Media role in a K-Economy: Transforming media education in Malaysia

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Since the introduction of television in Malaysia in 1963, the Malaysian media have been deemed by successive governments as a tool to help promote national development plans and strategies. Following the best traditions of the modernization school, ‘development’ was – and still is – measured by economic growth indicators such as gross national product figures and improved transportation system, education and healthcare, among others. One of the major impediments to such development, as often argued, is the ‘counter-productive’ attitude of citizens. Hence, the people need to be informed and persuaded of the need for development as prescribed by the government of the day. At the same time, the people need to adopt change or development-oriented attitudes. It is in these areas of ‘informing’ the people (of the government’s development policies) and of persuading them to ubah sikap (change attitudes) that the media are seen to be playing a crucial role. The emphasis, thus, is on the psychological shortcomings of the citizens, while social structures which exacerbate or perpetuate inequalities are conveniently sidestepped.

This view of the media’s role in helping to develop the country is not one that is peculiar to Malaysia. It has been the dominant way of looking at the role that media should play in developing countries since the early 1960s. Without going into an extensive discussion of what has often been discussed (see, for example, Elliot and Golding, 1974 and Zaharom, 2001), it will suffice to say the belief is that the poor and supposedly ‘backward’ should develop and ‘modernize’. Inevitably, this would be done according to patterns and structures designed by the government of the day in collaboration with the principal economic actors from the private sector.

In a classical top-down manner, the role of the media clearly
is to ensure that the government’s development policies and strategies, irrespective of their inadequacies, are channeled to the wider population, thus making them more ‘informed’ and ‘primed’ to act in accordance with these policies and strategies. As far back as 1964, when television was first introduced into Northern Malaysia, the then Minister of Information, Senu Abdul Rahman, spoke of its so-called revolutionary potential. According to him (Malaysian Times, 2 October 1964) “television will be an important instrument of our social revolution. It will be a means of informing the people about the progress in the various sectors of our national life. It will also enable them to know of the progress outside Malaysia”.

Why any government in power, the Malaysian government being no exception, would wish to perpetuate and reinforce this “media-as-catalysts-for-social-change” line is straightforward. Quite simply, it helps to preserve the status quo. As Lent (1982:51) has suggested, “There are, no doubt, hidden agendas that the ruling elites hope for in setting media policy. In some cases, the leadership claims to keep out negative western influences; at other times it says it wants to develop the media for national integration purposes. But in most cases, it seems keeping out negative western values has more to do with keeping the national leadership stable than anything else.”

Lent’s observation more than two decades ago still holds water today. The state’s perspective of the media’s function reaffirms the perception that broadcasting in Malaysia began as “part of the power structure built and transferred to the new government and designed to provide the same service that it provided for the colonial government, namely to safeguard and strengthen the authority of government [with a] built-in partiality towards people and parties in power” (Karthigesu, 1988:767).

This is especially true with RTM (Radio Televisyen Malaysia), the government’s broadcasting network, whose links with the Malaysian government have been clear and strong since it was set up in 1963. And with two of its raison d’être being to “explain in depth and with the widest possible coverage the policies and programme of the government in order to ensure maximum understanding by the public” and “to stimulate public interest and opinion in order to achieve changes in line with the requirement of the government”, it is clear what the motivations of RTM are, what it perceives its primary role to be, and its assumptions of its impact on audiences.

An early study of RTM conducted by an academic and a senior official in RTM (Lowe and Jaafar Kamin, 1982: 31) is illustrative. They conclude thus: “Most of the decisions on local media content come from sources outside of the professional structure of the
department. The main influence on these decisions are therefore external and they emanate from the delicate political position of the country resulting in delicate racial balances as shown by compromises and different emphasis on questions of religion, language and culture...News items which are likely to be controversial and which do not provide enough time to be ruled on by people ‘upstairs’ are underplayed...Audiences are assumed not to be able to suspend their literal interpretations even in the case of fiction for as long as these programmes are produced locally.”

And nothing much has changed with the substance of RTM programming since. In this regard, we can begin to understand the ongoing controls put by the government on the ‘traditional’ media of print and broadcasting. This despite the apparent ‘deregulation’ of the Malaysian economy, including the media industries, under the regime’s Privatisation policy. Indeed, as I have argued more substantially elsewhere (Zaharom, 1994:188): “[T]he present situation in which the media finds itself is one of ‘regulated deregulation’...Invariably, where ownership and control of the media are in the hands of a few closely aligned with the government and who also wish to profit from the situation, there has been increasing emphasis on the production and importation of “safe” and uncontroversial light entertainment programmes...material that will not question or challenge the official discourse.”

