BIG DREAMS, BITTER REALITIES : WHY PUBLIC CAMPAIGNS FAIL IN MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that public relations in the post-modern era needs to be examined with new critical lenses. As the technological tools of the practice become increasingly sophisticated and society far more complex and unpredictable, new methods of reality construction should emerge. The paper attempts to sketch the political, social and media landscape in Malaysia as a background to understanding why conventional methods of communication and public relations practice and research have become obsolete and irrelevant under present pressure-cooker circumstances and ideological clashes. In pointing out that the signs of the media generate reality and become reality as argued by Jean Baudrillard, the paper argues that public relations texts in Malaysia tend to reflect a lack of skill and sophistication and, therefore, fail to fully exploit the power of signs and symbols in constructing reality. Looking at Malaysian public service announcements as a case, it is contended that although these announcements in the form of public campaigns, attempt to represent ideology of the state, they fail most times, to do so effectively. It is argued that the new and changing climate of politics in the country appears a major contributory factor to the poor working of ideology in public campaigns.

INTRODUCTION

Government and business are known to engage in persuasive discourse, most times to draw attention and arouse interest toward ideas, policies, services and products and to activate favourable behavioural response. The advent of mass media over the last hundred years and the arrival of sophisticated forms of communication technology in recent decades, in most parts of the world, has led to an unprecedented increase in forms of persuasive communication. Interestingly, in countries such as Malaysia, where stringent media laws and regulation[1] deny and limit space for debates, new technology appears to have augured well for those whose voices were once never heard and whose faces never seen, except probably in distorted and disjointed form, thus, adding a new and challenging dimension to what used to be one-sided persuasion by government and business alike.

The process of propaganda, or put politely, political persuasion by ruling regimes to gain voter support and loyalty appears challenged by oppositional camps through on-line and web-site addresses. The excitement over information technology in Malaysia led quickly to a process of deregulation and liberalisation[2] and the creation of technological concentration in what is known as Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) modeled and fashioned after the Silicon Valley of the US and akin to Singapore One. It has been reported that in 1999 Malaysia spent RM5 billion (USD1.9 billion) on information technology (IT) alone (*The Sun*, March 17, 1999).

In a rapidly industrialising and fast-changing nation like Malaysia, its visionary Prime Minister, has given the nation a face-lift in all aspects, particularly in the realm of information technology for multi-racial and multi-religious Malaysians. Malaysia's vision to bring citizens of diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds closer together in the creation of a Malaysian race (*Bangsa Malaysia*), appeared a possible dream until the advent of new media technology—welcomed and embraced with the allocation of billions of *ringgit*. Nation-wide campaigns to encourage and foster an IT culture were vigorously pursued by the government. The Information Communication agenda in Malaysia appears focused on infrastructure development more than people and cultural development until its effects on the minds of the young and on the cultural fabric of society seems to have become a worry and a pain. This has been expressed by the
Malaysian Prime Minister himself in making reference to widespread deviance among youths in the country—from HIV to IV drug use, satanic and black metal music worship and religious to political deviance.

In fact, just recently, it was reported that five Islamic school teachers were arrested under the Internal Security Act for alleged involvement in the *Kumpulan Mujahidin Malaysia* (KMM) or Malaysian Militant Group, most of whom happened to be members and supporters of opposition *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (PAS), and altogether so far 19 arrested, according to the same report (*New Straits Times*, Dec. 8, 2001:12). The Malaysian government is believed to give top priority to the control and eradication of all forms of Islamic extremism and militancy, which has been in force, way before the September 11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre in New York and Pentagon in Washington. Unfortunately, however, Malaysia's pro-active stance, on this issue, at earlier points in time, appears to have been (mis)perceived by international bodies and the US itself as high-handedness and an infringement on human rights.

