

# **Strategies to Improve Health Communications for Breastfeeding: Examining the Relationship between Media Producers and News Sources in Malaysia**

**Emma Mohamad**

**School of Media and Communication Studies  
Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities  
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia  
43600. Bangi Selangor  
MALAYSIA**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores some media production issues in relation to breastfeeding promotion. It delves into the relationship between media and news sources, and how this relationship can play a role to improve health communication strategies. Three in-depth interviews were conducted at the media production level involving a magazine editor and two breastfeeding news sources, a lactation expert, and a breastfeeding online forum moderator. The interviews revealed some editorial issues and journalists' treatment of breastfeeding in the media. The paper hopes to shed light toward some media production politics in health reporting. It is hoped that this can be useful in improving communication strategies for breastfeeding promotion in Malaysia in the future.

**Keywords:** breastfeeding, media production, health communication strategies, media and health, journalism

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### **Introduction**

The latest statistics (2005-2009) revealed that only 29 percent of infants in Malaysia were exclusively breastfed in the first six months of life and only 12 percent of them would carry on to breastfeed until they reach the age of two (UNICEF, 2006). This is considered poor compared to other countries such as Norway, Sweden and even Indonesia, a neighbouring country which shares many commonalities with Malaysia such as language, religion, economy and geography. The Malaysian government however, has never directly opposed or discouraged breastfeeding. In fact, Malaysia was among the earliest to respond to global calls for breastfeeding-friendly environments by adopting promotion of breastfeeding programs in hospitals. This is supported through the Baby-Friendly Hospital Initiatives (BFHI) which is endorsed by The United Nations Children's Funds (UNICEF) and The World Health Organization (WHO). Through this policy, the Malaysian government ensures that its healthcare providers are actively advocating breastfeeding and discontinue the routine practice of giving formula feeds to newborns.

The first Baby-Friendly Hospital in Malaysia was declared in 1993 and, within just four years, all 114 government hospitals followed suit. Malaysia was even recognised by WHO as the third

country in the world, after Sweden and Oman, to have successfully accredited all its government hospitals as baby friendly. Aside from BFHI, the Malaysian government also pledged its commitment through adopting the International Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes with the aim of protecting, promoting and supporting appropriate infant and young child feeding practices. The Code is a set of recommendations to regulate marketing of breast milk substitutes like formula milk, feeding bottles and teats. It is part of the response and awareness regarding poor infant feeding practices which can negatively affect children's growth, health and development. Unfortunately, this policy has yet to be thoroughly implemented. For example, not all maternity unit personnel are trained in line with the recommendations of BFHI. Furthermore, many hospitals lack strong breastfeeding support (in relation to both physical and emotional care).

### **The changing role of breastfeeding: From hero to zero?**

In Malaysia, breastfeeding once played a significant role in improving child mortality rates (Butz et. al., 1984). According to their research, infant mortality was particularly common before the 1980's in rural areas confronting sanitation problems and poor water quality. Exclusive breastfeeding helped reduce infant mortality from illnesses such as diarrhoea and pneumonia caused by contaminated water. Kramer et al. (2001) furthermore indicate that this correlation can be seen in both rich and poor countries.

Butz and colleagues (1984) conducted a study in Malaysia from 1976 to 1977 and concluded that mothers who exclusively breastfeed for six months experienced lower infant deaths compared to those who did not. Their research also demonstrated that breastfeeding was strongly associated with infant survival in homes without piped water or toilet sanitation. Montgomery et al. (1986) also conducted a similar study in Malaysia and found that breastfeeding has direct influence on children's survival regardless of their health condition at birth. Breastfeeding therefore increased infants' chances of survival despite complications and health problems that may occur during and after birth.

It was apparent that exclusive breastfeeding helped save many Malaysian babies at the time. Fortunately today, the quality of water supply has improved tremendously and Malaysians are now able to enjoy clean piped water, better sewage systems and septic tanks at home. Almost 100 percent of people in Malaysia are now enjoying improved drinking water and sanitation facilities, including in rural areas (UNICEF, 2006). This is associated with a steady decline in recorded infant mortality (from 52 deaths per 1000 births in 1970 to 18 deaths per 1000 births in 1990). This number continued to decline and as of 2009, infant mortality under one year old is recorded at six deaths per 1000 births (UNICEF, 2006).

