

THE MEDIA IN MALAYSIA: ASPIRATIONS, CHOICES AND REALITIES

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The papers in this volume were presented at the 15th Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) Conference on "Media in Asia: Aspirations, Choices and Realities", organised in collaboration with Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang, 17–20 July 2006. The conference was attended by 250 delegates from 30 countries who presented a total of 189 papers. The opening was officiated by Y.B. Datuk Wong Kam Hoong, the Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage and attended by the Secretary-General of ASEAN, H.E. Ong Keng Yong and the Assistant Secretary-General for Communication & Information of UNESCO, Dr. Abdul Waheed Khan.

As a partner of this conference, USM took the opportunity to host sessions known as the Malaysia Track to run parallel to the main conference sessions. When this track was announced and call for papers was made, we received overwhelming response from the academicians and professionals from Malaysia as well as from abroad. In total, we received 41 abstracts to be presented in six sessions spread over the four-day gathering. The idea of organising this track is to enable academics and practitioners to deliberate on issues on media development in Malaysia and its impact on social, political and cultural progressions. It is organised as an appreciation to the prolific development of media and communication research in Malaysia. The track specifically dovetails on media and communication research efforts within the Malaysian milieu.

The Malaysia Track was divided into four sessions. In the first track, the *Malaysian Identity and the Global Media*, the thrust of the discussion was opened to papers which dealt with the transformation and

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restructuring of Malaysian institutions, politics and economics. Some of the pertinent issues which were discussed in this track were national culture, national identity and the media; national sovereignty and policy responses; popular culture and the Malaysian identity, and reception and resistance of the local audience.

The second track, *New Media and Status Quo*, focused on the emergence of the new global economy driven by information and knowledge which has brought about serious implications to the nature and purpose of basic institutions (such as family, gender and sexuality), economics (business, organisation, nation and government) and civil society. It is generally touted that the information and communication technologies have the potential to become powerful tools for change and empowerment, and this track allows serious discussions on their impact on education, e-commerce and e-business, e-government and women's empowerment.

The third track, *Communicating Health and Environment*, dealt on issues which have become crucial in the global agenda, more so with the continued global natural disasters happening all over the world today. Given the currency of such events that have significant impact on health and environment, the track was able to gather papers which focused on natural disasters and epidemics, environmental degradation and conservation, lifestyle diseases, health care provision and HIV/AIDS.

The final track, *Representation of Minority Groups* was designed based on the notion that the era of globalisation and digitalisation has benefited all groups providing them with equal opportunities to be represented. Hence, this track explored how minority groups are being represented and whether their representation empowers them.

As a result of these four tracks, we are able to publish selected papers and these are presented not necessarily in the sequence and themes that they were presented in the conference.

The first three papers discussed the contentious issues emanating from the public relations (PR) profession in Malaysia. These are the relationships and networking with journalists, the justification of their worth and value to an organisation, and the debate pertaining to ethics in the profession of PR. With regard to the former, Kiranjit Kaur and Halimahton Shaari delved into the symbiotic, or lack thereof, of the

liaison between PR practitioners and journalism which they describe as often complex but necessary. On the one hand, the journalists accuse the PR practitioners as a group of people who are naive and devoid of any clue to the needs of the audience; the latter, on the other hand, are beset with inaccuracies, innuendoes and misreportings. There were also instances where the journalists demand incentives to carry PR stories. Hence, there emerges a climate of mistrust and suspicion. PR practitioners are perceived as controlling access to and managing information, while journalists are seen as controlling the main sources for communication to the public. The authors surveyed 48 PR practitioners and 63 journalists to examine these contentious issues. In their conclusion, they found that PR practitioners seem to hold more positive perceptions than the journalists on the various aspects of their symbiotic relationship. The journalists seem to feel that their counterparts do not contribute much to their work and daily routine.