Since independence from British rule in 1957, the Malaysian government has been known to have enjoyed a long honeymoon with the media, and with the exception of the 1969 ethnic riots, the country has sailed smoothly through rough multi-ethnic paths until the arrival of the Internet and along with it the sacking, trial and sentencing of Malaysia's former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, between September 1998 and April 1999. Internet craze among young Malaysians and the political saga toward the end of the last century in Malaysia appears to have opened doors in the 21st century for a new climate of public opinion and a new approach to public relations in an increasingly threatening and unpredictable environment. Or is the 21st century only just beginning to usher the birth of public relations in Malaysia?

WHERE IS PUBLIC RELATIONS ?

Public relations in Malaysia can best be explained by focusing on how transformation of media as well as politics and citizen activism has had a profound effect on the practice. It must be pointed out at the outset, that even in business and non-government agencies, the nature of public relations practice, seem shaped largely by government relations and personal influence (see Taylor & Kent, 1999). Government continues to remain an important public for business and NGOs, in relationship and reputation management. This means to understand public relations in Malaysia, one need to examine the practice in government and note the influence of government on the practice as a whole in the country.

For instance, business and NGOs need to design publicity and press agentry programmes with politicians in mind in order to gain media coverage. Most programmes, no matter how creative, in and of themselves, tend to be frilled with ceremonial launches by top civil servants and politicians for newsworthiness. This, to a great extent, ensures the presence of journalists, and subsequent favourable coverage. Likewise, social responsibility programmes and philanthropic contributions usually take into account government policies and favour the agenda set by government and mainstream media. *Bumiputeras*, thus, tend to benefit from private sector contributions, while the real issues of poverty among marginalised *Bumiputera* and non-*Bumiputera* communities are neglected.

Social and health problems such as HIV/AIDS, child abuse and illicit drugs, among others, seem not to be prioritised by the business sector in their social responsibility programmes simply because government and mainstream media seem not to identify them as problems. Nonetheless, corporate globalisation, new mediascape and diverse forms of religious activism and cultural practices, in the country and around the world, may in due course change the face of the practice of public relations in Malaysia.

Fundamentally, in this paper I argue that prior to the Internet, there was propaganda, development communication, promotion and publicity as well as persuasion. After the Internet, there seems to be public relations. In other words public relations may have just arrived in Malaysia, although having been around in different guises since British rule and after. For a long time, Malaysians have been tamed to behave and speak in one voice and preferably one language. The Internet, uncontrolled cyberspace and along with it digital direct broadcast satellite service appear to have provided plural and diverse forms of news and entertainment outlets. Now, Malaysia appears to have a wild mediascape of many shapes, voices and languages. Malaysians have become both localised and globalised—a process called glocalised (Friedman, 1990 Robertson, 1995). Policy makers and leaders have found this process difficult to reckon with. People are speaking back, loudly and rudely too.

Conventional forms of public relations practice seem no longer relevant. For example, the development model of practice popular in the 1970s and 1980s, following the New Economic Policy [3]after the ethic riots of 1969, that placed a significant emphasis on the role of opinion leaders[4] in the dissemination of information and persuasion is today irrelevant and impossible, although, it must be admitted, it was once a success story told by mainstream academics and public administrators under a more submissive political climate.

Today, opinion leaders, representing the aspirations of the ruling *Barisan Nasional* (National Front), are suspect and viewed largely as mere followers of the ruling regime. Furthermore, the development model underestimated the political consciousness of rural folks and assumed easy penetration into simple minds. In the case of Peninsula Malaysia, rural and working class folks seem immersed in coffee shop and taxi-ride political debates while urban yuppies remain engaged in cyber cafes and various forms of social and political deviance. Even folks in the most remote parts of East and West Malaysia have mobile phones and satellite TV. Faith in the mainstream media seems drastically diminished, so why shouldn't faith in the opinion leader? ASTRO has become the new companion—global and local; and Internet the new religion—preaching and dividing. Malaysia seems virtually converted by new media.

The resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism and *dakwahism (*missionary movement*)*, in Malaysia since the 1980s and the prevalence of militant and deviant forms of practice in recent years, has made conventional forms of public relations practice futile and irrelevant. In fact, old methods of practice, especially by government, through the machinery of the Information Ministry, has led to public relations being scorned and ridiculed.

