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Mass Media And The Promotion Of Public Health
And Nutrition In Asean: Malaysia

By

Ahmad Mustapha Hassan
The press in Malaysia, like in most other countries, perform various functions. As is generally known, it is the function of the press to report, to inform and to criticise. Some may appreciate these three functions that are carried out by the press but there are also others who look at these functions of the press with suspicion and with a feeling of uneasiness. What may be welcomed by one group may not conjure the same reaction from another. But for the press, work and responsibility will have to be carried out.

Apart from the various functions as mentioned, the press undoubtedly has a social responsibility to the nation. Things reported may not be rosy but the idea is to drive home some points so that a change can be brought about. As said by some, especially in the Watergate case: the story as related was primarily an information one but when convincing evidence accumulated, it had a persuasive effect that brought about changed attitudes and behaviour. That, they emphasised, is what journalism has been all about over the centuries.1

A case in point recently in Malaysia, was the report on the closure of the Cardiac Coronary Unit at the University Hospital in Kuala Lumpur. The story was broken by Bernama and the issues were then taken up by the rest of the press. The public lauded the effort by the press to unveil the critical condition existing at the Hospital but the authorities were not at all happy with this revelation. Several press cuttings concerning this episode are attached with this paper to illustrate the various reactions to the said report. But the outcome of all these reactions was the positive steps taken by the appropriate authorities to better the conditions at the said Hospital. The press, in this instance, had carried out admirably its social function to the community. If it had not been for the press, the cardiac unit at the University would not have been given due attention. The press, therefore, has the power to activate things in a way to bring about change for the better.

There are many other instances whereby the press has carried out its social responsibility well. But this is not to say that only the bad is highlighted. Being in a position to inform the public, the press has also
carried out reports that will make the public more acquainted with new developments in health care. In most of the papers they do carry columns concerning health and nutrition. This is especially so with the Sunday editions. People are made to be aware of the risks of taking certain kind of drugs and also how they can better their health condition. These are some of the services done by the press to the public. Nutrition, too, has become a topic that is quite often highlighted by the press. Recently a series of articles were put out to show that nutrition and health are very much inter-related. This is to make the public much more aware that good food is essential to the body and the mind. It is also vital that the family health be made top priority by the people.

In a background paper presented at the First WHO/UNICEF Regional Workshop on the Promotion of Health Information, in Manila from 6th to 12th March 1979, Dr. Gloria D. Feliciano, Dean, Institute of Mass Communication, University of the Philippines, wrote that the role of the mass media concerning the propagation of primary health care falls into eight categories:

1. They inform the general public about the different facets of primary health care;
2. They interpret issues or problems relating to family health care;
3. They instruct the public on certain specific health concerns;
4. They motivate/persuade the government, other agencies as well;
5. They provide opportunity for dialogue on health issues between and among health practitioners, experts, government agency, media practitioners and the general public;
6. They participate in special information campaigns undertaken by government or private agencies or the media men themselves during specific weeks or months of the year;
7. They assist the government in enforcing health laws; and
8. They undertake action programmes designed to promote primary health care to the general public.2
Those are the eight functions performed by the media, according to Dr. Gloria D. Feliciano. I do not think anyone would dispute that. The only point for discussion would be, in which category of function the press had been actively involved with. Nobody would dispute that the Malaysian press has done a good job in informing the public concerning public health and nutrition. But there has not been very many reports that can be considered to have fallen on category two of the job-function of the media as mentioned above. Three, four and five are also being done by the Malaysian press and this can be seen from what I shall be relating later on in this short paper. The same it is with function number 6. To a lesser extend I can safely say that the Malaysian press does carry out functions seven and eight.

It is not possible for me to fully illustrate the various undertakings carried out by the Malaysian press in relation to health promotion and nutrition, but I shall highlight some issues which I believe would clearly show how the Malaysian press has been in respect to this campaign. It is however not known, as no survey has ever been carried out, as to what percentage, items put out by the press carry messages on health and nutrition. But generally, quite a portion of the pages is devoted to the subject in one way or another.

In Malaysia, as mentioned, the press has always been acting responsibly and is ever ready to shoulder its responsibility to the community. In any campaign, the press has given its full support and has even come out with its own strategy on how the campaign can be made to be successful. A very good example is the current campaign against drug abuse. The Straits Times, especially, comes out with a special section highlighting the harmful effects of this practice. There has been no special guidelines put out by the authorities concerning this campaign but simply an appeal and the press has acted on this appeal and has come out in support of the efforts by the government to combat this social menace. It has been left to the press to plan its contribution towards the campaign. And the press did come out with plans that greatly assist the authorities in realising the objectives of the campaign.
A survey done by the Department of Information, Malaysia, to ascertain how effective the anti-drug abuse campaign had been, showed that the press, radio and television had done very well and the campaign had been most fruitful. The survey, among other things, mentioned that the public got their information concerning the harmful effects of drug abuse mainly from the press i.e. the press has been the main source of information for the public.

Let me reproduce parts of the report to illustrate the effectiveness of the press in the said campaign.

"D. Conclusion

The main conclusions of the above survey comprising the following viewpoints:

1) The Main Source of Information
   The newspaper is the main source of information on dadah. Other important sources are television and the radio.

2) The Rate of Information from Newspapers
   When compared with all three important media, newspapers provide the most information on dadah.

3) Reaction to Publicity
   Sixty-nine per cent of the members of the public and sixty-five per cent of the families of dadah addicts say their reaction to the publicity on dadah prompt them to give warning/advice to other on the dangers of dadah.