PR practitioners in Malaysia are also confronted with another complexity, that is, to justify their worth to an organisation. Unlike marketing or advertising departments, PR units are often queried on what they actually do and what returns to investment they bring into the organisation. The article by Chang Peng Kee and Musa Abu Hassan (a collaboration between a practitioner and an academician) is an attempt at unravelling this issue by proposing a method to measure the effectiveness and economic value of PR to an organisation. They proposed that their effectiveness and value can be measured through the use of a modified advertising-value-equivalent (AVE) which they developed with specially designed computer software. The report generated from the said software shows that the cumulative AVE is able to explain the return on expenditure (ROE) in order to carry out PR activities. In sum, they argued that the propagation of the AVE can be one of the many solutions to evaluate the economic worth of PR.

Another contentious issue with regard to the discipline of PR is the notion of ethics of the discipline. In their paper, Khor Yoke Lim and Adnan Hussein argued that unlike the medical and law professions in which their ethical codes are clearly specified and mandatory compliance by all members is strictly imposed, the codes of the PR profession are not only vague and ambiguous, but members' compliance are purely voluntary. In examining the PR codes as applied in Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and Malaysia, the authors said that the code

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of "working in accord with public interest" which appears in all the PR associations in those countries does not provide clear guidelines of what they are trying to uphold nor does it provide information regarding how members should act "in accord with public interest". This ambiguity is more obvious with regard to the relationship between the profession of PR and the tobacco industry. In the final analysis, they argued that it is not ethically appropriate for the PR profession to represent the tobacco industry because the latter contravenes PR obligations to protect the public interest and to work "in accord with public interest".

Four articles on new information and communication technology (ICT) dealing with varying functions of search practices, knowledge management and media discourse are selected for publication in this volume. The first article by Ramli Mohamed and Aini Hayati Khalib examines the impact of the new technology on the search practices of selected Malaysian journalists. In this article, they asked how Malaysian journalists find information on the Internet and what their favourite search engines are? What are the characteristics of the Internet that influence journalists' search practices? What is the attitude of journalists towards Internet usage in their daily activities and what are the perceived success and lack of it that the Internet poses as a source of information? Finally, what is the level of knowledge they possess in terms of technology, in general, and the Internet, in particular? Their study found that (i) the adoption rate of ICT is relatively high among the journalists, (ii) over the years, computers have become a necessary tool of the profession and, (iii) the Internet has become an important source of information. Nonetheless, the journalists were found to be unable to optimise the advantages of ICT and the Internet in that they are not adventurous in the search habits and are still partial to the habits of searching for a visible way of obtaining information, such as through interviews, archiving or referring to printed sources.

The article by Gerald Goh Guan Gan, Charmaine Ryan and Raj Gururajan focuses on new communication technology from the standpoint of the knowledge management process, which is defined as the process of effectively creating, capturing, sharing and using organisation-wide knowledge to improve the organisation's performance. They argued that little attempts are made to understand how organisations in Malaysia undertake knowledge management and use it to enhance their competitiveness. In this article, they reported how

their study attempts to examine this issue as practised by some selected companies located in the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), especially on the critical elements of knowledge management, such as the degree of collaboration, mutual trust, leadership and incentives/rewards. The authors found that collaboration, mutual trust, leadership, *kiasu*-ism and incentives/rewards have significant impact on the level of knowledge management practice. As a result, they suggested that the relevant authorities pay adequate attention on these cultural factors to ensure that the knowledge management initiatives undertaken by Malaysian companies are effectively deployed.

In the article by Adnan Hussein, Hamidah Abdul Hamid and Siti Hajar Abdul Aziz, ICT is examined through its ability to facilitate discourse among participants on issues of concern to them. In this case, they examined the issue of cloning. The authors argue that, as a result of ICT, especially the creation and proliferation of weblog applications, the media landscape has changed. In societies where media operations are curtailed, the weblog becomes the alternative source of information and knowledge. The authors went on to examine the discourse that has emerged through this application and found that, in the case of scientific discourse, such as on the issue of cloning, the weblog has been able to attract diverse attention and discussion as opposed to the daily newspapers. They concluded that the weblog has brought about community dialogue and discourse in an open market system to enable the participants to forward their views in greater intensity than what a print medium can do in Malaysia.

