Critical media education in Malaysia: A challenge to vocational-orientation

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Critical Media Education In Malaysia: A Challenge To Vocational-Orientation

This article examines the pedagogic vacuum in media education in Malaysia where critical inquiry has been made subservient to the acquisition of technical skills. It suggests that vocational oriented communication courses should engage in constructing alternative representations, meaning and values so that what is experienced by the students and the community is a mutual educative process of participatory communication.

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Developments in the Malaysian media scenario have impinged on the form of media education offered in the country. Between 1981-1985, the number of titles of local newspapers, magazines and journals in circulation have increased by 80% (Zaharom, 1996). In the television industry, the second private commercial station after TV3, MetroVision; and the first pay-TV network, MegaTV started broadcast in 1995; MEASAT, Malaysia’s satellite network entered the media fray in 1996; and the third private news station NTV was scheduled to start broadcast in December 1997.

Zaharom (1994:185) notes that despite the variety of media sources what Malaysians are really getting is more of the same material that are non-contentious and easily marketable. The prevailing commercial logic in the media sphere further ensures that only the tried mass appeal formulae remain secure in television programming. Market orientations have not lead to the democratisation of the mass media but instead have reinforced legal, political and economic controls of the media (Zaharom et al., 1995).
The Ministry of Information oversees radio and television broadcasting vis-a-vis the Broadcasting Act (1988) which gives the Minister wide ranging powers to either reject or approve a license to potential broadcasters. Part III, Section 10, Subsection (1) of the Act states that licensees must comply with the direction given, from time to time, by the Minister of Information appointed by the Prime Minister.

Metrovision comes under the ownership of the Utusan Group — the director is the former press secretary of the Prime Minister. Malaysia’s first pay-TV network, is run primarily by a consortium composed of TV3 (40%), the Ministry of Finance (30%) and Sri Utara, a subsidiary holding of the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), a component of the Barisan Nasional (5%). MEASAT, which operates 40 digital television channels, 12 analog television channels and eight radio stations, is held by Binariang under the directorship of Tun Mohd Hanif Omar, known to be a close associate of the Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamed.

The ruling United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) holds controlling interests in TV3, New Straits Times Press (NSTP), The Malay Mail, Berita Harian and the Chinese daily, Shin Min Daily News. The Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) has its controlling interests in The Star and the Chinese daily, Tong Bao, while MIC has interests in three Tamil dailies - Tamil Nesan, Thinamani and Tamil Osai as well as in TV3.

Such is the media ownership pattern in Malaysia that what media voice is heard in the public sphere is that of a selected few with political affiliation and economic clout. Given this scenario, many individuals and groups, particularly in the television and video sectors, have jumped on these commercial forms of producing videos without contesting the existing representations, conventions, norms and values.

The recourse is to rely on community media to provide an alternative to the services of the mass commercial media or state. However, the idea of participatory media communication is still very much alien in the Malaysian context. Even among social pressure groups, media as organising devices and empowering tools have not been utilised widely to communicate their needs and concerns to the people at all levels to facilitate social transformation and political-community action.

Community media production develops access and participation as two major components of the communication process and these are specifically related to the concept of citizens in the public sphere and their capacity and right to access a public resource of media systems (Riano, 1994). Production is not necessarily the prime purpose of community media. More emphasis is given to the process of community organisation, of
raising both the producer’s and the participating community’s awareness of local issues.

This form of community media activism, regrettably, does not occupy a legitimate agenda in the Malaysian media scenario. There is very little success in the participation of communities in community media production. Debate, research and activism on media literacy at the grassroots level are also very marginal. In view of the enormous challenges in the Malaysian media ecology, it is evident that media education here must strive to play a critical role to enhance responsible citizenship and to enable the formation of a discriminating public that is active and critical; a public that is not passive or domesticated but capable of questioning the real world to engage in alternative media voices and choices.

Early Days Of Media Education

Media education in Malaysia is offered at tertiary level. It is also an applied research area informing on existing patterns of communications and for determining public policies. Various programmes on communication studies and media training are structured to expose students to technical skills that will allow them to participate in media related activities. For example, students are trained to be entry level producers or journalists in the print and broadcast media, as development agents or information officers in government agencies, as copywriters or creative visualisers in advertising agencies or as public relations officers in both government and corporate sectors.

