

Role of media in society



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Media is considered to be the 4th pillar of the society while the other three being legislative, executive and judiciary. It plays an important role in the welfare of the society, working as an informer, an educator, a form of entertainment and an opinion influencer. In Malaysia, media and politics are co-dependent because through this, democracy is formed. Mustafa (1999) stated that in this broad context of democracy, the mass media plays an important role by supplying media users with a platform to obtain information, exchange views and at the same time give feedback to the government; however this is overshadowed by the state's official view that the media should be functioning as an essential tool to promote ' national development', ' national harmony' and ' national security'.

The Mainstream Media and Politics

The Malaysian mainstream press can be categorised as having gone through a major period of change since the early 1980s in terms of ownership and well as flourished amendments and policies that serves as a form of gate-keeping and control over the media. All forms of media introduced,

newspaper, radio and television, directly went under the control of the government or companies that were aligned with the government.

In Malaysia, obtaining information is often a tedious affair and can be frustrating applied not just for journalists but for the public because there are no Freedom of Information (FOI) laws. One of the events that aided towards a tight control over the mainstream media was during the 1969 elections, Barisan National while retaining a majority, lost many seats to extremist Chinese and Malay parties Yesudhasan & Wong (2010) stated that Malaysia experienced one of the worst incident of ethnic violence in its history that came to be known as the “ May 13 incident”. As part of the government’s plan to sustain social order then, the government suspended the publications for all newspapers for two days starting from 16 May 1969, subsequently introduced a censorship law and banned the circulation of certain foreign magazines and newspapers that contained reports of the violence in Kuala Lumpur (Mustafa, 1999)

Due to the incident, the government declared to have the rights to censor items that were deemed ‘ dangerous to national security’. The Malaysian government appears to be misusing arguments of religious sensitive and cultural issues to manipulate the political system by limiting political freedom of the opposition and civil society which makes Malaysia a less democratic state (Azizuddin, 2008) Then, a new established body, the National Operations Council (NOC) was formed to resuscitate parliamentary democracy, rebuild public confidence and engender ethnic harmony and a form contributing towards forming ethnic harmony; an amendment was form whereby it prohibited any act, speech or publication that has a tendency to

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bring feelings of ill-will and enmity between the various ethnic groups (Zaharom, 1999) Thus the strong hold over the mainstream media begins.

Many government leaders in the developing world justify their control over the media in terms of jealousy guarding and guiding its members towards the supposedly noble path of national development and to ensure that the media does not fall into the ‘ wrong hands’ or in other words, state control over the mainstream media has clearly been justified in the name of national development and national security (Mustafa, 2004)

During elections, the media plays an important role in publicizing as well as plays a part in advertising politicians as well as their campaign. The mainstream media is fully controlled by Barisan National’s needs to not only publicise but as Mustafa (2005) stated, flaunt to the whole country BN’s achievements, particularly in the area of socioeconomic development. A wide coverage would done on the pro-government and minimal reporting would be done on the opposition. Media ownership generally plays in role in why Barisan national is constantly being flaunt and portrayed as the political party to vote for.

After Malaysia gained independence in 1957, the mainstream print media was owned by private sector companies. Then the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) made a successful bid for the Utusan Melayu a few years afterwards. Over the years, the major English newspaper, The New Straits Times was also taken over by UMNO of the ruling National Front, while The Star was bought over by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and

mainstream television channels like TV1, TV2 and TV3 were born, controlled by the government.

According to an analysis on the coverage of Malaysia's 2004 general elections by four mainstream newspapers (The Star, the New Straits Times (NST), Berita Harian and Utusan Melayu), the total number of news items that were positive towards BN among all four major newspapers were roughly 40% and above. The other part of the percentage went straight to news items that were negative towards the opposition. Only a slight number of news (4% and below) were negative news items towards BN. Mustafa (2005) also highlighted sample of headlines used by these newspapers that gave an idea of slant news reporting; " Malaysians prefer Pak Lah's vision of Islam" (NST, March 15 2004), Perlis merana jika pilih pembangang (Perlis suffers if opposition is voted) (Utusan Melayu, March 16 2004) This shows a high level of bias coverage within the highly influential mainstream newspapers during the 2004 general elections.

