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The Newspaper And Its Public

By

Faridah Ibrahim
Introduction:

Development plans for nation building in many countries especially in the developing nations have often been equated with the mass media. The fact that the governments of these nations are using the mass media to help in promoting national development objectives and efforts, clearly demonstrate the potential of the mass media in facilitating development.

However, the role of the mass media in facilitating development is often indirect and only contributory rather than direct and powerly (Rogers, 1976:49-50). Some may even argue that other functions and external factors are important. But even so, intellectual critiques agreed that no change can occur without the flow of information by the mass media. From this point of view, it is not difficult to understand why mass media have been given considerable attention in nations where socioeconomic improvement are urgently desired as in the Third World nations such as Malaysia. With the increasing consciousness of national development, the role of the mass media becomes an important factor especially because of their educational, informational and persuasive roles.

Wilbur Schramm points out the task of the mass media in national development. He said the communication task behind the social change of national development are three kinds. First, the populace must have information about national development.
Second, there must be an opportunity to participate intelligently in the decision process. And third, the needed skills must be taught (Schramm, 1983: 125).

Schramm summarizes the role of the media in each task. The information roles of the mass media are 1) widening horizon 2) focussing attention 3) raising aspirations, and 4) creating a climate of development. The roles of mass media in the decision process are 1) helping only directly to change strongly held attitudes or called practices. 2) feeding the interpersonal channels 3) conferring status, and 4) broadening the policy dialogue lightly held, and slightly channelize stronger attitudes. The role of mass media in the teaching task is helping in all types of education and training (Schramm, 1983: 126-142).

MASS MEDIA STRUCTURES;

The mass media are both great multipliers of information and long pipelines for information. They also become powerful gatekeepers along the pathways of information. Where the mass media are readily available today, people typically spend more time on them than any other daily activities. Almost all news comes through the mass media, and consequently almost all of our images of our distant environment.

On the pathways of information, communicating organizations that grow around them such as the news agencies, newspaper and magazine staffs, broadcasting stations, publishing house, film studios, are gradually becoming extraordinarily powerful gatekeepers. When we consider the power of the media to focus our attention on one subject or one person rather than on others
that might concern us, we have good reason to ask how these gatekeeping decisions are made and under what controls. For the modern media are inextricably intertwined with modern life.

To understand media, we need to differentiate their separate structures and their effects upon individuals and society that make up the public. According to W. Philip Davison, a Columbia University Sociologist, radio is the alerting medium. It will be the first medium that tells us something noteworthy has happened, although the account will be sketchy. Television is the involving medium. It engages the emotions more completely than the others. Print, which will be the main concentration in this paper, is the informing medium. It alone is capable of handling complexity (Abel, 1981:4).

Why have people come to depend on newspapers rather than television as a source of information about public affairs and major events? Although recent communication researches have shown that television has captured the news function and clearly, it is the best window on events as they happen, we still turn to print for more facts, more interpretations, and depths. The extraordinary thing about television is the vividness of its coverage and the extent to which people have come to trust it. The impact of the moon scenes could never have been duplicated in the newspapers (Schramm, 1982:224)

The public who forms the media audience is learning from the media all the time, although they do not realize they are learning. And no better example can be found of the incidental, unintended and unexpected learning from the media than what they
contribute to the skills, values, and beliefs that go to make up human socialization. The media content affects our way of thinking, how we act; what we say; what we value, what we aspire; and how we feel about ourselves and another. In other words, the mass media give us knowledge and important experiences that become dominant forces that shape our thoughts and perceptions.

The roles of the mass media as mentioned earlier also reflect the roles and functions of the newspapers. The newspapers as we can see are part of the mass media. Among the various functions of the newspapers, three most often cited by communication scholars are the watch, teacher and forum functions. According to Schramm, in the first function, media personnel seek out, observe and report situations that are considered important enough to share. In the second function, the newspapers provide the public with material about societies' traditions, norms, and prevailing attitudes. The newspapers also provide messages of persuasion, that is, content designed to bolster current values or, to transform new ideas into social change. However, two other major functions that should be included here are the entertainment and commercial functions. In order to survive, media industry has to attract and hold a particular audience which it could then sell to advertisers (Schramm, 1982:17).

