

Introduction

Challenges of Media and Communication Issues:

Implications for Malaysian Public Sectors

Mohd Ekhwan Toriman

This special edition of the Journal highlights challenges of media and communication issues with special emphasis on Malaysian public sector. It is devoted to perspectives from academia, government and media practitioners, revealing Malaysia's situation in facing the challenges of the digital world. Accordingly, this edition presented a personal challenge for me, having researched on environmental studies which always apply new technological tools—from a simple two-way low-band transmission tool to a very sophisticated high-tech Telemetric-SCADA system. This led me to ask the question: what happens if there is no innovation in communication technology? In other words, can we live without proper communication facilities which help us in our daily lives, and to what extent are communication technologies applied in our daily activity? Technology is changing rapidly, and today's advanced communications are surely not as sophisticated as they will be in the next decade. Challenges and new issues will emerge. The questions of ethics, equal access and new strategies therefore require multifarious methods and solutions to address those challenges.

In Malaysia, new media technologies are now widely recognized and promoted as tools of development. The popularity of the digital media and the availability of a borderless world of communication networks have formed a new environment, mainly supported by the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) (Agil & Hamzah, 2007). Indeed, the Malaysian Government has taken advantage of all technological advancements to channel information to the public. With this influx of information, Malaysia is now moving to the new era of knowledge creation which will allow it to have a competitive edge. In fact, the vast potential of information and communication innovations such as satellite and telecommunications systems and the computer-based communication network, the Internet, is a blessing to us. Indeed ICT is truly helping us not only for research purposes, but also to expand our knowledge in various dimensions.

To engage with the issues and challenges posed by the proliferation of ICT, twelve articles were selected from a group of media and communication researchers and scholars at the School of Media and Communication Studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. To facilitate the discussion, I have divided these articles into three major themes, namely Malaysian media scenario, implementation of media and communication practices and innovations, and lastly, strategies and the way forward.

In the first article, Fuziah et al. address the survival of *Radio Televisyen Malaysia's* (RTM) TV1, the national television of Malaysia, within the changing mediascape. In the beginning, TV1 was hailed by Malaysians since it brought news, information and entertainment right into their homes, although broadcasted in black and white and dominated by government content.

However, with the implementation of the privatization policy, private channels sprang up and ultimately paid digital satellite broadcasting, offering both Direct-to-U (DTU) television and radio broadcast services, became a reality in 1996. These new television channels, with more variety, and more attractive as well as technologically-driven content soon became popular among Malaysian audience and threatened the position of TV1. In addition to private and satellite televisions, other developments and innovations in the media landscape, such as Internet television, narrowcasting and niche programming formats, also contributed to TV1's loss of audience. However, focus group discussions among housewives, young executives and university students reveal that TV1 remains a credible station for official and government information, despite broadcasting programs that are not technologically innovative and not of international quality.

Eight articles cover the enduring theme of implementation of media and communication practices and innovations in Malaysia. First, Chang et al. lead us to the tension between the Malaysian Government and NGOs in Malaysian Chinese daily newspapers through the eyes of framing. By definition, framing is a strategic action in which participants maneuver strategically to achieve their political and communicative objectives (Pan & Kosicky 1993). Although digital publishing is growing in Malaysia, printed media such as newspapers and magazines become key platform for the government and NGOs to disseminate information respectively. Currently in Malaysia, there are about 50 newspaper dailies and weeklies, either broadsheets or tabloids in the various languages of the main ethnic groups in the country—Malay, English, Chinese/Mandarin and Tamil. In the article, the authors scrutinize contemporary education issues related to the teaching and learning of Science and Mathematics in Malaysia. As they stated in the discussion, the media apparently have the power to influence the process of policy-making. In this case, the Government and the NGOs collided in their opinions and, through the media, they used different appeals in order to convince the public. In conclusion, the article reaffirms that framing does take place in the Malaysian media.

