COMMUNICATION, GLOBALISATION AND NATIONAL AGENDA: POLICIES, PARABLES AND PARADOXES FOR YOUTH DEVELOPMENT IN MALAYSIA

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Abstract

This article gives an overview of the changing media landscape and its implication to youth development in Malaysia. In tandem with globalisation, the Malaysian government had enacted several liberalisation policies that paved the way for the commercialisation, deregulation and privatization of broadcasting and telecommunication industries. Such initiatives resulted in media-rich environment and higher media penetration among young people in Malaysia. They are now having access to inflow of foreign programmes on local stations which many are the opinion that there should be some kind of control and censorship over such programmes. The paradox is that the changing media landscape allows for the necessary growth of human capitals pertinent to nation building, but at the same time it is also blamed for most of the on-going social maladies among the young.

Abstrak

Artikel ini menerangkan tentang perubahan lanskap media dan implikasinya ke atas perkembangan belia di Malaysia. Selaras dengan globalisasi, kerajaan Malaysia telah menguatkuasakan beberapa polisi liberal yang membantu ke arah komersialisasi, deregulasi dan penswastaan industri penyiaran dan telekomunikasi. Inisiatif ini memberi kesan kepada persekitaran dan penembusan media yang tinggi di kalangan belia di malaysia. Kini mereka boleh mengakses kepada program luar negara di stesen tempatan walaupun ada pandangan yang mengatakan perlu ada kawalan dan tapisan ke atas program berkenaan. Secara kontranya, perubahan landskap media membenarkan perkembangan sumber manusia yang berkaitan dengan pembentukan bangsa, tetapi dalam masa yang sama ia juga dipersalahkan sebagai penyakit sosial yang berlaku di kalangan remaja.

Keywords: Broadcasting policies, telecommunication industry, youth development, human capital, social ills

Introduction

It has been estimated by the United Nations that almost half of the world population today is young. So what does being "young"

mean? Many would debate that being young need not and should not necessarily be associated with age, lifestyle, or the state of one's mind. The United Nations defined youth as persons between the ages of 15 to 25 years. There are many countries especially in the developing world that stretches the age limit of young people to be beyond the internationally recognized age limit of 25 years old. Malaysia, for example in the National Youth Policy defines youth as those persons between the ages of 15 to 40 years. Whereas in China, one is considered a youth till he or she reaches the age of 45 years. Whatever the accepted definition of youth may be in any country, one thing that is very clear is that the young generation is always considered as a national asset. Griffin (1993) points out that youth are 'treated as a key indicator of the state of the nation itself'.

According to the United Nation World Youth Report (2003), young people are growing up in a world of globalisation and inequality, taking part in a development process that is simultaneously bringing people closer together and widening the divisions between them. Globalisation involves the dissemination of new technologies and has tremendous impact on the economy, polity, society, culture and everyday life. It is in the realm of culture that globalization is most visible.

Global media, information systems and a world capitalist consumer culture circulate products, images, and ideas throughout the world. Time-space compression produced by new media and communications technologies are overcoming previous boundaries of space and time, creating a global cultural village and dramatic penetration of global forces into every realm of life. Global culture involves promoting life-styles, consumption, products and identities. Local culture provides forms of local identities, practices, and modes of everyday life that could provide a bulwark against the onslaught of ideas, identities, and forms of life extraneous to the specific local region in question.

In spite of the potentials and possibilities that arrives with globalization particularly global media, there are numerous consequences both positive and negative for the local youth cultures. With the rise of global consumerism as the result of the increase in media streams, a new hybrid culture might be formed whose meanings might vary within local and national circumstances. There is also the likelihood that groups of young people who are unable to fulfill their heightened expectations of material well-being become marginalized. Thus, resulting in alienation and frustrations that may possibly lead to crime and social discord.

This paper will discuss the prevailing consequences of globalization on local communities and the implications of the resulting transformation in both policies and the communication landscape on youth development in Malaysia.

Globalisation and the Malaysian communication industry

In respond to the tendencies of globalization that has shaped and reshaped the national character of various countries including Malaysia. The government has enacted several liberalization policies that paved the way for the commercialization of television stations and the deregulation and privatization of several telecommunication companies. As it is, the Malaysian communication and multimedia landscape has changed drastically over the last five years. From mass access information through broadcasting services, the population now has wider options and alternatives to get access to their information needs.