Hence, it is in these related, wider contexts of development strategies, assumptions, utilization and control of the media that we need to locate the perceived role of the media and, indeed, the development of media education in Malaysia.

Formal media education – or, more accurately, training – in Malaysian institutes of higher education first began as part of the Humanities curriculum in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in 1970 and in the form of a diploma course in mass communication by the then Mara Institute of Technology (ITM, later UiTM) in 1972 (Syed Arabi, 2000: 12). Within a relatively short period, other universities and colleges followed suit, offering degree courses which implicitly promised basic technical training for potential media practitioners. The wider agenda was to churn out trained and competent ‘professionals’ for a country that was still rather young and needed to develop its economy rather quickly. This remains the main agenda of media education in contemporary Malaysia.

From these seemingly humble beginnings, media education and training has expanded with the newer public universities,
such as Universiti Utara Malaysia (UTM) and UNIMAS, now offering their own degree courses. Even private colleges have been getting into the act, offering twinning programmes in collaboration with overseas universities and, more recently, linking up with local public universities such as USM through ‘smart partnerships’, where the universities design the degrees offered by the colleges and, in turn, confer the degrees.

However, the theoretical and philosophical foundations of many of the courses and programmes being offered in Malaysia remain rather shaky. This has resulted in the majority of programmes unquestioningly conforming to the needs and dictates of external forces and actors. At the height of the economic boom in the mid-1990s, for example, Malaysian public universities were directed by the government to shorten the majority of their undergraduate degree programmes, including communication programmes, from four years to three years. Universities complied without protest. This directive was not based on a comprehensive study or any intellectual consideration. It was purely driven by a crude projection by the government of the impending labour needs of the Malaysian market. The Asian ‘meltdown’ that followed put paid to such crude projections, but that is another story. The dictates of the state aside, the market also plays a crucial determining role in the development of communications curricula. Two national workshops have been held in UiTM over the last three years (in 2000 and 2001) aimed at charting the future of media education in Malaysia. Both workshops emphasized the need for media courses and programmes to be industry-relevant. Indeed, the participation of industry players at the second workshop and the respect they were accorded by the academics present clearly reflected who the ‘shakers’ were.

There are three main reasons for this state of affairs. First, the direction taken by media education – indeed, education in general – in Malaysia continues to be charted by wider social policies, especially those related to ‘national development’. In this regard, the central role played by the state in dictating education aims and content needs to be understood. Legal controls on academic freedom, through oppressive legislation such as the University and University Colleges Act, are indeed very real.

Second, over the past two decades, there has been increasing emphasis on the benefits of the market. Recent strategies aimed at making Malaysia the educational hub of the region, decisions to reduce state subsidies for public universities and, at the same time, attempts at ‘corporatising’ these universities, have resulted in the ‘streamlining’ of course offerings to make them more marketable. With bottom-line economics increasingly playing a central role in universities, not surprisingly, there is now a greater need to make
more courses, including media courses, more ‘industry-relevant’, if not industry-driven.

Third, the majority of Malaysian media academics received their higher degrees from Western – principally American – universities, so the bulk of the local curricula have been drawn up largely from what appears to be ‘templates’ designed overseas. There is nothing wrong with this, of course, provided that there is an awareness of the ideological grounding of these ‘templates’. Unfortunately, these ‘templates’ tend to be much of a ‘muchness’, as evidenced by the curricula dominant in Malaysian media programmes, and also the research conducted by local media academics. More precisely, a functionalist and utilitarian approach to media education dominates. It is an approach that conveniently ignores structures and is reluctant to critically evaluate policy. As a consequence, for example, we have journalism courses that talk about press freedom, but refuse to assess the state of press freedom in Malaysia. In addition, there are programmes talking about communication and development – certainly in the haven of ‘development communication’, Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM), but equally in the communications curricula of UKM and USM - that disregard international forces and questions of legitimacy and power. This, sadly, is the predictable outcome of functionalist education (see Samsudin, 1992, Md. Salleh, 2002, and Musa, 2002 for celebrations of such approaches, and Zaharom, 2002 for a critique). Nonetheless, it is clear that the media and communications courses offered by all of Malaysia’s public universities do attempt to combine ‘theoretical’ and ‘practical’ components.