Second, Faridah et al. explore the professional roles of journalists in Malaysia in the reporting of war stories. The authors address the role of government official sources as credible information providers, especially with regard to information during crisis. Recollecting my memories when I was young, the Afghan war against the Soviet occupiers and their Afghan allies in the 1980s was fought in secret. As a layman who relies on public media, it was very hard to find out what was really going on, and there were very few visuals to bring to the attention of the world, or the human rights abuses that were being perpetrated by the occupying forces. That would not happen today, with satellite video phones, portable satellite uplink equipment and so on—the Soviets would have been closely scrutinized by the international media, the people at home would have received images through satellite TV (dish bans are very difficult to enforce) and there would have been great pressure on them to withdraw from the country. For Malaysian media practitioners, it is the question of balance and professionalism that colors the local media landscape. In this article, Faridah et al. suggest that one way to get balanced news is by using balanced facts provided by multilevel sources and not just from a single source. The use of multilevel sources will enable journalists to assemble various opinions from multi-perspectives in a single story, especially a lead story. To me, this article provides valuable impetus to those organizations working in media and conflict to learn from each other's experience, and for the aid and conflict resolution communities to make media an integral part of

conflict resolution process rather than ignore the media as a potentially dangerous nuisance which is often the case at present.

The implementation of media and communication practices and innovations in the context of the Malaysian Government delivery system through e-service is discussed by Maizatul, et al. Drawing on several examples of e-service project, they found that the use of e-services among the public is still low. This case has been proved by statistics in which the factor of attitude predicts more of the intention to accept e-service which is 71% as compared to the factor of behavioral control at 26%. This shows that attitude apparently plays a major role in influencing the intention of individual to accept innovations.

Faridah, et.al. question in their article the extent to which images of superpowers were portrayed by the government-owned National News Agency, Bernama through several mainstream newspapers in Malaysia.. They found that Malaysian mainstream newspapers tended to take a neutral frame where superpowers are concerned. Arguing that the coverage of these newspapers indirectly seemed to have tried to place the superpowers in the distinctive frames vis-à-vis news directions set by the international news agencies, they draw the conclusion that the dual images of superpowers as reflected by the mainstream newspapers are important to the Malaysian government. This is due to the fact that the Malaysian government depends heavily on the national press to advance its domestic and foreign policies to the Malaysian and foreign publics. The article concludes that Bernama, being a government-owned news agency, should play a prominent role in image portrayal of the superpowers, particularly those that have big influence on Malaysia.

Ali et al.'s contribution directly engages with the roles of new media in traditional mainstream mass media. After describing conventional print newspapers and their roles in mainstream mass media, to the authors argue that newspapers will not be replaced by the new media; instead, they will coexist and reinforce each other. At the conclusion of this article, Ali et al. also highlight the question of credibility attached to traditional media especially among the younger generation which perceives the media as being dictated by the government. With the fact that people in Malaysia currently have ready access to inconceivably vast information repositories that are increasingly portable, accessible, and interactive in both delivery and formation, the authors suggest that traditional media must improve their credibility. Aspects of transparency in the delivering of information must be given priority as well as creating more attractive newspaper interface so as to be more user-friendly.

In the next article, Normah et. al. explain the importance of Facebook among youth in Malaysia'. For young Malaysians, social networking sites like Facebook are easy to use according to their own terms, needs and priorities. This is consistent with the findings in this article. They found that Malaysian youth use Facebook as a means of communication with friends and as a way to reconnect them to old friends. To them, Facebook is used to build relationships, to communicate and share information, multimedia content and daily happenings, and to increase their social networks for personal purposes. To ensure that young people use Facebook with prudence, Normah et al. suggest that the government should develop a mentoring system and set performance indicators to regularly assess and measure this phenomenon.

Fauziah et. al., in their article, examine the media channels that people prefer to look for information on environmental disaster, and the extent the government is taking steps to create awareness of environmental sustainability in Malaysia. Given the importance of communication in delivering information during disasters, Malaysia has taken steps for effective information delivery to the public. Although there are sufficient government policies, factors that are able affect the behaviour change of its people such as technology, law and regulations, social values and norms within the society still need to be reinforced. I agree with the authors' opinion that the media play an important role in providing early warning related to environmental catastrophe, gathering information, as well as being the potential channel for discussion and feedback from the public about natural disasters. Going forward, advances in communication will be valuable in helping to explain the magnitude and extent of environmental disasters. It is hoped that this public awareness will allow for preparedness to handle natural catastrophes in the future. Today's environmental journalists must be well equipped to deal with complex issues such as catastrophic storms and flooding, tsunami and earthquakes.