As compared to the early 1980s when one had only the government run public TV stations as their source of news and current affairs information, now the public have wider choices from the commercial and satellite stations which carry news and public affairs discussions over CNN, BBC World, Al-Jazerra, etc. And additional alternative is the availability of on-line newspapers such as Malaysiakini.com and Harakah on-line which provides independent and critical news and commentary on current issues. When two new commercial television stations TV8 and Channel 9 announced their operations at the beginning of 2004, there was a contention that there are too many TV stations for a small country like Malaysia with a population of only 25 million. The Regulator on the other hand might view the setting up of new media stations as an effort to democratize the industry so that the population could have better choices and more alternatives for their source of information. Malaysia had started to liberalize the media industry in the mid 1980s predominantly with the setting up a first commercial TV station TV3 in 1984. As of July 2005, there are 5 free-to-air TV stations (2 public stations TV1 and TV2, and three commercial stations TV3, NTV7, TV8 and Channel 9). In addition, the satellite TV station ASTRO is providing a direct-to user service, which carries 55 channels ranging from sports channels (such as ESPN and Star Sports), educational channels (such as Animal Planet, Discovery), movie channels (such as HBO, Cinamax, Star Movies), to entertainment channels (such as MTV). ASTRO recently announced that it would add another 50 channels. Another pay TV service, MiTV is about to begin operation. MiTV, which will use the Internet connection, will provide additional 50 channels which can be access through PCs or laptops. However, it is predicted that the 100 channels from pay TV will only serve the information elite, and thus not facilitating equitable access to information and entertainment for all.

The greater dominance of the commercial and satellite stations will undoubtedly marginalize the role of public broadcasting. As it

is the public broadcasting's share of the audience has been reduced to only 25 percent. The stations' audience base is largely rural and older age group. On the other hand, the commercial stations, which attract younger and urban audiences, provide competitive programming so as to stay ahead of competition. Although the industry as a whole has provided a substantial increase in the number of hours of airtime, the issue most often asked is whether it is providing a more diversified programming and alternative sources of information?

Programming in local TV stations is a mixed of programming coming from various countries and languages. Besides the heavy dependence on western imported programs, the stations are showing programs from Bollywood, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and lately telenovelas from Latin America. Malaysians are also hooked onto the reality TV craze that has swept audiences worldwide. Programs like *American Idol, Pop Idol, Who wants to be A Millionaire, Joe Millionaire, Survivor,* and *The Amazing Race* attracts the Malaysian audience in the comfort of their homes.

Similarly, the ensuing trends and challenges of globalization that brought about the convergence of communication technologies, the government introduced the Communication and Multimedia Act in 1998. The Act, which is one of the Malaysian cyber laws, is to regulate the industry and promote the development of the industry. Several initiatives were promoted to encourage ownership of computers access to the Internet. It is predicted that the Internet population growth will reach the 20 million mark in the year 2007. To initiate a new direction for growth, the Communication and Multimedia Act noted that there is to be no censorship on the Internet. Individuals are free to access and post any information on the websites. Nevertheless, if any information incites feelings of racial hatred, invoking sensitive issues that could threaten public order, the government has the provision to charge those responsible under the existing laws.

While access to the Internet has increased drastically to 8.6 million (population of 25 million), it does not correspond with the increase of the local websites especially those using the national language. Although there is no specific number as to the number of local websites, the language issue is important. There is a tendency that those who are less proficient with English will have limited access to information on the websites. As of now, Internet subscribers are more skewed towards the young, urban, educated and working professionals. The report further stated that,"… further accentuating the existing disparities such as low internet uptake among Malays, low affinity of poorer states for new technology, the young and educated folks showing greater interest than the older generation…".

To take advantage of computer technology, numerous computer education and literacy programs have been promoted through schools and community networks. Realizing the challenges of digital divide, efforts are being made to make people in rural areas more accessible to computer technology by providing public access computer facility. In a smart partnership, the Malaysian Commission for Communication and Multimedia works with local entrepreneurs to offer Internet services to the local communities. The entrepreneurs will be responsible for the up keeping of the facilities provided by MCMC and in return charged a nominal fee from the customers for using the facilities.

To ensure that the population enjoyed maximum benefits of the computer technology, the government has initiated and implemented several flagships such as e-government, e-banking, e-commerce, e-health, e-learning, smart school etc. so as to make the technology as part of their daily life. Now more and more people are able to perform their daily business on-line in the comfort of their homes, schools or offices. The government has taken steps to improve the related infrastructures to ensure easier and faster access to the Internet. To this effect, with only one initial service provider, Jaring which was government run, Malaysia now have several other entities that provides internet services such as Maxis, TmNet, Nationcom, TimeNet, and DiGi .

Media Penetration in the changing communication landscape: Survey analysis

The various initiatives undertaken by the public and private sectors have resulted in transformations in the communication landscape. Malaysians especially the younger generation practically lived in a much richer media environment today as compared to a decade ago. A survey was conducted during April – May 2004 among 2029 young media user between the ages of 15-25 years. The main objective of the study was to determine the pattern of media use among the young generation in Malaysia and their perception of several initiatives taken by the government to regulate the communication industry.