The beginnings of formal media education in Malaysia has been closely linked to the needs of the priorities of the government and the media industry. The Higher Education Planning Committee (HEPC) report of 1967 which provided a framework for the development of universities, noted distinctly that university education must respond to national development policies. It identified the need for trained and skilled manpower to manage the economic development of the country. In the context of media education, the rapid transformation of the Malaysian economy in the post-colonial period required a ready pool of skilled workers to manage the media systems. The government has hence invested heavily in vocational-oriented media education programmes.

Media education was first introduced in Universiti Sains Malaysia (University of Science Malaysia, USM) in Penang in the early 70s. Like most other programmes in the South East Asia, it was set up in a hurry with very little planning (Goonasekera, 1995; Zaharom and Kirton, 1989; Lent, 1988). John Lent (1988), the first coordinator of the programme, observed that little consideration
was given to the staffing requirements, structure and organisation of the curriculum, building, equipment and library resources. Despite these limitations, he noted that there was a concern to provide academic knowledge and more importantly, to offer media training courses such as 'Writing for the Media' and 'Journalism' to train skilled personnel for the communication industry.

The School of Mass Communication in Mara Institute of Technology (ITM), Selangor was established in 1972. Many of the school's initial courses "seemed to be direct replicas of those of the United States, and more particularly, Ohio University" (Lent, 1988:110). The ITM school has since focused on media skills to produce graduates who will be technically competent in handling communication systems and production conventions. The school further organises student internships in media organisations.

A third communication department was set up in Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (National University of Malaysia) in 1975. The Board setting up this programme comprised academics, media representatives and members of other professional bodies. The rationales underpinning its curriculum reflect the ones in USM as it attempted to deliver both academic scholarship and vocational-oriented training. As in USM, there has been an evident bias in the curriculum to focus on the modernisation paradigm of Lerner and Schramm.

In recent years, public universities including Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Universiti Malaya and Universiti Putra Malaysia have introduced media programmes at undergraduate and post-graduate levels to prepare communication students for the media industries. Some communication educators have pressed for the utilisation of new communication technologies to improve media education, suggesting that: "the would-be journalist who has 'hands on' experience with regard to basic computer functions such as word processing, data analysis and compugraphics will have a decided advantage over competing candidates who are equipped with a broad-based liberal education" (Hamdan and Sankaran, 1987:2).

Media organisations have consistently flagged that the teaching of media education should not be too theoretical as graduates would not have sufficient practical knowledge to be of immediate use to them. In a news feature on media education, the heads of communication schools likewise addressed the need to focus on media skills in the curricula of their communication programmes ("Universities To Put on Emphasis on Practicals" - Sunday Mail, 12 December 1993).

One department head noted a proposed strategy to introduce a year long in-house training during the final year of the programme. The dean of another school stated that the
students be attached to communication or information agencies for a period of six months to gain from the experience and "knowledge of those already in the industry." This move has been widely welcomed by the Malaysian Advertisers' Association (MAA) and the Asia Public Relations Group. The problem is that the pragmatic perspectives have not confronted the pedagogic issue of whether practical work and skills should be assessed as a "product" or a "process" (Sefton-Green, 1995). This understanding of practical work continues to be the missing link in media education in Malaysia.

Although there have been efforts to re-structure the curriculum in several departments, the skills orientation rationale underpinning the field of the study in Malaysia remains strong. For example, in USM, despite attempts to combine "theoretical" and "practical" components, problems still arise when the "practical" courses are offered in isolation and not linked to theoretical insights. There are growing debates and analyses on cultural studies, the theories of dependency and political-economy in the theoretical courses in this school.

However, the debates do not inform critical discussion on news values, gendered discourses, selective representation, mediation, partial reality and conceptual understanding of production techniques like camerawork, editing and sound in practical courses. The direction of the "practical" component which is bent on imitating mainstream radio, television or print media without challenging the reproduction of dominant forms of representing reality has come under criticism from several leading educators in communication studies (see Zaharom et al., 1995).