To be a government spokesperson and middle person seems risky business in the new Malaysian political environment of today. In fact, loyalty to the ruling *Barisan Nasional* among civil servants and information officers themselves, since the jailing of Anwar Ibrahim, has become suspect making the process of building and maintaining good relations with various publics a burden some task. Usually, the dilemma faced by public relations practitioners, in developing countries such as Malaysia, is that of being trapped between organisational interest and public interest, in which case, practitioners tend to choose the former due to a lack of understanding from CEOs on how public interest could benefit the organisation, if not in the short run, in the long run. Now, it all seem reversed and rather peculiar because public interest seem prioritised at the expense of government, instead of, for the benefit of government.

Grunig and Hunt (1984) theorised the situational nature of publics and argued that publics are neither static nor stable. Publics change and along with it policies and strategies must change. For example, since independence from British rule, the Ministry of Information was focused on gaining the support of *non-bumiputeras* or non-natives such as Chinese and Indians regarded then as migrants and seen as politically problematic.

At century's end, however, with the resurgence of Islam and d*akwahism* as well as the greater influence of oppositional parties such as *Parti Islam SeMalaysia* (PAS) and the recently formed *Keadilan* (led by jailed Anwar Ibrahim's wife), *bumiputera* communities, in particular, Malay Muslims, have become politically divided—there are the BN Malays, the PAS Malays and the Keadilan Malays. Furthermore, the influx of foreign labour, especially from Indonesia, to help in the process of industrialisation, has created a new breed of *bumiputeras*, not to mention many more *bumiputera* communities in the states of Sabah and Sarawak, and Chinese, Indians and other non-*Bumiputera* communities marginalised in the process of polarisation. In other words, the fabric of Malaysian society today is much more delicate and complex than it once appeared to be. This has great implications on the practice of public relations. Has the Ministry of Information reformed its policies and strategies and retrained its practitioners to manage these changes effectively?

REALITY CONSTRUCTION

A large part of the work in public relations entails management of relationships and the building of reputation which inevitably involves the construction, re-construction or deconstruction of reality. What is reality in public relations? How do media practitioners and communicators reconcile to the fact that signs and symbols carry differing meanings and make different sense in different contexts to different individuals, be they consumers, employees, activists or government. No matter how much pain seems taken in identifying publics, categorising and labeling them for appropriate channel selection and message dissemination, there prevails the inability to tell how these appropriated publics read and make sense of appropriated messages.

Conventional forms of research, market and opinion polls help to support existing policies and continue to sustain those who are in power (Khattab, 2001). This is especially so in developing countries, where there is little certainty that respondents of field research are in anyway aware of how their responses can be a contribution to society and most times fail to respond honestly. Even in the developed world, administrative research appears to have failed to provide answers to many questions, leading to ideological clashes. In many cases, such data tend to reinforce irregularities, sustain hegemonic power and serve in the best interest of ruling regimes.

Textbooks (see for example Cutlip et al. 2000; Newsom et al. 1996) continue to provide simple administrative prescriptions to the practice of public relations, making it seem like a respectable and established profession. Teaching public relations over the years has made me realise that there cannot be a single model or approach to the study and practice of the field. For such a long time, and even today in many sectors, practitioners speak of image but never of reality. This appears to have destroyed the image of public relations itself. No matter how realistically words and symbols tend to be presented, they tend to make different sense and meaning to different individuals in an increasingly complex environment. Does representation equal reality? Whose reality? Organisation's or publics'? Which public? Is reality that which is constructed by the powerful and resourceful such as the *Barisan Nasional* in the case of Malaysia, and business that work hand-in-hand with government and public relations that make all things happen? Or is reality that which is constructed by CNN? As argued by Hall et al. (1978:59),

> ...media are frequently not the primary definers of news at all, but their structured relationship to power has the effect of making them play a crucial but secondary role in reproducing the definitions of those who have privileged access, as of right to the media as accredited sources.