The last article on implementation of media and communication practices and innovations is addressed by Wan Amizah Wan Mahmud et al. In their article, the authors foreground media practices and innovations with regard to the process of censorship by the Malaysian Film Censorship Board (LPF). They trace the historical development of LPF in British Malaya, during the Japanese Occupation and after Independence until now. In order for LPF to remain relevant in the era of globalization, the authors outline several transformation and innovation programs that they can implement in line with the government's vision in its Government Transformation Plan (GTP). Perhaps what the LPF Chair said below best captures the position of LPF now:

Many have been questioning whether Film Censorship Board is still relevant with the open sky policy, as there are now broadband, internet and satellite facilities available. However, we are talking about 25 million people who are living in Malaysia. We have to bear in mind that only a small portion of the community has access to the modern facilities and the rest of the majority still depend on television networks as a source for enjoyment, thus film censoring is still relevant. In this context, National Censorship Board is still relevant though open sky policy is being practiced.

Finally, the last three articles invite readers to appreciate the strategy and direction for media and communication in Malaysia. First, Samsuddin, et al explore how youth, as citizens in a multiethnic and multireligious society in Malaysia, use the Internet to accelerate their economic and political participation. For future strategy, this article suggests that all ethnic groups be encouraged to get the benefits of investment in ICT. The digital inclusion involves encouraging ethnic groups to go beyond access to technology and garner whatever benefits ICT could bring to their lives. In this way, digital technology could be the catalyst for ethnic group to achieve social and economic inequality and move forward to achieve a more equitable, just and prosperous society.

Next, Abdul Latiff, et al. explore the blogging scenario in Malaysia with a specifically focus on the regulation of blogs, perception of bloggers and the role of the public sector in dealing with blogs. Surprisingly, they found that most bloggers are still unaware of the regulation policies and

Internal Security Act (ISA). However, they are generally aware of the constraints on their writing where certain sensitive areas such as race, religion and sexuality. Bloggers should be ethical in their writings and should take full responsibility for them. This article suggests the practice of self-censorship and the nurturing of cultural sensitivities in one's writing. My personal view is that bloggers also expect a degree of ethical behavior from the community at large. This is simply because when bloggers take responsibility in their writings, readers must also respect alternative ideas which may not necessarily be negative.

Lastly, Emma and Kitzinger bring the issue of improving health communication in breastfeeding programs. The article reports a study that highlights some editorial issues and journalists' treatment towards breastfeeding in the media. For the future, this study suggests continuous media promotion on breastfeeding which may need good media relations and the emphasis on credible news sources.

I would like to conclude by thanking all of the contributors who submitted manuscripts for this edition of the Journal. I must thank Associate Prof. Dr. Faridah Ibrahim from the School of Media and Communication Studies, UKM who coordinated this project and was always very prompt to my inquiries. My appreciation also goes to Ms. Eleanor Glor, Editor-in-Chief of TIJ, who has given UKM this opportunity to publish in the special issue of this prestigious journal. There are many people who made this special edition possible. I would like to recognize again, Associate Prof. Dr. Faridah Ibrahim, the Chair of the School of Media and Communication Studies, Dr. Normah Mustaffa, Associate Professor Fuziah Kartini, Dr. Ali Salman, English language Editor, Associate Professor Dr. Jamilah Mustaffa, and all the contributors for their hard work, positive attitude, dedication and energetic spirit that helped launch this project and assure its success. I would also like to thank everyone who volunteered their time as peer reviewers. This has been an enriching, challenging, rewarding and enjoyable experience for me.

About the Author:

Professor Dr Mohd Ekhwan Toriman is an Associate Professor specialized in Geographical Information Systems (GIS) in the School of Social, Development & Environmental studies, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia). He can be reached at: ikhwan@ukm.my.

References:

Pan, Z. P. & G. M. Kosicky. 1993. "Framing Analysis: An Approach to News Discourse." *Political Communication*, 10(1): 55-75.

Agil, S. & A. Hamzah. 2008. "Self Regulatory Implementation and Practices in Malaysian Media Environment." A paper presented to the Sixth international Conference on New Directions in the Humanities, Fatih University, Istanbul, Turkey. July 15-18, 2008.