Improved piping systems throughout the country have also made supplemented feeding (including formula milk) safer to consume. Therefore, breastfeeding was no longer seen playing a crucial role to save infant lives and parents have a choice to feed formula milk safely to their children. As a result, breastfeeding rates failed to improve but have remained low until today. Only 29 percent of infants are exclusively breastfed in the first six months and only 12 percent continued to breastfeed until 24 months (UNICEF, 2006).

### **The media production story**

Studying media production is crucial to developing health communication strategies. Many media researchers focus on the culture of news room and media production politics. In addition, studies looking into news-sources relationships are also important to examine strategies and the nature of how stories are constructed. In the media production process, both journalists and their news sources play a huge role in the process of news making. The relationship between them also contributes a very interesting process behind the media production itself.

The relationship between news editors/journalists and their official sources are often described as symbiotic. Both parties need each other in the process of news-production. Sources are often regarded as powerful voices that are able to shape the news agenda. Sources need the media to channel their ideas to the wider audience and to propagate certain views/opinion to the public. Journalists and editors, on the other hand, are in control of what they decide to publish or not to publish, and this is often seen as a powerful way to regulate information to the public. The media, however, still need sources to authenticate news, which include official sources or those who are considered “experts” in the field.

News-sources relationships are not just a part of a media production process. What goes on between the journalists and their sources can shape the way certain news are being constructed. One or both parties may contribute towards the agenda of a story and the strategies used to pursue or withhold news. Some studies suggest that sources have more power than the editors/journalists when it comes to shaping the news agenda. This can be true, especially with stories which require data from authority and official resources. Hall et al. (1978) illustrate that heavy dependence upon official sources of information by the media has shifted the power and news interest from the media to the sources. They suggest that these “accredited” sources who enjoy privilege access to the media have become *primary definers* of the key issues published in the media.

The *primary definers* command higher access to the media by claiming their expert knowledge and their powerful status they hold in the society. These qualities make them very reliable thus establishing trustworthy image of the media organization itself) for contributing “objective” information to the public. Hall’s idea of the primary definitions, however, is criticized for failing to engage in ideological conflict that went on before news sources became “primary definers” and the changes that have taken place in the structure of access to the media (Anderson, 1993). It is argued that when the selection of sources change from time to time, it is impossible to have “primary definers” in the first place.

The concept of primary definers is even more complicated with the abundance of information available on the Internet, giving media audience better control of what they want to see and where would they go about finding it. The structure of the new media gives opportunities for alternative views and sources to come out and be heard. The Internet has opened up more opportunity than before for equal information flow and therefore, the dominant ideological effect suggested by Hall may not seem to be the main problem anymore.

As a result of easy access to health information in the Internet, the number of breastfeeding advocates has increased. More and more websites on breastfeeding are helping parents to gain

information and the support they need to sustain breastfeeding. This avenue is limited, however, to those who have access to the Internet and to those who wish to seek information about breastfeeding. Even though Internet usage is now becoming a lifestyle for Malaysian sub-urban community, according to Salman & Hasim (2011: 12) “having access to the internet may not necessarily mean there will be no more gaps or divide in the subsequent usage of technology.” Furthermore, breastfeeding is not a typical health issue that concerns most people or that would interest people to seek more information on. Diffusion of information for health is a challenge, as Omachonu and Einspruch (2010: 8) note, “health care is rich in evidence-based information, yet even when such innovations are implemented successfully in one location, they often disseminate slowly—if at all.”

Therefore it is argued that the traditional media still play an important role in health communication. Studies in areas of media and health for example, suggest that media influence on risk assessment can operate at several different levels. Studies show how media effect theories can be useful for understanding people’s reactions to certain health and risks stories. Moreover, agenda-setting theory has helped explain how the media shape the kinds of discussions people have about global warming and its effects. The media are also argued able to “cultivate” a sense of danger (Weaver, 2007). In addition, media “frames” can assist audiences to identify health problems and prompt ideas for the causes and solutions.

Albaek et. al. (2003) suggest that that quoting expert’s opinions is necessary because of the “trustworthy” impression produced by journalists and editors are also well received by the general public. Therefore, the relationship between the editors/journalists and their sources is likely to be established not just because of the need for experts opinions to support a story, but also because of their obligation to obey the media production culture.

The relationship between sources and journalist/editors, however, is also very much influenced by the media system, its political stance, regulations, history and culture. Therefore, the most important issue that needs to be examined here is the nature of the relationship between media and their sources, its functions and how this influences the production of breastfeeding stories in Malaysia.