However, even within the theoretical components in many local universities, there is still much reluctance to engage with contemporary developments in the field of media studies, more due to a lack of understanding of these developments or even blind ignorance of the implications of these developments. For example, the introduction of Cultural Studies as a field of study at a communications department in a local university was recently met with much resistance. This was partly due to internal politics, but equally due to a simplistic – and erroneous – linkage between Cultural Studies and anti-establishment thinking. Even if there were such a linkage, it would not have rendered Cultural Studies any less relevant, especially in a socio-political context where there has been much talk about greater democratization and the increasing of space for genuine participation. The fact that situations like these are more the norm than exception indicates that external influences and controls are still very much at play in Malaysian media education. Such controls, in turn, play a central role in making contemporary media education conformist by
nature.

But this needs to change as Malaysia actively moves towards developing a knowledge economy (k-economy). If the media play a pivotal role in defining social consciousness, then media education indeed needs to reinvent itself while those controlling the structures and policies equally would need to think about making media education more creative and critical in such an economy.

On 28 February 1991, at the inaugural meeting of the Malaysian Business Council, then Malaysian prime minister, Dr. Mahathir, unveiled Vision 2020, a blueprint for making Malaysia a ‘developed country’ by the year 2020. The Vision is best appreciated, perhaps, as a master plan for transforming the country. As Mahathir (1991:1) himself put it when initially unveiling the Vision: “The ultimate objective that we should aim for is a Malaysia that is fully developed by the year 2020”. He then outlined (Mahathir, 1991: 2-4) nine challenges which the nation had to overcome in order to attain fully developed country status.

More than a decade on, the Vision has become firmly entrenched in the hearts and minds of many, especially politicians, as evident in many policy statements and strategies. Contrary to ill-informed assertions that a k-economy is already firmly entrenched in Malaysia, it is actually within the nine challenges set forth in the Vision that we can locate the initial motivations for developing a k-economy in Malaysia. One of the Vision’s challenges, indeed, is to establish ‘a scientific and progressive society…innovative and forward-looking’ (Mahathir, 1991: 2-4). It has been further argued in this regard that the ‘national IT agenda, aimed at transforming the nation into a knowledge-based society, [is] in line with Vision 2020’ (Government of Malaysia, 2001: 367).

The few available local literature on the k-economy paint a decidedly rosy picture of what it is, where Malaysia sits in the context of this economy and its implications. Such optimism is not unexpected despite the realities. After all, this is Malaysia, and a Malaysia that is evidently obsessed with the idea of Malaysia Boleh (Malaysia Can). Ghauth Jasmon (2001: Foreword), President of Malaysia’s Multimedia University, put it quite simply: “The wind of economic change is blowing across the Asian landscape. The wind is bringing with it a new kind of economy – one based on knowledge. This new kind of economy is rewriting the rules of economic growth and development that countries have followed over the years. In the past the ownership of natural resources such as
land, minerals, as well as labour and capital determined the wealth of a
country or that of individuals. Today, knowledge intensity and its effective
application to production determine the wealth of a country or individuals
within and without the country (emphasis added).

One may rightly quibble with whether this ‘knowledge economy’ really represents a break with the past, especially when it
could be argued that the major actors and ‘shakers’ in this ‘new’
economy were those dominant in the ‘old’ economy. For the
purposes of this paper, it is prudent to adopt this basic description
of what a k-economy entails. This would help in assessing its
implications for Malaysian media education, Malaysian media
(industries, content and representations) and Malaysian society
generally.

It is quite easy to spout definitions without going into the
intricacies of what these definitions really mean. Politicians do this
all the time, and Malaysian politicians are no different. Thus far,
the idea of a k-economy has reflected such norms. It would
therefore be instructive if we were to look at how the constituents
of a k-economy are discussed by one of its main proponents, the
Chief Economist of the World Bank, Joseph Stiglitz. For Siglitz
(1999: 20), in a knowledge economy “institutions are best structured
with openness and competition to be robust under the assumption
that knowledge and virtue are rather less than perfect. That
robustness strategy…leads to the institutions of an open society
such as a free press, transparent government, pluralism, checks
and balances, toleration, freedom of thought, and open public
debate. The restructuring moves away from the idea of a closed
society that “knows the truth” towards an open society that “knows
it does not know the truth”. This political openness is essential for the
success of the transformation towards a knowledge economy (emphasis
added).

