovations in the field of editorial coverage as well as in the field of transmission. The system used then was pretty much unsophisticated.

4. Typewriters were everywhere on the editorial floor and teleprinters were the main equipment for despatching news. Operations were slow and BERNAMA could only partially meet the requirements of the press. Many of the stories sent out could not meet deadlines set by the press. As such, it was rare to find BERNAMA-originated stories appearing in the print media.

5. At that period in time, BERNAMA offered two services -- one known as the General News, and the other the Economic News. The extent of these services were also limited and the wordage was in the region of 16,000 words per day for the general news and about 10,000 for the economic news.
6. Stories from state offices and bureaus were either sent by teleprinters or were phoned in. These stories were then passed on to the sub editors for polishing before the final approval by either the chief sub editor or the editor himself. The edited stories were then submitted to the teleprinter operators for punching on the tapes. The tapes were slotted in to the various subscribers. Sometimes the same tape would have to be transferred from one machine to other machines for transmission to yet other subscribers out of the Kuala Lumpur area.

7. The system was time consuming and was subjected to errors. By the time the stories arrived at the offices of the subscribers, they were no longer useable because deadlines could not be met. Hence, it was rare for any reader of the newspapers in Malaysia to come across items credited to BERNAMA.

8. Editorially, the stories were of a high standard but due to our inability to transmit the stories fast enough as required by the media, the stories did not find space in the pages of the media. The speed used at that time was 50 baud.

9. In the case of our transmission to Sabah and Sarawak, only one line was used and this had to cater for the general as well as the economic items. The style and scope of operations did not meet subscribers' requirements.

10. Mainly due to BERNAMA's inability to provide a speedy service to its subscribers, its services were not highly appreciated. The number of subscribers, too, was very limited. There was no way BERNAMA could expand the number of services it could provide as the system used posed innumerable constraints. The only foreign wire that BERNAMA carried was the Agence France-Presse (AFP) and this was sent to subscribers on a separate wire with the same 50 baud transmission speed. There was no delay in the service as the news went direct to subscribers from the broadcast panel located at the Telecoms headquarters. The setup then gave no scope for further expansion of BERNAMA services.
11. It was only in 1982 that a decision was made to install a computer to handle editorial operations as well as to facilitate distribution. It was then that opportunity presented itself for BERNAMA to launch new services.

12. The editorial operations were reorganised and divided into three divisions -- Domestic, Economic and Foreign. BERNAMA was also given the mandate to handle foreign wire services but this was to be carried out via commercial arrangements. For the first time BERNAMA embarked on a new era whereby its operations were based on modern media technology.

13. I have visited a number of established news agencies whose operations are completely computerised, to find out how these new technologies have affected the agencies themselves as well as the media. In the case of the agencies, they have become very successful as now they have become broad-based in terms of news operations and distribution. As for the media, they receive the services much faster and in time to go to print. As most of the media in the advanced countries as well as the news agencies there are already computerised in their operations, the services sent by the agencies go straight into the computers of the newspapers concerned. It is up to the editors to call up the stories, edit them and pass them on for printing in the various relevant pages of the papers.

14. It costs BERNAMA about US$1 million for the current computer that is used for its editorial and distribution system. Altogether we have installed 55 VDU terminals and reporters coming back with their stories are expected to input right away into any one of the terminals. The stories will then appear on the printer at the chief sub editor's desk. He will assign a sub editor to process the stories and subsequently transmit them to the subscribers.

15. Stories which have been transmitted to subscribers appear on the copy printer at the chief sub editor's table. This allows him to send out corrections immediately should he spot any inaccuracies or mistakes in the stories.
16. In order to transmit stories only to relevant subscribers, the subeditor assigns an address code to these stories.

17. As can be seen, the time taken for BERNAMA stories to be written and transmitted has been reduced tremendously and subscribers are kept updated on the latest development concerning the stories which have been sent out. A news item on the staging of a coup in a certain country, for example, is updated each time a new development takes place. The same goes for sports stories. In other words, subscribers are kept constantly abreast of current situations.

18. It depends on the media themselves as to what time each goes to bed -- the later it is, the more up-to-date the stories will be for them to choose. It also depends whether the paper's operations are computerised. If so, the transmitted stories will go straight into the paper's computer. Even if printers are used, copies can be torn and sent to the various desks concerned for selection and insertion in the various pages.

19. The coverage of the last general election in Malaysia has shown how beneficial it is to use modern technology in news operations. On the night of the counting of votes, results were transmitted as soon as we received them. This was made possible because the computer had been fed with the format for the various constituencies. All it took when results came in was to put in the various figures involved and then transmit them out. At the same time, as results were being sent out, desks involved in doing analysis and election-related stories turned out stories for the media to use, such as profiles of leaders elected and also profiles of those who lost. Subscribers were, therefore, never short of stories.

20. At the moment, BERNAMA is transmitting on slow speed wires of 50-75 baud. However, we are trying to encourage our media subscribers to use the metropolitan line which has a transmission speed of 1200 baud or 16 times faster than existing lines. By using this line, subscribers will not face delays in receiving the service. They can receive the three services - domestic, economic and foreign - just on that one line instantly.
21. When we had our first meeting with our subscribers in 1982, the main complaint was the delay in receiving the service. But now, that has been overcome. In fact, they are now receiving more than they can cope with. Our total wordage transmitted to our subscribers fall in the region of 140,000 words a day -- 40,000 for domestic, 60,000 for foreign and 40,000 for economic.

