"Cue journalism": Media should stop playing Follow-the-leader

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“Cue Journalism”: Media Should Stop Playing Follow-the-Leader

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The mainstream media in Malaysia, as in most countries, are expected to break news to the public while an important event unfolds, or at the latest, shortly after it occurs. They are also supposed to be in the forefront, probing and pushing vital issues to centre-stage.

That’s why under normal circumstances we would expect the media to analyse, for example, the implications of new legislation or amendments to existing laws or the impact of a technological or medical breakthrough. The media are also expected to provide a platform for intelligent debate among interested parties on a controversy or policy matters that are of public concern.

In times of uncertainty or adversity, the role of the media to inform and enlighten the citizenry becomes all the more crucial. They should, for instance, alert if there is an outbreak of a contagious disease so that people can take steps to protect themselves.

The media can also help curb rumours and speculations by giving as accurate a report as possible with balanced commentaries, especially when it comes to reporting on communal issues. This can help to cool down escalating tension and unnecessary suspicion among the various communities.

These were indeed important roles that the Malaysian mainstream media had been playing to some degree. The media, however, seemed to have lost vigour and spontaneity in reporting and analysing important issues over the last few years, particularly since the days of Reformasi movement in 1998. The mainstream media appeared to have taken its “cue” from the powers-that-be before reporting on a particular issue or event.

In certain cases, the media are quite hesitant to highlight an issue and instead display an indecisiveness that is spawned by a culture of self-censorship, a fact that was admitted by Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in his interview with CNN in October 2006 (Malaysiakini, October 16, 2006). There is also the possibility that the media might have been getting too many conflicting signs (cues) from the government which reduce them to a state of journalistic paralysis.
Opening the Floodgates

Take the annual open burning and the peat fires, for instance. These fires had worsened the “haze” in many parts of the country in 1998. Although some coverage was focused on these sources of pollution, it had not been enough to raise massive public awareness and concern. For example, Fire and Rescue Department Assistant Director-General (Operations), Mohd Yusof Muhammad, gained a limited measure of media attention (*The Star*, 6 April 1998) when he revealed the extent of bush and forest fires in the country.

It was only after the Malaysian Cabinet took a decisive action to curb open burning to control the haze that the mainstream media were jolted and went to town with the issue. Thus, on 10 April 1998, the *New Straits Times* (*NST*), for example, splashed a front-page banner headline, ‘All Out To Curb Open Burning’. According to the news report, the Cabinet had “directed the authorities to press for the maximum RM100,000 fine and five years’ jail when prosecuting those caught starting fires.”

In addition, the Cabinet was reported to have instructed various agencies to conduct immediate aerial monitoring to catch and punish the culprits accordingly, indicating the Cabinet’s displeasure, something the media could not afford to ignore.

In another *NST* report on the same day headlined ‘Open Burning Cases Increasing’, readers were told by the Kedah Fire and Rescue Department Deputy Director, Nik Zulkifli Ibrahim, that 224 fires were caused by open burning in January, 448 in February, and 401 in March. These were serious cases of burning, happening a few months prior to this, which the media could have conscientiously highlighted for the good of the people, but this issue gained media attention apparently only after the Cabinet’s wrath was expressed.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find an avalanche of news reports about fires in the country once the Cabinet “opened” the floodgates. On 14 April 1998, for example, the *NST* carried a front-page story with the headline ‘DOE Cracks Down On Open Burning’.

In another case on 15 April 1998, the front page of the *NST* carried an aerial photograph of a peat forest fire in Penor, with the accompanying headline, “Peat Fires Spotted at 14 Locations in Kuantan and Pekan”. On the same page, there was a story of forest fires raging in East Kalimantan, headlined “Blazes rage out of control in Kalimantan”.

An array of stories of fires and related reports were published on the whole of page five with the following headlines:

“SOLDIERS GO THE EXTRA MILE TO HELP FIGHT SARAWAK FOREST FIRES” (a picture story);

“2,000HA OF FORESTS IN SABAH PARKS ABLAZE”;

“TING: LEAVE OF STATE FIRE CHIEFS AND DEPUTIES FROZEN”;

“OPEN BURNING: MORE TO GET ARREST TO POWERS”;

“21 OFFENDERS FINED, ANOTHER TO BE PROSECUTED”;

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‘RTD TO HAUL IN VEHICLES BELCHING EXCESSIVE SMOKE’; and ‘GEF HELP SOUGH TO TACKLE HAZE’.

On 24 April 1998, in the ‘Life & Times’ section of the NST, an in-depth report focused on the problem of fires in Sarawak, particularly in Miri and its surrounding areas.

It is imperative to state here that the Malaysian government had banned the disclosure of the vital Air Pollutant Index (API) soon after the terrible 1997 haze for fear of scaring foreign tourists. The API was then put under the purview of the restrictive Official Secrets Act (OSA). This measure certainly posed obstacles to reporters who attempted to seek a better grasp of the dire situation at the material time. The ban, however, was lifted in August 2005 because the government apparently realised that there was a need “to keep the public informed about the situation” (Malaysiakini, August 10, 2005). But this move did not necessarily mean that the Malaysian press exercised thorough investigative journalism, probing deeper into the root causes of, and inter-governmental or regional mechanisms to overcome, the haze, particularly when there were allegations that Malaysian companies that operate in Indonesia were also involved in the burning of forests in the affected Indonesian regions. Such journalistic inquiry becomes all the more important when the problem of haze in Malaysia and the region around it has become perennial.