## **Method**

Interviews were conducted with two selected breastfeeding news sources and an editor of a local parenting magazine. These interviews investigate the process of media production, which includes questions about the relationship between the media and their sources. It also touches on some production and ethical issues related to publishing breastfeeding stories. These interviews will help identify some issues and challenges faced by breastfeeding news sources. The study is also interested to look at any aspect of breastfeeding which may be difficult for journalists to publish in the media.

The key informants in this study are: the President of Malaysian Breastfeeding and Lactation Consultation, the moderator of [www.susuibu.com](http://www.susuibu.com) (a breastfeeding online community) and the editor of a local parenting magazine, *Pa&Ma*. These three informants were selected based on their position and contribution towards breastfeeding promotion in the media.

The three key informants were asked about their contribution to promote breastfeeding and whether their relationship with or their position in the media played any role. Among other matters, they talked about media coverage of breastfeeding, the advantages and limitations, government policies and regulations, as well as discussing some cultural taboos surrounding breastfeeding. The responses were mostly based on their own experience and relationship they have with the media. Also, the three key informants gave their suggestions to improve media coverage and currency of breastfeeding.

### **Findings**

All three key informants agreed that public awareness on breastfeeding remained very low. The public is generally aware of the benefits of breastfeeding; however, they are still very poorly informed about other basic information such as how to sustain milk supply, latching, the importance of skin-to-skin touch, etc. Inadequate knowledge has also led to poor hands-on practice and the lack of physical and emotional support from the general public towards breastfeeding mothers.

The media are seen to be able to play a huge role to promote breastfeeding awareness to the public; however, there is still not much media coverage received. All three of them agreed that breastfeeding is more likely reported in specialist media such as parenting magazines, as opposed to general media. This in a way limits the reach of breastfeeding stories to certain groups (mostly to those who are involved with breastfeeding such as parents with infants and young toddlers). This contrasts with the formula milk promotions which are easily found in general media especially through advertisements. Formula milk promotions are accessible to a wider audience and able to reach more people, rather than just parents. Even though the Malaysian government has enacted the International Code of Marketing Breastfeeding Substitute, formula milk advertisements (which are targeted for those between 12 months and 6 years) can be published in the media and may influence infant supplemented feeding indirectly. In addition, cultural taboos surrounding breasts are seen as a reason why breastfeeding is being discussed so little in the media. Although the three key informants agreed that breastfeeding can be discussed without publishing images of breasts, breastfeeding stories are very limited in the media.

The government is also seen able to play a significant role to promote breastfeeding to the wider public. This can be done through nationwide campaigns, breastfeeding seminars and workshops to promote awareness so that the public is sensitive about the issue and able to show support towards breastfeeding. In addition, the government is seen prioritizing other health issues such as HIV and cancer over breastfeeding. All three hoped that the government will implement tighter policies and ban all kinds of formula milk advertisements in the media.

### **Individual interviews**

#### ***a) The President of Malaysia Lactation and Breastfeeding Support Association (PPPLM) - Mrs. Yon Said***

Despite more than 30 years of existence, PPPLM has managed very little media coverage and attention. The PPPLM's president mentioned that the organization has never established any media contact because... "the media are not interested, and would only be interested to cover

breastfeeding stories if they are paid to do it". According to her, the media is not interested in talking to them because... "the organization does not offer any monetary benefits for journalists to write stories about breastfeeding".

Nonetheless, some newspapers and magazines have featured PPPLM in breastfeeding stories; however, the president did not make any effort to maintain their network with the media. "The media have the power to choose whatever stories they want to publish and news sources do not have any power to construct news," she said. Although Yon acknowledged that there are efforts made to promote breastfeeding especially by specialist media, it is still far from enough. She commented that when breastfeeding is published in the media, the coverage given is usually very minimal. The media would usually highlight the benefits of breastfeeding even when there are other interesting angles or more important issues that need to be highlighted. Among some suggestions given was a step-by-step guide on how to express milk, latching techniques, etc. She suggested that the media should make breastfeeding stories more interesting than just highlighting health facts. The media, she said, should also adopt a social responsibility role to promote breastfeeding even if it does not bring any benefit for them.

It was also stressed that there are very few influential Malaysian figures championing breastfeeding rights. According to Yon, "The media would be more interested with breastfeeding stories if someone famous and influential such as politicians or celebrities are seen advocating it". These people are believed able to attract media attention and interest towards breastfeeding issues. When asked whether having influential figure may turn breastfeeding into a political or personal agenda, she said that it does not matter, as long as breastfeeding promotion is highlighted and that the right messages are put across to the public.