In the developing nations, the functions of the newspapers have been reoriented and adjusted to local needs. Much of the mass media roles are tightly closely to the government objectives. Let us look briefly at the mass media system in Malaysia.
Mass media in Malaysia not only are required to inform, educate, and motivate the masses toward development goals stipulated by the government, but also are expected to go hand in hand with the government's policies in order to remain viable. The newspapers and other media are expected to help the government foster the spirit of understanding and strengthen the friendship and unity among people.

On the whole, the media in Malaysia reflect the situation of government and the society in which they operate. The diversity in culture, race, language and ethnic groups is most distinctively portrayed in the mass media. There are Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil newspapers circulated widely all over the nation. The same goes to the electronic media. John A. Lent in his study on the Malaysian mass media found that increasingly since 1969, the authorities in Malaysia have cajoled the media, through legislative, economic, and socioeconomic constraints, into a partnership for the sake of national development and unity (1974:2).

The newspapers and other media are expected to cooperate with the government policy. One can see that Malaysian media, especially the newspapers carry a proportion of material about development and government activities. Malaysia, like so many other Southeast Asian countries, has put aside the freedom of expression guarantee. Several of the reasons given have to do with the internal sensitivity resulting from Malaysia's multi-racial background and also for the sake of national security and nation building. The newspapers must therefore accept and
actually seek guidance from the government especially from the censorship officers in the Ministry of Home Affairs. Failure to follow the government guidelines may result in the suspension of the newspapers, or seriously, withdrawal of the printing permit permanently. The media in Malaysia are controlled by legislation and ownership, particularly by political parties.

PUBLIC AND CONTENT SELECTIVITY:

How do the issues published in the newspapers affect individuals that form the public? They can do so in many ways. As a private individual, you have to make decisions as to the part the newspapers will play in your life, whether the role you chose is that of a professional in communication or that of a media consumer. As a citizen, you should be aware of the role the newspapers in society and you should be able to take well informed positions on policy issues regarding the mass media - their relationship with the government, their structure and financing, and their technological progress. As a journalist, you would not likely be serving a specific function in the media structure; your understanding of your job would be enhanced by the knowledge of the newspapers and the ways that people select communication.

Few people plan their mass media diet systematically. Their attention is governed by habit, by the suggestion of their friends, by professional necessity or by chance.

Why do individuals attend to media content? In order to understand these needs, we have to delineate the individuals into distinct groups. Chaffee and Petrick spell out six major
categories of individuals (1975:12). One grouping consists of the owners or managers of the mass media, in this case the newspapers' policy. These people see and control the machines which makes mass communication and news dissemination possible. They are the ones who implement policies and make decisions. They use the newspapers to make money, to get influence and to stay in business. Secondly, the professional communicators who are the individuals such as reportgers, chief reporters, subeditors, news editors, feature writers, columnists and the like who use the media to make a living by commercializing the news. The third category is the large groups of individuals known as the audiences, who use the media for specific needs such as entertainment, education, information and advice. Then there are the Economic Supporters of the newspapers; persons such as the advertisers, who buy readers from the newspapers and use the newspapers to communicate with the readers. The fifth category is the Professional Utilisers such as the Public Relation Officers and anonymous but informed news sources, who are not media people but who use the newspapers as vehicles to deliver their personal messages to the target audience. And finally, the Servicers that perform auxiliary but vital services which keep the newspaper operating. Proofreaders, production engineers, management administrators are several examples.