Finally, the article by Abdul Wahab Ismail Gani, Kamaliah Hj Siarap and Hasrina Mustafa examines the application of the computer by the teachers in their teaching and learning activities in several selected schools in Penang. Using the framework of the diffusion of innovation, these scholars seek to examine the impact of the policy of the government to introduce the computer into the classrooms and how much has this policy improved the learning outcomes among the school children, especially on the interactiveness of learning as well as the motivation and aspiration to learn. This paper is based on a study conducted on 184 school teachers in the selected schools. It was found that the application of computers in teaching and learning activities have proven to be effective, especially in its ability to increase knowledge and

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understanding as well as to change the overall learning scenario of the students and how teaching is conducted by the teachers.

The three remaining articles deal with the representation of Malaysians in the media as well as their impact on the society. In his article, Ahmad Murad Merican examines the representation and embodiment of Malay identity as represented in the works of three renowned Malaysian scholars and leaders: Abdullah Munsi, Syed Shaykh al-Hady and Mahathir Mohamad. The author argues that how we know ourselves and how we have selected that knowledge determine the facts accumulated about us. What do the Malays make out of media? One assumption says that the Malays are averse to print and more attuned to orality and aurality. However, there is also the category of *baca, membaca, and cerita* which may not fit in the understanding of the European mind. Locating the categories of communication and media in the context of meaning, culture and thought may illustrate that the Malays do not share Euro-American presuppositions; at the same time, however, efforts to localise and indigenise the minds, concepts and practices only reattach these to the matrix of globalised modernity.

Apart from representation in the media, another critical issue pertaining to the relationships of Malaysians and the media is on multi-ethnicism and multi-culturalism, and how much the media has contributed to the inculcation of ethnic and cultural tolerance of the people. This is the theme of the article by Ezhar Tamam, Wendy Yee Mei Tien, Fazilah Idris and Azimi Hamzah. These authors undertook a study to examine the relationships and contribution of exposure to news of public affairs to cognitive, attitudinal and behavioural dimensions of ethnic tolerance among Malaysian youths aged between 15 to 25 years. In this study, they interviewed 2,906 respondents and applied regression analyses to determine the relationships. The study found that the level of ethnic tolerance in terms of practising tolerant behaviour in dealing with ethnic differences and related issues could also be predicted from the level of exposure to news of public affairs. Furthermore, they also found that people who are more exposed to news of public affairs have a higher level of behavioural component of ethnic tolerance. This implies that the mainstream news media in the country to some extent play their role in inculcating tolerant behaviour in relating with others of different ethnic groups through their coverage of inter-ethnic relations news. Based on these findings, the authors suggested that perhaps Malaysian citizenship

training and courses should explore the use of news reports to educate young people about ethnicity, ethnic differences and inter-ethnic relations issues.

The final article in this volume also deals with the issue of the representation of the minority in the Malaysian media. Halimahton Shaari, Ngu Teck Hua and V. Raman who analyse two contentious racial-religious issues – the M. Moorthy and Nyonya Tahir cases – that were reported in the *New Straits Times*, *Utusan Malaysia*, *Malaysia Nanyan* and *Sin Chew Daily*. The former case caused a stir when there was a tussle between Moorthy's Indian/Hindu family and the Federal Territory Islamic Affairs Council which argued that Moorthy had converted to Islam when he was alive without the family's knowledge. The latter was a case of a Malay/Muslim woman who, while alive, had denounced Islam and lived as a Chinese practising Buddhism. The authors contended that the Malaysian media has constantly tread on precarious ground when they report on racism or religious matters, striving to balance between what to write and how to write it. The study found that, true to the communal nature of the Malaysian press, there had been an apparent slant in how the ethnic press covered these two issues. The different newspapers were also seen to "favour" the subject they covered according to the ethnicity.