The findings indicate that there is high access to media among the younger generation. 100 percent of the respondents have access to free-to-air TV, 59 percent have access to satellite TV channels, and 91 percent admitted they have access to personal computers and internet. Although access to radio is expected to be high at 91 percent, access to web radio is still low at only 41 percent. One notable finding is the accelerated increase in access to satellite television and internet. A study by the Samsudin and Latiffah (2000),

showed that access to satellite television was only 25 percent. Internet access was only at 35 percent.

TABLE 1. Access to Media

Television	100 %
Satellite television	59 %
Radio	91 %
Web Radio	41 %
Computer and Internet	91 %
Mp3	86 %

To gauge their media use and choices, the respondents were asked about their sources of local and foreign news. Television is still predominantly their source of information compared to the internet both for local and foreign news. For local news, these young people frequently used television (75 percent), radio (46 percent.) and Internet (26 percent). The same pattern of media use and choices applies to the foreign news. Television remains as the main source (65 percent). In spite of its rich resources for foreign information, only 28 percent of the young respondents choose internet for the source of foreign news.

TABLE 2. Source of Foreign and Local News

	local news	foreign news
Television	75 %	65 %
Radio	46 %	38 %
Internet	26 %	28 %

The study also asked the respondents for their sources of entertainment. Entertainment is considered as one of the main interest of young people. In this case, television is still predominantly the main source for entertainment may it be foreign or local programmes. 76 percent frequently view local entertainment programmes on television. With regard to the internet, only 27 percent admitted they frequently use the internet. Although the pattern remains, there is a slight reduction in percentage for those who frequently used television for their source of foreign entertainment. Only 29 percent of the respondents used internet to surf the websites for foreign entertainment materials.

TABLE 3: Sources for Local and Foreign Entertainment

	Local Entertainment	Foreign Entertainment
Television	76 %	68 %
Radio	70 %	67 %
Internet	27 %	29 %

The Internet is a multipurpose medium, more or less catering for the various needs of the surfers. While TV audience do not have many choices in the selection of programs depending on what is being offered, the web surfers could customise their needs accordingly. On this basis, higher percentage of the young generation frequently surf the entertainment websites (54 percent) compared to those who frequently surf the educational website (22 percent) or the science and technology websites (22 percent). Such patterns of usage do not argue well for promoting the use of internet among the young generation who would form the catalyst for the future creation of a knowledge society.

TABLE 4. Most Frequently Surfed Website

Website	Frequently surfed
Entertainment	54 %
Sports	27 %
Science and Technology	22 %
Education	22 %
Tourism and Recreation	18 %
Employment	10 %
Religion	8 %
Economy	7 %
Culture	5 %

Media censorship has always been a sensitive issue. While in most cases we would like to be free of government interference, yet in many instances we blamed the government for not taking adequate measures to safeguard our values and morality. This study further asked the respondents as to who should be responsible for safeguarding societal values and morality. It appears that respondents feel that government, community, parents and the individual themselves should be equally responsible. Nevertheless in relative terms, the younger generation feels it is important that they should be responsible for their own values and morality. As

for the government role, 80 percent feel it is important for the government to assume the guardianship.

TABLE 5. Who is More Important to Safeguard Values and Morality

	Very Important
Oneself	90 %
Society	89 %
Parents	87 %
Government	80 %

When asked whether they would prefer censorship for foreign programs/content on TV and the Internet, 43% strongly agree to censorship while only 11% are strongly against it. The other 46% agree with the censorship. In spite of their age and expectation of a more liberal outlook, it is surprising that a high percentage would agree to censorship for foreign programs. In relation to censorship of foreign programs, majority of the respondents are not in agreement to restrict the number of foreign programs on TV. With regard to the government policy on 80 percent local content on TV, only 22% strongly in agreement with the policy. Another 62% slightly agree and the other 16% strongly oppose to the policy.

Moving on to the Internet, 65% agree and strongly agree with the government initiative not to censor materials on the Internet. This is in contrast with TV programs where a high percentage prefers some kind of censorship being imposed on foreign programs. With regard to the language used in surfing the Internet, 55% used English and another 32% used Malay language. Those who are not proficient in English will be at a disadvantage. They will be limited in the choices and alternatives since they are bound by their limited proficiency in the international language.

The findings indicate that although the young generation accepts the impending trends of globalization and the inflow of foreign programs on local TV stations, there are a good many number of them who are of the opinion that there should be some kind of censorship and control of/onto the foreign programs. This could be seen as their democratic rights to preserve their tradition, values and customs from infringement of foreign values.

National agenda vs media consumerism

The question at hand is whether globalization and the development of the local communication industry are in tandem with the

objectives of youth development in Malaysia? As mentioned earlier, half of the Malaysian population is young and they are entrusted with the future of the nation. The objective of the nation is to be a developed country by the year 2020 which is only 15 years away. The forthcoming Ninth Malaysian Development Plan is set to focus on the development of human capital. In this regard it is natural to invest and harness the potential of the young population into a rich and resourceful human capital.