Alternative Media and Politics

With an obvious slant reporting and biasness from the mainstream media, cyber news is slowly taking over, becoming a more focused, better written, more informative and alternative to the mainstream newspapers and media. Like in the case of Marina Mahathir with ' The Column that wasn't'; this piece was spiked by the Star because it touched in issues that were sensitive but since The Malaysian Multimedia and Communication Acts of 1998 promises that ' No censorship would be applied on Internet content', Marina published her column online together with ranting on why her column was spiked.

What would stop the public now from reading that column online and have the same reaction if it was published in the mainstream newspaper?

A study conducted by Zentrum Future Studies Malaysia in 2008 involving 1,500 respondents between the age of 21 and 40 showed that the alternative media holds a big influence on young Malaysians. In the study, 64.5% of those ages from 21 to 30 years old trusted blogs and online media for reliable information. Those between 31 and 40 years old, 61.7% believed that information in blogs and online media are true. (Study Shows Why BN Lost the War, 2008)

Yesudhasan & Wong (2010) said that the young readership in Malaysia believes that the mainstream media are under the control of the government, always working continuously to ensure that the news are pro-government and has no or limited reports on sensitive issues. Various alternative news portals such as Malaysia Today, Malaysian Insider, Harakah Daily and MalaysiaKini provide media users with the alternative source to obtain political news or for those who have generally lost faith with the mainstream media.

The parliamentary elections in 2008 brought the alternative media to a different level when weblogs, text messages and copies of Internet-streamed videos became the most influential information sources for voters ahead that resulted in a surprise blow to the Barisan National (BN) party, which has ruled the country for more than 50 years. After BN's worst election showing, in which it lost its two-thirds majority in the parliament, Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi acknowledged March 25 that his coalition " certainly

lost the Internet war,” and added that it was “ a serious misjudgement” for his party to rely solely on government-controlled newspapers and television in its efforts to attract voters, (Kaufman, 2008). The alternative media gave media users a chance to hear what opposition parties have to say as it is not controlled by the government.

Due to this, the government realize that the new media or alternative media is an important impartation in the political scene. Now, politicians are looking into the internet to gain communicate and display information to the mass society of internet users. Parti Keadilan Rakyat, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim is in the blogspere at [www. anwaribrahim. com](http://www.anwaribrahim.com), with regular updates on PKR as well as him opinions on what Malaysian the government should be doing.

SMS is also another form of alternative media, in fact; it is a rather powerful form of communication tool if used wisely. Generally, there has been a passive use of SMS for politicians to pass on messages as well as information to voters from a national voter database, as well a more interactive use of it for politicians to communicate with party representatives, voters or the media (Kaur and Halimahton, 2004)

A research done by Kaur and Halimahton (2004) analysed contents of several election-related SMS for the 2004 general election sent from the nomination date until a few days after the election ended that were being sent among 238 respondents. This number was the final sample for the pilot study. According to research, 51 general election-related messages sent by friends, colleagues, family members, political party members and NGOs were collected between nomination day, 13 March 2004, and polling day, 21

March 2004. Only one message could be categorized as informative, provided by communication provider MAXIS, informing voters that they should check their voting status and voting location through SMS. Only a few proved to be informative and useful in helping voters with information on the general election. 19 out of 50 were shown to be ridiculing or condemning messages towards Barisan Nasional.

60. 5% of the respondents found the election-related messages to be useful and informative. 27% found the messages to be funny whereas about 6% found the messages to be a nuisance. Though most found the SMS to be useful and informative, only 31.9% were influenced to support a party of individual base on what they received. Data collected showed that the public primarily uses SMS to for jokes or to criticize certain candidates or political parties, no serious discussion was found among the sample of SMS messages to persuade voters to vote in a certain way.