Is standardisation of reality representation possible in public relations? In fact, even in the arena of corporate culture, it is becoming increasingly doubtful whether organisations can continue to impose upon employees, not to mention their families and community, its rites and rituals and its organisational religion. In the realm of multinational companies and globalised business, caution may be needed in attempting to project a single set of values in the promotion of products and services.

In the case of Malaysia, under prevailing circumstances, on the one hand, those involved in constructing reality are themselves confused and divided, on the other, those expected

to attend to these constructions have become unpredictably active in reading texts in various contexts. Although public relations boasts of attending to groups of people in special ways unlike advertising, yet groups of people have become difficult to identity and tend to appear and disappear ever so easily and quickly. Thus, by the time a message, story or persuasive text is out, it may no longer be "hot" or relevant. This has a lot to do with new and alternative forms of communication as well as rising skepticism toward those who hold power and manage resources.

Marginalisation and discrimination in the representation of reality, tends to kill the credibility of the message, messenger and the source, resulting in the seeking of "truth" from other more reliable mediums and sources. In the construction of reality, public relations seem focused on the positive side of the coin while journalists, the negative side. Where is the balance? And whose version is closer to reality? When will it be possible for public relations to present both sides of the coin, operate in the true spirit of public interest and get promoted for all that?

PUBLIC CAMPAIGNS IN MALAYSIA

In spite of the Internet, government agencies in Malaysia continue to depend on television to reach out to target audiences in the promotion of ideas. The idiot box in essence is believed to be able to cater very well to the needs of the lowest common denominator. Campaigns are thought of as an effective strategy in the management of social problems that enable education to be imparted and support and participation gained from target publics through persuasive means. Public campaigns are usually well-intended for the welfare and well being of society.

In Malaysia most government agencies such as the Ministry of Health and Ministry of Housing and Local Government engage public television stations such as TV1 and TV2 in their campaign planning and implementation programmes. Recent campaigns such as *respect for public property, recycle, road safety* and *healthy lifestyle* have been nothing but unrealistic. These campaigns blatantly marginalise representation of many ethnic communities in Malaysia. Actors are largely and singly Malay-Muslims, themes are mere reinforcement of values not common to all Malaysians. Whenever ethnic minorities are represented, it is usually in bad light and in the form of cheap humour. For example, in the *respect for public property campaign*, an ethnic Indian-looking male is portrayed as destroying public property and in the diabetic campaign, an ethnic Indian male is portrayed as sick in a humorous sense and needing of medical advise from a Malay doctor. In a campaign on healthy lifestyle, a Malay-Muslim family is portrayed as living a perfect lifestyle—material wealth, healthy food, spirituality, exercise, respect for old folks and traditional family values reinforced in the process.

The *recycle campaign* that represented an affluent, urban Malay-Muslim boy and girl explaining the function of different coloured bins for the effective disposal of different forms of garbage, failed drastically in bringing about any significant behavioural change. Can children be considered effective communicators of messages in public campaigns in Malaysia? Who listens to children in Malaysia? And where are all the other children?

In the television world of public campaigns, there seems to prevail only one ethnic group, one set of values and one clear message for one community. Where have all the other

multi-ethnic Malaysians gone? Is their welfare and well-being irrelevant? Who designs these messages and with what intend? Those who design these messages seem close minded. While, on the one hand, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad speaks of vision 2020 and a *Bangsa Malaysia*, on the other, the government agency implementers appear to speak a different language and lack vision and foresight. Their campaigns, for sure, will not help create *Banga Malaysia* as envisioned by the leader of the nation.

In fact, a closer look at health campaigns will reflect a tendency on the part of Ministry of Health authorities to focus on diseases of the rich and the supposedly normal (see Khattab, 2001). Thus, health campaigns present coronary heart, diabetic, healthy eating, healthy family, exercise and physical fitness as well as environmental health as important themes deserving of public attention and recognition. Where is the reality? Where is HIV/AIDS, illicit drug abuse, child abuse, rape, incest and alcoholism?