But there are times, though, when the Malaysian government would make its displeasure unmistakable and subsequently issue crystal-clear “cue”. The government would issue directives or summon mainstream media editors, especially if and when it perceives a grounds swell of public dissatisfaction towards its action or policy that is controversial. For example, Deputy Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak told editors of all newspapers and TV stations, in a hushed-up meeting in December 2006, “not to play up the impending increase in toll hike on five highways” (Malaysiakini, Dec. 13, 2006). As a result, much of the mainstream media kept mum over a number of street demonstrations that were staged against the toll hike in Kuala Lumpur, while online newspaper and certain blogs gave extensive coverage of the events.

“Cue journalism”, as already shown above, also prevails in an environment where legal obstacle is placed by the draconian OSA that is empowered to imprison an individual who is found guilty of possessing, or passing on to someone else, what is classified as “Official Secrets”. The OSA obviously discourages investigative journalism. Recent case of the OSA involves police questioning of four leaders of the Opposition who disclosed a copy of what was deemed as a secret document pertaining to the agreement signed between the government and the concessionaire of the Damansara-Puchong Expressway (Malaysiakini, Feb. 1, 2007).

Predictably, the waiting for this official “cue” from the government often makes the mainstream media unreliable sources of information in the popular imagination. Their credibility takes an ignoble tumble when websites and blogs race to break news. For instance, the news of the government buying an expensive Airbus A319 Corporate Jet in January 2007, at a time when the general public has been asked to tighten their belt, compelled Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to make a public announcement about it, which only later was picked up by the compliant mainstream media. The mainstream media merely recorded the prime minister’s official explanation and did not make any probing over the issue. Abdullah insisted
that the government did not buy the jetliner, but instead was bought by Penerbangan Malaysia Berhad, a government-owned corporate outfit that then leases the luxury plane to the government. This “explanation” provoked swift reactions from politicians and the civil society who felt that, in the final analysis, the government – and the taxpayers – will be the one paying for the purchase of the jet. (See blogs, for instance, http://www.jeffooi.com/ and http://rockybru.blogspot.com/)

A Bombshell

At times, certain government ministers could misconstrue a sudden surge of media interest on a particular issue or problem as bordering on overkill. Television station ntv7, for instance, was reprimanded by the then Information Minister Mohamad Rahmat for having committed an “exaggeration” in its news report of the haze (Berita Harian, 30 April 1998). He regretted that the television station had tried to link the haze to reduced visibility. The connection was evidently hazy to him.

Then, Science, Technology and Environment Minister Law Hieng Ding dropped a bombshell. He declared that Malaysia no longer had a haze problem (The Star, 30 April 1998). One wonders about the credibility of his declaration especially when it was published next to a story about a cloud of haze hovering over Kuantan. Was this “cue” for real?

In the case of the water woes that were experienced by residents in the Klang Valley, the mainstream media dutifully gave ample coverage of this human misery. The people were outraged, so were MPs and government ministers, a harsh reality that any journalist with a nose for news could not miss.

But this intense journalistic activity belies the fact that others had warned some time ago that this crisis would happen unless concrete steps were taken by the authorities to avert it. Gurmit Singh, then President of the Environmental Protection Society of Malaysia, had recommended back in 1983 that catchment areas needed further protection and that the government should formulate a national water policy (Asiaweek, 1 May 1998). But, as expected, not many in the local media took seriously this somewhat insignificant “cue”. And with the Commonwealth Games that was about to commence in Kuala Lumpur then, it seemed that news on the water crisis was deliberately played down.

Finally, there was the case of then Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed’s indignation in 1997 over the lack of cleanliness and hygiene in Jalan Bukit Bintang, Kuala Lumpur. This is a civic concern that was certainly shared by all Malaysians who care for the environment. It should not require a prime minister to draw the attention of the authorities and the media to this problem. Any concerned citizen in a democracy should have just as much access to the media and the authorities in articulating a particular concern, especially if it is of social import.

Why should anyone make a fuss over the mainstream media’s swift, and almost devoted, response to what is said and done by the powers-that-be? After all, political leaders and governments in almost every county are normally generators or makers of news by virtue of their being part of the policy-making process. They are the ones
who initiate socio-economic programmes, introduce new laws, and chart a nation’s course.

But in a civil society, ordinary citizens and groups, too, should have a role to play – to promote certain ideas via the mass media and to debate policies. An individual or a group should have the opportunity to take centre-stage in championing, say, a social cause.

For a civil society to survive and prosper, the media cannot afford to be at the back and call of the powers-that-be. There has to be some space for them to think independently, to offer differing opinions, to initiate media coverage of what they think is of social significance, and consequently to enhance their credibility.

In conclusion, the underlying factors have to be addressed. The local mainstream media can, to a large degree, be freed from the dictates of the powers-that-be if laws such as the Printing Presses and Publications Act and Communications and Multimedia Act (1998) are repealed, and the Official Secrets Act is amended so that the media can operate without having to look over their shoulders. To this end, Malaysian journalists need to test the waters from time to time as a way of trying to widen the envelope. Perhaps some of these journalists should also start thinking of the unthinkable, such as treating bloggers and webmasters as fellow seekers of truth and justice so that a form of loose cooperation, at least momentarily, can be developed among themselves in order that some of the undisclosed information and materials can be made public via the new media.

Additionally, the present pattern of media ownership – the close relationship between media owners and the ruling party, and concentration of media ownership – also needs changing as it impinges upon the healthy development of the mainstream media. For instance, the journalistic fraternity and the civil society groups may want to wage a campaign for the instituting of an Anti-Trust law to combat the emergence of oligopolies, and also to launch a nationwide campaign of raising public awareness regarding the importance of media freedom and democracy. Unless these changes occur, the mainstream media will always be inclined to take their “cue” from “the above”.

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