Thus, different individuals use media differently. The interest groups use media to solicit support for status quo, whilst proponents of new idea use media for social change. The professional communicators who have careers in the communication
fields, use media organizations and machines to construct and deliver information, education, persuasion and entertainment to the millions. On a general term, other members of the public use media as aids for coping with an increasingly complicated and illustrated society.

Having established the media-public relationship, let us now examine how the newspapers carried out their functions in informing and educating the public, especially in promoting goodwill and understanding among the readers. The daily agenda of reports produced by the newspapers as stated by Edward J. Epstein (Abel, 1981:119) a communication scholar, is not the inevitable product of chance events. It is the result of decisions made within a news organization. Many of the decisions are made prior to the events itself by top decision makers in the newspaper organizations and to some extent, with influence from the government. These decisions will in turn shape its product — the news. The decisions made are based on many factors, the focus of which can be seen in the following model. This is a case of Malaysian media system and perhaps, the media system in several developing nations.

To begin with, the newspaper organization plays an intermediary role between the government and its public. In a normal
communication process, there is a two-way process between the media and government, and the media and public. The media in this case are well informed in terms of government information and public responses. This model reinforced the importance of media in the process of communication. Communication being a vital factor in any development situation, must be carefully used to influence the minds and opinions of the public towards the desired directions. As in the case of Malaysia, the government has its priorities. Amongst them are national unity, building up stability, work ethics, and the inculcation of proper values. All these factors are referred in this paper as "development-oriented" priorities of the government. Thus the function and performance of the press is therefore the direct concern of the government especially when the nation is presently beset with numerous social, economic and political challenges (Hamidah, 1981:30).

As an intermediary in the communication process, the Malaysian newspaper and media have adapted themselves well to the needs of the government, working towards the achievement of nations' ideal and racial stability. Hamidah Karim writing about the media and national unity, said that the media in Malaysia have contributed in the expected direction. While each and every newspaper in the country has developed its distinct identity, they have collectively responded to the needs of the nation and the aspirations of the society. She said the media have adapted well to their educational function of which the mass media in Malaysia is to make the people take pride in Malaysia and in
themselves (1981: 30-33). The electronic media also work hand in hand with the newspapers to promote goodwill and understanding among the people. The Malaysian broadcasting system that comes directly under the Ministry of Information strictly adhere to the objectives stipulated by the government. Amongst these include efficient coverage of policies and programs of the government to ensure maximum understanding by the public; promoting civic conscious news and fostering the development of Malaysian arts and culture; providing suitable elements of popular education, general information and entertainment within the Malaysian context; and advancement of public interest in order to achieve changes as required by the government (Yew, 1983:2).

A survey done by Yew Yeok Kim on the electronic media indicated that special attention and considerable care have been taken to see that programs do not offend any of the sensitivities of any ethnic groups of the country. In fostering national unity, attempts are also made to depict interethnic interaction in a good light. For example, a drama plot which shows a rich Chinese family employing a Malay driver is certainly not allowed (1983:22).

However, attaining national unity in Malaysia is somewhat complicated. Besides, having to consider the differences in cultures, religious beliefs, races and lifestyles, the various groups do not as yet enjoy an even lot economically. In this respect the newspapers and the media have especially a complicated role to play since motivation and education of Malaysians on cultural and social ideals are slow due to unequal
share of the economic pie. Nevertheless, the role of the newspaper and media is vital here (Hamidah, 1983: 22).

CONCLUSION:

The process of developing unity and national consciousness among the public will necessarily take time but the newspaper and other media can act as catalysts towards achieving these goals. In this context the newspaper people should understand fully the needs of the government. Newspapers can help to plant certain positive images in their daily news input. As conveyor of messages, they should give more prominence to news that carry messages on unity. National unity objectives have been appreciated by all, a long time ago, but the approach to achieving it must necessarily differ. As Dostoyevsky had said, taking a few steps, uttering a few words, is what men fear most.

In this respect, the newspeople need to be more objective and aggressive in projecting their "unity messages".
Bibliography:


