

**Ethics And Social Responsibility Of The Mass Media :
Radio-TV Malaysia**

By

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PAPER: ETHICS AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE
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Radio-Television Malaysia, a government organisation has been given the task and responsibility to:

1. explain in depth the policies and programmes of the government through as wide a coverage as possible to enable the people to understand accurately those policies and programmes.
2. help create a way of thinking and understanding that will bring about the changes in attitude required by the wishes and policies of the government.
3. assist in creating civic awareness and to encourage the growth of a Malaysian Art and Culture.
4. provide suitable material for the general information, education and entertainment of the people.
5. assist in the establishment of National Unity through and to help create one National Culture in a multi-racial society.

These five tasks sum up very briefly the responsibilities of RTM both to the government and to the people of Malaysia. A detailed study of them will reveal that the function of RTM has some of the characteristics of a leadership role. Why this is so can be understood when the nature of the Malaysian Society is considered.

Malaysia is a multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-cultural nation. At the time of independence in 1957 the three major racial components of that society - the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians - tended to exist in compartmentalised cells with not much more than surface contact with each other. The Chinese and Indians - descendants of immigrants who had come to this country to seek their fortune - still looked to Chinese and India as their motherland. To the Malays, of course, this was their country but even amongst them there were some - descendants of Indonesian immigrants - who looked over seas to Indonesia.

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When Malaysia was formed in 1963 the situation had not changed very much. The new states of Sabah and Sarawak also had a history of the indigenous peoples of Malay stock co-existing with the immigrant races. The most important task for the leaders of the new country, therefore, was to break the walls of the racial compartments and create an entirely new breed of people - the Malaysians. These leaders had inherited from the British the Department of Broadcasting which had been established as a vehicle of propaganda for the colonial government. At that time there was no thought in the minds of the powers that be to create a United Malayan Society. The main function of radio then (TV was only introduced after Independence) was to pass on the government's messages to the various Communities and to assist in the fight against Communist terrorism. Experience gained in the Second World War had shown the power of the medium - both for good and for evil.

With independence this powerful tool was inherited by the people's government. Although independence had been won through the combined efforts of the three communities in the Alliance - UMNO, MCA and MIC - the concept of the Malayan nationality barely existed. There were also a host of other problems facing the newly independent country many of them with racial overtones. Added to this was the continuing battle against communism. Imbalances amongst the races had to be redressed. The neglect of the rural areas, where the vast majority of the Malays lived had to be overcome. All this had to be done within the concept of a parliamentary democracy. The task that the government faced was literally the creation, from scratch, of a nation where all the races who called it home had their place in the sun. To do this the government formulated and implemented many policies - particularly developmental policies. Some of these appeared on the surface to have racial overtones - although a closer study of them would have clarified the necessity of these policies.

With all these necessities the task of the Department of Broadcasting changed. Far from being just a channel of directives from the government it had to play an active role - a role of leadership -

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in the creation of a nation. This, then, was the background against which the new functions of RTM was devised.

At the 4th Asian Broadcasting Conference held in Kuala Lumpur in 1962 the Asian Broadcasting Organisation drew up a Broadcasting Code which calls for the enshrining of the following Cardinal Principles in the policy and practice of all Broadcasting and Television Organisations:

- a. To ensure the objective presentation of news and fair and unbiased comment;
- b. To promote the advancement of education and culture;
- c. To raise and maintain high standards of decency and decorum in all programmes;
- d. To provide programmes for the young which, by variety and content, will inculcate the principles of good citizenship;
- e. To promote communal harmony, religious tolerance and international understanding;
- f. To treat controversial public issues in an impartial and dispassionate manner;
- g. To respect human rights and dignity.

RTM as a member of the A.B.U., abides by this code although there have been occasions when the national need has at times created problems - particularly in respect to (a) and (f). While our news bulletins have always sought to be objective we have often been accused of over-publicising the government in power. Where the news is concerned what we have done is to present government activities without making any comments. In our Parliamentary reports we have

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always reported the comments of the opposition – although we are a government organisation. However, we must admit that we have not used any comments or criticism which could lead to communal disharmony or could hinder the achievement of a Malaysian nation. Similarly with (f), there have been some public issues that we have avoided altogether as in our opinion any treatment of such issues could hinder the nation's progress towards the building of a truly Malaysian Society.

It is difficult to assess exactly how successful RTM has been in living up to the ethics and social responsibility of the media. This is because any assessment of this would by its very nature be subjective. In a country like Malaysia objectivity is not always easy and the memory of 13th May, 1969 makes us feel that there are times when objectivity has to be sacrificed in the greater interest of national objectives. Nevertheless we in RTM have tried very hard to live up to our responsibilities and to live by the code of broadcasting within the framework of Rukunegara.