4) The Impact of Publicity
   Publicity on dadah has succeeded in keeping away members of the public and the families of addicts from dadah involvement and has been effective in warning them on its dangers. But fifteen per cent of the addicts say the publicity aroused feelings to want to try dadah.
5) The Methods of making it Effective

Members of the public, families of addicts and the addicts themselves unanimously say the enforcement of severe laws and regarding dadah addiction as a criminal offence are the most suitable ways to effectively counter dadah. To addicts, to portray dadah addiction as against the principles of community living and as such is looked down upon by members of the public is another effective measure.

6) The source of information to addicts before receiving treatment

Before receiving treatment at the various dadah rehabilitation centres, eighty-six per cent of the addicts read directly from the newspapers and seventy-seven per cent of the addicts listened to the radio and viewed television. Only twenty-four per cent read directly from government pamphlets.  

This shows that the press in Malaysia is an effective mechanism in the efforts to make the public more aware of the severe implications attached to drug abuse.

Coming to the issue of 'Promoting Public Health and Nutrition' the press has on a number of occasions pointed out the necessity of this being given greater attention by all. But this has been done more on occasions rather than based on any planned campaign. One of the main targets by the press at the moment is the lack of civic consciousness on the part of the general public on general cleanliness. The public utility services too had come under constant attack for not providing enough services in the maintenance of cleanliness.

In any effort to promote public health and nutrition, the main target should be in bringing about a change in attitude. This can only be successful if there is a planned strategy, involving not just the press but also all other relevant agencies including community organisations. But what is happening now is that the matter is only taken up at random by the press just as mentioned earlier concerning the reports on the unclean state of affairs in the cities such as heaps of rubbish not being attended to,
the public throwing rubbish where they please and a general lack of concern on the state of health of the community. This kind of campaign will not bear fruit as desired. It may conjure some reactions but whether this will entail greater development is a matter of pure conjecture.

When the Malaysian Prime Minister, some time back, launched the 'Keep Clean' campaign, almost all agencies and organisations made the effort to bring home to the people the urgent need to maintain cleanliness in order to achieve better health. But the enthusiasm seemed to have slackened and we again fall back into the old habit of just not caring whether the campaign has been effective or not. No proper analysis was carried out and no further improvement was ever initiated in order to make the campaign much more effective than ever before. In other words, there was no post mortem done and as such, nobody knows how effective some of these campaigns have been.

When we discuss about promoting health and nutrition, many related topics are involved. It is simply not possible to achieve better health if no proper plan and strategy are worked out. Questions such as pollution, the mental attitude towards health and cleanliness, proper dieting, sports and recreation etc. will have to be given proper attention if we are to achieve our targets. It has to be an all embracing campaign and as such every aspect will have to be looked into. It is not enough to report once in a while about the lack of attention being given to this and that aspect of health care. The press cannot be blamed for this because the question of promoting public health and nutrition is the concern of everyone.

It is quite simple if the topic chosen for any campaign pertains only to one aspect of the problem. In the campaign for the eradication of drug abuse, for example, the picture is quite clear and there is no complexity in the planning of the campaign. But in the case of promoting health and nutrition, the problem is much more complex than that. We are facing an innumerable number of problems and challenges. Attitudes apart, beliefs by some groups concerning customs and practices can also affect the health standard of the community. It is essential, therefore, that a complete programme be worked out how to disseminate the right information in order to bring about the right attitude.
The 'Star' of 11th June had two reports concerning nutrition. I shall quote parts of the reports. The first report says: "The government and the public are complacent about nutrition among rural communities as well as among urban poor, quoting the Malaysian Paediatrics Association." And the report went on to relate the various factors that will affect the general condition of health of the public. In another report that also appeared on the same day, it was mentioned that old beliefs had restricted the consumption of nutritious food. The report said: "Food beliefs and prohibitions exert a strong influence on the dietary pattern of rural Malays, some of which were harmful as they restricted the variety of food intake and thus the nutrition supply."

From the extracts that I have chosen, it goes to prove that the press is very much concerned with the question of health, nutritional habits, government complacency towards this issue, and various other related subjects that hamper the promotion of health and nutrition in the country.

The press alone cannot do very much concerning the issue on the promotion of public health and nutrition. The press has already pointed out the problems involved and hope that the relevant authorities would act so that it is possible to minimise the issues. If the authorities concerned can be more positive, the press is ever eager to assist and make the campaign a success.

Reports of this nature by the press also create negative reaction from agencies concerned. To some of them, such reports are taken to be criticism of the performance of their work and instead of trying to better their performance, they tried to rationalise their inefficiency or lack of action. The press has been blamed on a number of occasions concerning this. To some of them what the press did was merely to make mountains out of molehills. Thus, in such a situation, the role of the press has been very much misunderstood. What is reported for the general good was taken in very bad light and has caused adverse effects.
It will be most laudable if the press as a whole can regulate its contribution towards promoting health and nutrition by having proper format and regular columns on the subject. This will enhance the campaign and make the effort much more effective. Health columns should appear on set days of the week so that we can create a pattern whereby the reading public will know when to expect reports on health and nutrition. Special children page should be introduced and information on various aspects of healthy living be made a regular feature. All those concerned with health and nutrition should come together and plan the campaign well and this will add a lot more meaning to the effort to make the community more health conscious. These are some of the things that can be done and if need be, there should be a permanent council established in order to plan and implement programmes for the promotion of public health and nutrition.

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