“Free press”, “transparent government”, “pluralism”, “checks
and balances”, “toleration”, “freedom of thought”, “open public
debate”: these are all very nice notions. I would argue that anyone
concerned about democratic governance, genuine participation,
and a knowledge economy would need to come to terms with what
these notions mean. In the context of Malaysia, it is futile to be
dreaming of a k-economy, which has these notions as its
foundation, while public gatherings and theatrical performances
are banned. The early 2003 Kuala Lumpur City Hall blanket ban
on the performances of the performing arts group, Instant Café
Theatre, purportedly on the basis of one complaint in a local Malay
newspaper, is a case in point. Anyone who has even a passing
acquaintance with the press and broadcasting in Malaysia would
acknowledge that the idea of a ‘free press’ (political and/or
economic) is quite alien.
It is often enough implied and asserted in Malaysia that the basic requirement of a knowledge economy is the instrumentation. Proponents are quick to point to what Mahathir has called “Malaysia’s gift to the world”, the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), and Malaysia’s long-term flirtation with ICT, as indications that it is well on the road to becoming a k-economy. However, having the instrumentation alone is simply not adequate, just as having the tallest building or the longest buffet line in the world does not make Malaysia a ‘developed’ nation. Form cannot be a substitute for substance.

The key question is this section is: What needs to be considered to allow media education curricula in Malaysia to play a more supportive role in helping transform Malaysian society and developing a genuine knowledge economy?

First, there would need to be greater awareness at the media policy-making level about the requirements of a k-economy, especially the need for a free press, greater transparency and accountability. In this regard, and perhaps most importantly, there would need to be a serious rethinking of current legislation, such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act, Official Secrets Act, Internal Security Act, Sedition Act and a slew of other equally repressive legislations that hinder the development of a k-economy. If the wider environment does not provide the structures and support, it would be rather pointless and naïve to talk about nurturing more questioning, critical and creative citizens.

This brings us to the second point, namely the need for media education and studies to encourage creativity, not conformity. One common emphasis in media studies in Malaysia is how the media can play a role in national development, as prescribed by the government. This emphasis, of course, is based on the ideological, not scientific, contention of development communication that media role in developing countries is qualitatively different from the role they play in developed nations. The books and the authors may now be different, or even local, but unfortunately, the concepts, strategies and overall policy orientation still reek of the same odour of the old ‘devcom’ days where state propagandists were called ‘information officers’ and, more quaintly, ‘extension agents’. Where the problems – and accompanying solutions – lie with the individual and not with created structures. Where the state and the market, if considered part of the equation at all, are assumed to be benign actors concerned about the welfare of ‘the people’.

This emphasis is made much easier, of course, in a country where the state is suspicious of ‘politically-free media’, where direct or indirect state control of the media is a matter of course,
where recourse to media censorship by the state is largely legitimized in the name of cultural, religious and moral purity. In this environment, the old development communication strategies continue to thrive.

And so the vicious cycle continues. Through formal education, in development communication programmes specifically and communication programmes generally, found in Malaysian universities and other institutions, a particular ideology of development and the role the media are deemed to play are propagated and perpetuated. Rightly or wrongly, this keeps the masses in check and deters restless natives from revolting. Such an approach cultivates conformity and helps to maintain hegemony. But this will not do in the context of developing a k-economy. It is easy to blame students for being uncreative and uncritical, but how can they be otherwise if the wider policies and structures impinge on their potential to be creative and critical? Media educators are also at fault in perpetuating the myth that such structures and policies are necessary for the supposed ‘interest of the nation’, when the real beneficiaries are those in power.

Third, there is clearly a need to understand – and convey in media studies curricula – that the media (institutions, practices, contents, audiences) do not exist in a social vacuum. There is a need to stress, certainly in the context of Malaysia, that “the study of communications should be incorporated into the wider study of stratification and legitimation, based on the recognition that social relations within and between societies are radically, though variably, inegalitarian” (Golding and Murdock, 1978: 353).

It is recognized that these suggestions may be politically dodgy at best, especially for media educators concerned about their career paths and ambitions. But if Malaysian media educators desire future media professionals to evoke positive changes and to transform Malaysia into a genuine k-economy, the options are few and far between.

REFERENCES


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