At this juncture, it seems useful to examine the "practical" component which has attracted much controversy among media educators in Malaysia. A conservative reading will look at practical activity as the demonstration of media skills. It emphasises technical competence and the reproduction of dominant conventions in communication activities. It is highly concerned with the preparation of students for the competitive labour market, armed with skills which do not encourage them to critically question industrial norms or to attempt alternative expressions. Communication students are thus trained to accept media production conventions thus conforming to the status quo. There is a great tendency for them to write, to produce and to conform to what sells, where news and other media artefacts are treated as commodities in the market.
The danger inherent in adopting such an approach in media education as advanced by Masterman (1991) is that it naturalises instead of attempting to scrutinise the dominant patterns in communication codes and conventions. This tendency leads to cultural reproduction and produces deference and conformity when students attempt to emulate professional communication practices rather than subject them to critical scrutiny.

A narrow view of teaching technical skills in a framework devoid of critical inquiry will not challenge existing value-laden practices in media production. It needs to be noted here that media institutions usually adopt programming that is based on well-tested formulae and formats that can maximise profits. If these conventions and production techniques are taken as unproblematic and reproduced in the teaching of practical media skills, then the interests of the dominant groups will be reinforced. The need for innovation, to reflect upon different ways of engaging in media practice and to produce alternative expressions will become non-issues.

The idea that media education serves to produce technically competent students who will reproduce industrial norms rather than students who will explore issues like oppression and social justice, particularly in the context of development is profoundly political. A curriculum that is designed narrowly to the interests of the business industry will not serve the potential value of education and the developing society at large.

I have much difficulty with the primacy of this position where practical work is mainly seen in terms of reproducing technical skills as this may leave critical inquiry subservient to technical skills. It is imperative to remember that techniques like layout, reporting, filming, editing, camerawork, script-writing, lighting, sound and photography are not value-free and the performance of these skills cannot be deemed as objective or unbiased. Indeed production techniques themselves are not neutral and thus make interesting objects of study.

A more useful approach would be to embody critical inquiry and creative production where communication conventions and codes are deconstructed and alternative directions charted. Students should question the communication process and the production convention in specific genres, assess the dominant patterns that emerge and think about alternative constructions that can be attempted. Applying the knowledge gained from their theoretical courses, they can choose to focus on particular forms or formats and attempt to engage in alternative constructions in media production activities.

For example, students working on video projects can interrogate their own media products and their own social
experiences. They can be encouraged to reflect on the following questions: Where is this text coming from? What happens in this text? What is its purpose? Whose interests does it serve? Whose interests does it frustrate? How does it operate? Am I going to accept it and work with it? Am I going to reject it? Am I going to try to work with it on a modified basis? This approach to practical work in media education denies the principle of transparency and scrutinises simplistic notions of communication practices - notions which neutralise and suppress vital questions of images, representations, meanings and values.

If students are to understand media texts and communication projects as social constructions, this practical activity approach will obviously be helpful as it will not only sensitise students to numerous issues, but also give them hands-on experience and useful insights of their own construction process. Therefore, I feel that practical work which is not abstracted from the context of critical study of the media should be used in the interests of social justice, in empowering marginalised communities and in developing people's citizenry.

Media education programmes could be sites for raising public consciousness and encourage intellectual challenge on issues of gender, class and other lines of oppression. It is conceivable to consider media education as potential sites for critical or liberatory teaching.

What I am proposing here is that both the critical and the creative components of media education need to be developed - whether as theory or conceptual understanding and as practical work or skills. In this way, what is offered is an educative process which encourages students to think critically and participate creatively in communication activities. More favourably, this could also lead to what Costas discerns as “part of the process of education for the organisation of individuals, for people to understand their rights and duties as citizens and for participation in fighting social injustices” (1991:13).