Yon also believed that breastfeeding can still be discussed at length in the media even without direct images of the breasts. "The media can keep the mother's identity anonymous by omitting the mother's head or have it pixelated," she said. She believes that using images of breasts in the media is fine as long as the breasts are not portrayed in any manner to suggest sexual connotations.

On representations of bottle-feeding in the media, Yon felt that the media are portraying more bottle-feeding babies than breastfeeding babies. This, she said, is suggesting that bottle-feeding is a norm in the society. She pointed out that formula milk advertisements tend to highlight the benefits of bottle-feeding babies by showing representations of healthy children and the nutrients they are able to provide to these children. "This indirectly underplays the benefits of breastfeeding and suggesting that formula is better than breast milk," she said.

Yon also pointed out some instances where TV programs (sponsored by formula milk companies) indirectly tried to feature formula milk in their content, such as seen in dramas and health-related programs. Two examples given by Yon are local dramas using background scenes of formula milk aisle in a supermarket or including clips of formula milk in interviews with medical doctors (to imply that the doctors are recommending formula milk).

Yon suggested that the media should reduce stories and advertisements about formula milk. Instead, the media should portray the negative side of formula feeding such as the hassle of

cleaning and sterilising bottles. Yon also suggested that the government should ban formula milk advertisements from the media such as implemented to cigarette and alcohol adverts.

**b) *Susuibu.com – Mrs. Nor Kamariah Md Said***

Kamariah, who is the owner and moderator of a breastfeeding website and forum, *susuibu.com*, believes that the media play an important role for breastfeeding promotion. Kamariah also agreed that, compared to the general media, the specialist media such as parenting magazines do play a bigger role to promote breastfeeding.

She also mentioned, however, that the Internet has an advantage when it comes to promoting breastfeeding because of its capability to “unite the breastfeeding community from all over the country,” such as seen in *susuibu.com*. Kamariah said that online forums or communities such as *susuibu.com* are able to give freedom for people to speak out and promote breastfeeding. This, will also indirectly strengthen breastfeeding support groups and able to attract other people and the general public to understand more about breastfeeding.

Nonetheless, Kamariah believes that traditional media is still the best way to promote breastfeeding because of their wide and balanced reach. “Although online media are more open and easier to promote breastfeeding content, the Internet has limited reach and more popular with the younger groups and to those who have access to it. The general media on the other hand are able to reach a more balanced audience, which includes not only the people who are directly dealing with breastfeeding issues but also to the general public,” she said. This is important, according to Kamariah, because the general public are the ones that needs to be informed and educated about breastfeeding.

Kamariah added that support from the public, especially family members and friends, is important to improve breastfeeding rates.

“If more people are well-informed about breastfeeding, then people will start respecting women who breastfeed and do not see breastfeeding in public as shameful. This would also help correct our culture perception about breasts as being sexual objects and private,” she said.

Like Yon, Kamariah also agreed that the media should portray different angles for breastfeeding stories. Among the suggestions she made was for the media to expose the danger of denying breast milk to babies. This would have a deeper impact on audience, she said.

The media should also portray breastfeeding as a natural thing and a good habit. Nonetheless, to be successful at breastfeeding, mothers need to learn the correct breastfeeding techniques. “Mothers should be told that although breastfeeding is a natural thing, some people may still face problems with it. Therefore, it is important to keep mothers motivated and informing them about the right techniques and emotional support that is available to them,” she said.

Kamariah believes that the government is able to play an important role to promote breastfeeding to the general public. Kamariah feels, however, that the government does not view breastfeeding



as something that “is worth spending money on. At the moment, breastfeeding is not considered as a priority compared to other health issues like HIV”, she said. According to Kamariah, there are few resources provided by the Ministry of Health to promote breastfeeding. Currently, allocation for breastfeeding promotions is shared with other general health promotions which include all community health issues.

**c) *The Editor of Pa&Ma Magazine – Mrs Liza Ali***

Being the leading local parenting magazine in the market *Pa&Ma* sees itself as the mediator between breastfeeding sources and the public. “We feel responsible to inform our readers about the benefits of breastfeeding especially to the people who are involved directly with breastfeeding issues, such as young parents and expecting parents” Liza said.