Indeed, AIDS campaigns are usually activated each year in conjunction with World AIDS Day. Interfering with doctor-patient relationship and compelling HIV tests has caused quite a stir in Malaysia in the treatment and prevention of HIV/AIDS among Malay-Muslims. AIDS campaigns and programmes such as *Prostar* (Living Without AIDS—a programme targeted at school-going youths, prescribing peer role modeling and counselling) have drawn clear lines between the normal and abnormal in Malaysia. While AIDS campaigns carry a heavy moralistic discourse in the infrequently aired public campaigns, alcoholism has never been on the agenda of public campaigns nor even linked to road accidents in frequent road safety campaigns to curb rising incidence of road accidents and deaths each year. Simply put, in the non-representation of real and actual social and health issues, and real and actual people, campaigns appear to be morally, politically and socially punitive. Above all, public campaigns fail, because they appear to have, thus far, stereotyped and misrepresented reality. Hall (1997) argues that representation and signifying practices of media attempt to make meaning through language and symbolic forms and the work of representation is itself ideological. It is part of the maintenance of social and symbolic order, setting up a frontier between normal and deviant, us and them. To restore purity of culture, whatever is negative must be symbolically excluded (Hall, 1997).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Clearly, government agencies lack the skill and sophistication in designing public campaigns. There appears the old colonial attitude of top-down communication with little regard for the realities of time. While national policies and plans reflect positive and dynamic pursuit for ethnic integration, equality and justice in the achievement of developed nation status by 2020, implementers and practitioners in various agencies, seem unable to create signs and symbols to reflect such national aspirations, let alone help achieve them. Is the climate of political dissent, especially among Malay-Muslims who make up the bulk of the civil service, an obstacle to the achievement of vision 2020? Is hegemony possible in multi-ethnic, multi-religious Malaysia? Why have campaigns effectively marginalised groups of people and subtly attempted to convey an ideology that contradicts national policies and dreams? As a nation in transition and in a hurry, Malaysia seems very much in search of an identity. Subjectivities prevail but communicators seem to simply objectify them. They seem to have failed to creatively

capture and exploit the rich colour of diversity prevalent in Malaysia. Probably, communicators are themselves puzzled, without clearly drawn objectives for *Bangsa Malaysia.* If it is true that perceptions become reality and signs of the media generate reality and become reality, then in due time Malaysia will achieve *Bangsa-bangsa Malaysia* instead of *Bangsa Malaysia* (many Malaysian races instead of one Malaysian race). Thus, in ending I ask, where in Malaysia, is public relations?

FOOTNOTES

[1] Grip on media strengthened through Printing Presses and Publication Act of 1984, Broadcast Act of 1988, Internal Security Act of 1960, the Sedition Act of 1948, Official Secrets Act of 1986 and Defamation Act of 1948 as well as direct political party ownership of mass media.

[2] Privatisation policy launched by the Malaysian government in the early 1980s, called and allowed for increased private sector role in the economic development of the country and fundamentally transformed public service monopoly of broadcasting with private television networks such as TV3, NTV7 and also ASTRO (All Asia Satellite Television and Radio company)—Malaysia's first digital direct broadcast satellite service. Deregulation and liberalisation however has not reduced nor prevented government intervention and control.

[3] This national development policy was designed in 1970 to help restructure society and to alleviate the identification of ethnicity with occupation. *Bumiputeras* or native communities, who were then marginalised, were provided opportunities and special privileges in education, employment and business among others. Although the policy is still in force, it is no longer a popular catch phrase like *wawasan 2020* (vision 2020). The Prime Minster of Malaysia is known to constantly criticise the *Bumiputera* communities, particularly Malay Muslims, for not being able to competitively reap the benefits of the New Economic Policy, be it in business or education, and for being ungrateful to the ruling *Barisan Nasional* government.

[4] Since the Second World War, Paul F. Lazarsfeld's two-step flow theory remained an influential research paradigm in the field of communication and picked up momentum in schools of communication in Malaysia from the 1970s onwards and continues to be preached as gospel truth.

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