The practical courses, as traditionally practised in the Malaysian media programmes are largely clean, convenient and non-controversial. Many course tutors say that their students are “learning by doing”. But there is no formal, critical component in these exercises as debates on technology’s ideological influence on content and the aim of furthering human communication for a better world are still missing in the official curriculum knowledge. Given the fascination to fit students into the job-readiness mould, these programmes encourage students to produce “commercial broadcast clones” while the “constructedness” and values inherent in the process of production are not assessed critically. Students are seldom invited to reflect on the dominant media forms, their
limitations, why they exist, and who they serve.

The USM programme encompasses several courses (e.g., Communication and Culture; Communication, Power and Conflict; Communication Technology; and Communication Theory and Research) that operate within a framework that advances the mechanisms of power, the relationships between communication systems and developments in society and possibilities for change. The practical courses emphasise technology and students are expected to learn the handling of equipment effectively so that they can run radio continuity sessions, produce television magazines, documentaries, news features and drama.

As a tutor for practical courses in radio and television production, I was interested in how an alternative pedagogy could be located in media education programmes. I advanced that students should identify and question the language of television, its conventions, and its political and economic underpinnings and more importantly that they should begin to use video as a strategy for community development where ideological critique is raised and unhappy, painful as well as distressing events confronted. The key aim is to allow students to engage with community relationships that contest dominant versions of reality.

It needs to be stressed that the students are not producing community video in an ideal sense that transfers media knowledge and skills to the community but that they are engaging in a process of making meanings (not just receiving it) and negotiating it with others (not just thinking alone). Such video attempts to situate students at the intersection between education and animation, and work towards personal and social empowerment. Students are encouraged to examine social relationships, extend the marginalised voices of various communities. The "finished tapes" are circulated to different groups to communicate the needs of particular communities and to foster common social struggles. Students seek ways to form an "organic relationship" with the energies of social struggles taking place around them in society and learn practical grassroots democracy.

For example, one production group worked on a documentary about poverty in a village in Jelutong (a town near the USM campus), advancing the views of the local community on the problems of securing their basic living necessities. Yayasan Bina Ilmu (YBI), a local NGO which operates in the community, has been assisting the villagers to confront poverty, health difficulties, drug abuse, illiteracy and other educational problems. The video project allowed the students to look at the village, appreciate, understand and examine the villagers' problems and relay the voices and expressions of the people through the visual
medium. The students have been holding dialogues with the villagers and YBI to assess the NGO's role in the community.

A preview of the video and discussion of the exchange between the students, the participants of the video project and YBI was organised. The students described their project and assessed the production process and the relationships they have developed with the villagers. They raised issues like representation, narrative selectivity, meaning 'construction', editing and the production process of a video programme, why some aspects were included in the programme while other aspects that were shot during the filming had to be left out.

The video project effectively created a situation where the production group and the community got to work together in developing alternative solutions to urban poverty. The tape is currently being used by YBI to advance its work on alleviating the urban plight of the Jelutong community. Other on-going student projects include documentaries on the marginalisation of the aged in increasingly nuclear-oriented families in Malaysia; the development of tourism in Penang; the plights of trishaw peddlers; and the environmental impact of rock-blasting on the community. This approach to practical projects aims to go beyond the traditional method of "learning by doing" to include a critical framework of questioning the mainstream media and creating alternative representations and voices.

Media educators have a crucial role to play by presenting critical problems to learners to encourage questioning of underlying assumptions and values about dominant ideologies, knowledge and the ways of making sense of the world. Clearly if we wish to understand society and organise action for a more egalitarian order, the most fruitful course would be to adopt the point of view of the most underprivileged members, including women, children and communities that do not have access to media technology and media voice.

While media education programmes continue to painstakingly network with the media industry and the corporate agencies, the same can hardly be said for generating genuine interest in making links with marginalised groups who have a critical role to play in influencing national and local debates. Very little scholarship related to media education offers critique on power imbalances and themes on liberation, empowerment and people's citizenry.

Indeed, both the course curriculum and research activities in Malaysia have very little to offer towards the creation of empowering discourses aimed at a broad cross-section of society. Struggles for alternative media voices linked to a citizen's movement for democratic media reform must begin if media
education schools wish to contribute to counter-hegemonic strategies designed to intervene in the present maldistribution of power and resources.

REFERENCES