Liza admits that breastfeeding is still very poorly publicized in the media, and the awareness only circulates among those who have direct involvement with breastfeeding such as parents, lactation experts etc. The general media treats breastfeeding issues as “something that is not important. Therefore breastfeeding stories are seasonal and not consistent. Sometimes, there are other interests or agendas behind publishing breastfeeding news/stories in the general media, such as political interests”, she said.

Liza also mentioned that the media, particularly the general media, is uncomfortable discussing breastfeeding because breast is considered a topic of taboo in the society. “In addition, it is difficult because the Malaysian government strictly regulates the media industry, not allowing images of breasts in the media. This makes efforts to show breastfeeding images in the media complicated,” she said.

Although the magazine has never been reprimanded for publishing breastfeeding images, the editorial team is always careful with selecting images for breastfeeding. Images of breastfeeding are taken from an image bank and most of them are pictures of white women. “There are not many pictures of Asian women breastfeeding in the image bank and none of them are suitable for our articles,” she said.

Liza also agreed that breastfeeding in general, is poorly supported by the Malaysian society and institutions. She said that public institutions and organisations such as schools, hospitals and even shopping malls should play a role to support a breastfeeding-friendly environment.

Specialist media (especially *Pa&Ma* magazine) are more focussed on discussing breastfeeding issues as compared to the general media. This is reflected through the frequency of breastfeeding news/coverage, such as having regular column for breastfeeding and increased coverage during Breastfeeding Week. Liza said that the magazine tries to approach the readers with interactive columns that promote two-way-communication. The magazine also prefers giving out practical advice and not too theoretical or laden with facts.

Being a profit-driven entity, however, the magazine also accepts formula milk advertisements and promotions. The magazine tries to negotiate World Health Organization’s recommendations to fit into their profit-making needs. When asked about formula milk promotions in the magazine, Liza said that they are only featured in advertisements and advertorial (paid-for

promotions). Formula advertisements in the magazine adhere to the ethics code and must be catered for children older than 12 months.

“The advertisements are only targeted for children over 12 months, therefore it does not clash with what the magazine is advocating, which is to support breastfeeding in the first 12 months” she said.

Due to cultural sensitivity toward publishing breasts images, Liza said that the magazine tries to keep the breastfeeding mothers’ identity anonymous and not exposing the nipple area directly. The magazine also used illustrations for detailed information about breastfeeding (e.g. breasts massage, expressing milk etc).

## **Discussion**

The relationship between breastfeeding sources and the media in Malaysia is still at its embryonic stage. News sources do not feel that the media is doing all they can to promote breastfeeding, yet they themselves are not being proactive enough to approach the media. This is mainly because they believed that news sources have no power to influence journalists in their writing. It was apparent that they are still not familiar with media industry operations and have yet to realize that they do have some influence over how news is written.

On the other hand, the media’s social responsibility to promote breastfeeding conflicts with their needs to generate income from formula milk advertisements. The media does fulfil some responsibility to promote breastfeeding, but at the same time they welcome formula milk advertisements and advertorials. This negotiation is observed in both general and specialist media.

In terms of improving public sector’s health communication strategies, health ministry or key leaders should be proactive, approach the media and establish good relations with them. The government can also highlight recent studies about breastfeeding and promote policies such as BFHI to the public through the media, along with other communication channels. Breastfeeding should be a priority in government’s effort to disseminate health information, but health campaigns must also be sensitive to cultural issues and taboos. As Rivera and Rogers (2006: 1) notes, “... interpersonal and intercultural communications may be seen as prominent variables in network based efforts at the diffusion of innovation.”

## **Conclusion**

The most effective strategy to communicate health campaigns, in particular to promoting breastfeeding through the media, must begin with improving news sources and media relations. In terms of who is more dominant in the news-source relationship, it seems that neither the media nor the sources have taken the lead in this “symbiosis” dance. The media, however, are seen to be using breastfeeding sources solely for the purpose of news. On the other hand, breastfeeding sources do not seem to confirm Hall’s idea of “primary definer.” Rather, they play a more passive role in this relationship, waiting for the media to make the first move.

It is very clear that there is a communication breakdown between the media and breastfeeding sources due to lack of understanding in roles and responsibility between them. Both parties need to be exposed about the issues and concerns surrounding breastfeeding in the media and learn to establish a healthy relationship in order for them to function properly.

**About the author:**

**Emma Mohamad** is an academic staff member at the School of Media and Communication Studies at The National University of Malaysia. Her research interests include exploring health issues in media and cultural discourses. She is currently exploring breastfeeding, media and culture in Malaysia. She can be contacted at emma\_mohamad@yahoo.com

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