22. With the amount of news and information that we collect both from our own services and those which we receive from other news agencies, national as well as international, we have become a vast storehouse of information. With this we are able to provide other kinds of services which cater for non-media clients. And with our computerised operations, we have become an international news agency. We are selling our services in Singapore as well as in Japan. We also have our own Correspondents and Retainers in various major cities throughout the world.

23. I shall now describe the various other services which we have since the installation of the computer.

24. We have introduced video news services for hotels and other public places. These provide news highlights and graphics on TV screens and since their introduction a year ago, we now have thirty subscribers. Other projects launched to generate income include a news service to clients in Singapore and a bulletin service in Japanese and English to clients in Japan and the Japanese community in Malaysia.

25. We are also in the process of introducing a PR Newswire that will provide a communications medium for PR agencies and corporations to deliver their news releases in professional form to the media throughout the country. We have also entered into a corporate agreement with the Universal News Service (UNS) in London to distribute Malaysian press releases to media houses worldwide and conversely press releases from abroad for release to Malaysian media.
26. Early this year we engaged the services of a Unesco Consultant to assist us in developing a Malaysian news database. We are now evaluating his recommendations to ensure that we can come up with a financially viable service. Such on-line database services are proliferating in developed countries and offer screens full of information on everything from share prices and corporate earnings' histories to airline flight schedules and the weather.

27. It would certainly not have been possible to introduce the new services if BERNAMA's operations had not been computerised. However, in diversifying our operations, no effort has been spared to improve our editorial operations and the end result is that we now provide a news service that meets with the highest professional standards. Modern communication technologies have thus set the stage for BERNAMA to develop into a broad-based news and information agency.

28. Allow me at this juncture to describe briefly the computerised system we have installed. The central computers are DEC 11/44 and the disk memory is in two parts: (i) system disk, where the storage capacity is 10 million characters or 10MB; (ii) text memory, where the storage capacity is 4 million words or 28 million characters. The video terminals are Delta Data terminals. We are using IMOS (London) software. The system is fully duplicated for reliability. There are two systems and both are running at the same time with only one system active.

29. It is now two years since we installed the computers and the results have been amazing and dramatic. The system has enabled us to expeditiously and efficiently handle all our news traffic amounting to close to three million words a day with the greatest ease. We are also upgrading our communications network from the present teleprinter circuit to voice-grade data circuits and the new network will cover all major towns in the country so as to be able to provide a wide range of news and information services to subscribers throughout the country. This will enable us to play a key role in setting the stage for the establishment of regional and provincial newspapers and, thereby, improve the flow of information throughout the country.
30. Equally significant is that the system does not only provide for word storage and processing facilities, but serves as a powerful communication device, enabling us to bring news from three dozen sources abroad and to re-route copy to various destinations around the world. With this new facility, we are now playing a more active role in the ASEAN News Exchange (ANEX) and the news network operated by the Organisation of Asia-Pacific News Agencies (OANA). In fact, with effect from September 1, 1985, BERNAMA became the centre for the distribution of ASEAN news with the transfer of the regional computer port from the Philippines Communications Incorporated (PHILCOM) in Manila. Our sophisticated technology has thus been made available for the regional distribution of news agency copy in our part of the world.

31. One of the impediments to effective operations of national news agencies has been poor communication network. Because of the high communication tariffs, many agencies have not established a good system of communication network which is essential for delivery of news services. Unesco as well as OANA have recognised that high rates levied by telecommunications authorities was the greatest impediment to the free flow of information. This subject has been discussed at many national and international forums and many resolutions have been adopted calling for PBS and DPBS rates. A number of countries have responded by reducing tariffs. If our agencies are to enjoy the benefits of new technology, they should have all the necessary communication facilities, be it telegraphic or data circuits. Tariffs in our region are one of the highest, in some cases three to four times that in the West. In Europe, press tariffs are very much lower largely because of preferential tariffs. Enough resolutions have been passed and it is now time to press national governments for some positive action.

32. Satellite communication is also revolutionising media activities and they are far cheaper than terrestrial circuits. Terrestrial circuits costs increase roughly in proportion to distance whereas satellite circuits
costs are relatively independent of distance. The advantage of satellite communication is that once the signal is broadcast it can be picked up at an unlimited number of points within range of the satellite on low cost receiving devices. This will help immeasurably in bridging communication problems faced by countries where communication infrastructure is still in its infancy. Satellite communication can also play an important role in helping our agencies receive services from a central point cheaply.

Currently BERNAMA is exploring the possibility of using INTELSAT's multi-destination satellite service which will enable a news agency to distribute a news service or a news-photo service to a multiplicity of small low-cost user-provided receive-only earth stations over a wide area.

33. In conclusion, I would like to emphasize that however advanced communication technology is, it is not an end unto itself but just a means to an end. And for BERNAMA, despite our success with new technology, we have never lost sight of our key objective of providing news, on an impartial basis, to the public. In many ways, our successful and dynamic growth can be attributed to our determined adherence to this professional stand.

BERNAMA,
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.
August 18, 1986

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