The human capital that is needed should not only be well informed and knowledgeable, but must also be competitive in meeting the challenges of globalization. Our honourable Prime Minister has repeatedly stressed that there is a need to develop towering personalities among Malaysians. Recently he was quoted as suggesting that Malaysians must be innovative, carries the Malaysian brand of positive attitudes and values, and provide leadership that are caring and trustworthy.

Given such a national agenda, does the expansion of the communication industry and the high penetration of media among the young population facilitate the growth of necessary human capital required by the nation? The paradox is that although the changing communication landscape allows for the growth of necessary human capital pertinent to nation building, it is also being blamed for most of the social ills among the young population. There is a higher incident of drug abuse, cases of HIV, sexual permissiveness and acts of violence among the young which have reached an alarming proportion.

In view of the on-going social maladies among the young, the national agenda prioritises youth development programs such as Rakan Muda, leadership programmes and economic activities to inculcate good morals and behavior, values and norms among our youth. Meanwhile, these government sponsored programs face stiff competition from the media industry. Popular media programmes such as *Akademi Fantasia* could easily attract 40,000 youths to attend their concerts without having to coerce these young people with goodies. But sadly, that is not the case for many youth development programmes which experienced lukewarm response. The media with its imported, and adapted program content is exerting a stronger influence among the young compared to the other traditional agents of socialization in moulding the young into a more resourceful human capital.

The building up of human capital among the young necessitates the promotion of role models particularly from local youth. As it is, entertainment personalities supersede other successful young personalities in various other fields such as education, business, politics or social work as role models. The popular media icon such as a popular singer or winner of a reality television show becomes

an instant "national icon". In a sense there is a blurring among the general populace as to what a national icon is as compared to the popular media icon. Such an extensive and orchestrated promotion of the media icon makes success a seemingly easy and short process and this may indirectly send the wrong signal to the younger generation. Though it may be an effective and successful commercial undertaking without any devious anti-national agenda other than purely capital gains for the organisation, the current general concern is that this commercial mechanism may inadvertently mislead the young as to what is truly in store for them in the "real world" and this may hamper their potential role of in leading the nation to the desired destination.

In line with that, the supportive policies that have allowed for the growth and development of the commercial media stations making them the popular and preferred stations have subsequently, undermined the role of public broadcasting. In the case of Malaysia, public broadcasting attracts middle ages and more rural audiences. The young and urban are geared more towards commercial stations with more entertainment and diversified programming. Ironically, this development that was initially intended to provide for more quality programs and healthy competition among all stations including public have inadvertently "killed" public broadcasting. This in a way has hindered the ability of the government to have more positive impact of human capital development especially among the young. Besides the 'intra' competing elements, there is another dichotomy where the working class and lower middle class are mostly hooked to the local media and local programming while the middle and upper class prefer the international programming through subscription channels.

In view of the current situation, so what is our national response towards this development in the media industry? Firstly, to safeguard the young population deemed as national asset, the government is currently formulating the Malaysia Youth Act. The main purpose of the act is to enhance the development of young population by identifying their rights and at the same time provide sufficient measures to protect them from extraneous negative influences. For instance, if media programmes are seen as being exploitative towards young people, citizens or the government have the right to protest and protect them against possible negative influence by suggesting the programmes be taken off the air either through persuasion or legal means.

Secondly, in 2004 the National Youth Consultative Council had passed the 11 points action plan for Malaysian youth development. The action plan is a parallel to the United Nation's World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and beyond adopted in 1995. One of the action plans is the role of media and ICT

in youth development. It was pointed out that the media has not been actively promoting positive youth development. Instead consciously or unconsciously the media to a large extend have undermined young people's values, attitudes and priorities in life. Thirdly, efforts are underway to initiate programs aimed at awareness, sensitizing and developing young people's skills to meet the challenges of media consumerism that may hamper their personal potentials as human capital and is contradictory to the goals of national agenda The action plan call for a more concerted effort to systematically develop programmes that could help promote positive youth development. Such an effort could really help to develop the required human capital needed by the country in pursuit of its national agenda.

Conclusion

It is without a doubt that globalisation and the transformations in the communication industry have a role in supporting the pursuits of the national agenda. At the same time one must not overlook the negative impact that globalization has on the younger generation. While commercialization of the communication industry is applauded for the potentials that it brings to the population at large, there is a need to take stock on the impacts of such commercialization. Thus, youth culture and media consumerism brought about by media globalization is something that we should be wary of. The recent public attention and controversy over a reality show and its influence on values and attitudes of young people is not without basis and should not be dismiss lightly.

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