Another form of alternative media, Al-Jazeera English (AJE) believes in their mission to 'provide voice to the voiceless'. In a survey done by AJE on how AJE is perceived by participants, the respondents of the survey gave a ranking of more positive than negative, showing the respondents had a favourable perception of AJE with regard to how it performed the conciliatory media functions (Mohammed and Power, 2010) Among the points that participants agreed on was that AJE 'provided a public place for politically underrepresented groups', 'AJE provides multiple view points on a diversity of controversial issues' and that AJE 'represents the interests of the international public in general rather than a specific group of people'.

During the protest that broke out in November 10, 2007 organized by BERSIH with the aim of reforming the electoral process, up to an estimated of 40, 000 protestors came with force to draw attention from the government. What began as a peaceful protest, the Malaysian police tried to vanquish protestors with tear gas and fire hoses. The image of such goings were shocking and while, the mainstream broadcast and print failed to cover the protests but obtain minimal coverage, AJE covered the whole thing live and in detail (Mohammed and Power, 2010) The coverage done by AJE was then placed online, on YouTube, receiving more than 250, 000 viewers within the first week of the protest resulting in a largely stated influenced media resulted in the Malaysian mainstream media's ' largest credibility crisis to date' (Mohammed and Power, 2010)

Media, Politics and the Public Sphere

The role of the media is to act as a safety valve to release any pent-up emotions on any issue or combination of issues facing our country; with the heavy ownership by government, the credibility and reliability of our mainstream media might die out one day. The media also acts as a public sphere that is critically important for modern societies as it serves as a forum whereby the public can communicate collectively on relevant issues as well as allowing citizens to inform or update themselves on societal developments to observe and control political, economic and other elites (Gerhards and Schafer, 2010)

However, due to the hold back and tight gate-keeping from the mainstream media, Mustafa (2005) stated that the public sphere in Malaysian society has been further constrained so that ordinary citizens and concerned civil have

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not been able to fully express their views and to directly participate in the country's democratic process. Earlier this year, NTV7 producer resigned in protest over his company's decision to stop his talk show from commenting on the upcoming by-election at Hulu Selangor, following pressure said to have emanated directly from the ruling coalition. A TV2 documentary on the controversial Bakun Dam and the forced relocation of Sarawak's natives was forced off the air, just before the Sibul parliamentary by-election took place. It is clear that open debate has little room to flourish in Malaysia, (Yeoh, 2010)

Malaysiakini, an example of an alternative publication that flourished tremendously after the 2008 general elections. Steele (2009) stated that it is not the Internet that challenges the Barisan National's stranglehold power but it is actually the norms and values of independent journalism that have made MalaysiaKini such a threat to government authorities. This ideology of creating independent journalism with the alternative media not only changes those who work within the public sphere but also creates a democratic space for public discourse, one that the Malaysian society lacks. It not only gives voice to the voiceless but concrete prove or forms of information through video, audio and feedback tools. It shows media users sides of stories that they may not see. The seemingly mechanistic tools of fairness and balance, "did you get the quote from the other side?" become a means of guaranteeing that all voices will be heard (Steele, 2009)

Conclusion

The media plays an important role in the welfare of the society, working as an informer, an educator, a form of entertainment and an opinion influencer. With the current media ownership that poses credible threat and questions

the credibility to the role of the media; media users need to consider, who to trust now? Political issues are highly dependent on the media as it is highlights what is important and is highly influential thus it works as a form to influence the political mind-set of media users. With the mainstream constantly bombarding pro-government issues towards society, media users now yearn for a different point of view, shifting to the alternative media to abstract that diverse opinion. In sight of how the media and politics are intertwined, it is important that the opinions and comments of the public take place to form a democracy, in the words of Abraham Lincoln; for the people, by the people and of the people. Thus, the public sphere is important in the role to collect or obtain the voices of the public. The alternative media has already taken the role in proving that space for the public to take part in forming the country's democracy; it is now up to the mainstream media to do the same, for a better political constitution of the country.