# Communications, Curricula and Conformity: Of National Needs and Market Forces

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*Artikel ini meneliti secara kritis beberapa perkembangan baru dalam pendidikan komunikasi di peringkat universiti. Perkembangan ini diletakkan di dalam konteks yang lebih luas, terutamanya konteks pemikiran ortodoks tentang peranan media komunikasi dan konteks sistem pendidikan dikomersialisasikan. Hujah yang disediakan ialah bahawa kurikulum pendidikan komunikasi tempatan dipandukan oleh ideologi fungsionalisme dan ideologi pasaran yang sesungguhnya akan menghasilkan graduan yang konformis dan, pada analisis terakhir, yang tidak akan mempersoalkan kesahihan sistem sosial yang sedia ada.*

*Berasaskan kritikan ini, artikel ini seterusnya mencadangkan satu sistem pendidikan komunikasi yang menggalakkan perbahasan dan persoalan, yang seterusnya diandaikan akan menghasilkan graduan yang berfikir secara kritis, yang sedar tentang sistem dan hirarki sosial yang lebih luas dan yang akan bertindak sewajarnya untuk memperbaiki sistem tersebut.*

> *In a world in which images are fast becoming of greater significance than policies, in which slogans often count for more than rational argument, and in which we will all make some of our most important democratic decisions on the basis of media evidence, media education is both essential to the exercising of our democratic rights and a necessary safeguard against the worst excesses of media manipulation for political purposes.*

(Len Masterman, 1985:13)

## Introduction

Having survived its painful birthpangs in the 1970s and the teething problems of the 1980s, communications or media education at tertiary level in Malaysia it would seem has now attained maturity in the 1990s. In this paper, we wish to argue to the contrary, suggesting instead that, far from having reached adulthood, media education in Malaysia is currently going through the confusing and uncertain stage of adolescence. And this uncertainty has been made more perplexing with the emergence of new forces from without, hellbent on moulding this confused adolescent into an entity not necessarily consonant with its potential or with what it genuinely has to offer.

What is indeed evident is that, on the one hand, "communications education" - also sometimes vaguely called "communication studies", "media studies", or "media education" - has developed quantitatively and expanded at a tremendous rate in Malaysia.    As a consequence, over the past decade, numerous Malaysian media educators have painted a decidedly rosy picture of the media education scene in Malaysia (see, for example, Mohd. Hamdan Adnan and Sankaran Ramanathan [1987] and Lowe [1982]).

On the other hand, however, it is equally clear that while there is little doubt that, materially and physically, media education is fast developing in Malaysia, its philosophical and theoretical foundations remain rather shaky.    This has caused it to flow uneasily with the tide, increasingly conforming to the dictates of external factors and actors, without so much as a squeal of protest being uttered.

This situation, it is suggested here, has come about because of three main factors.  Firstly, this situation is the result of  the direction taken by media education in Malaysia and which has thus far been charted by wider policies regarding education as a whole, the nature and process of Malaysian development and the perceived role of the media in this process.  Secondly, and in relation to the first, the situation is also due to the increasing emphasis on the supposed benefits of the market.  Thirdly, there is a continuing tendency among the majority of communications educators in Malaysian  institutes  of  higher  learning  to uncritically take on board numerous concepts and models of communications and society dreamt up, refined, and then exported wholesale in the late  1950s and  1960s from the academic halls of Stanford University, among other places, to the slums and villages of the Third World.

## Official Discourses And Theoretical Orthodoxies

We begin our analysis with the assumption that any viable consideration of the present and future roles of media education in Malaysia would need to take cognizance of wider social agendas and policies, primarily those regarding the concept of development and social change.  It has been consistently proposed in this regard that for change to come about in Malaysian society, for poverty to be eradicated and development to take place, individual attitudes would need to change.  Eleven  years ago, for example, the Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad, was reported to have asserted:

> *There must be a change of attitude among the less well-to-do if*
> *poverty eradication  is to be realised.... The poor must face up to*
> *the fact that their fate lies in their own hands.*

(*The New Straits Times*, 2/5/1984)

Three years later, he again called for a change in the people's attitude, arguing that "without such a change in attitude and philosophy the country would not progress further in trying to wipe out poverty". (*The New Sunday Times*, 13/9/1987).  Pointing to the success of the industrialised countries and urging Malaysians to use them as role models the Prime Minister, using rhetoric reminiscent of modernists such as McClelland (1961), reiterated the over-simplistic and historically naive view that these countries had prospered "due to the industriousness and willingness of their people to face challenges." (*The New Sunday Times, ibid*).

And the policy makers appear as equally convinced that the role to be played by the media in this process of changing attitudes is indeed central and crucial.  As far back as 1964, for example, when television was

first introduced into Northern Malaysia, the then Minister of Information, Senu Abdul Rahman, spoke of its so-called revolutionary potential. According to him,

> *television will be an important instrument of our social revolution.*
> *It will be a means of informing the people about the progress in*
> *the various sectors of our national life. It will also enable them to*
> *know of the progress outside Malaysia.*
>
> (*Malaysian Times*, 2 October 1964)

In the mid-1980s, this belief still held sway. At a seminar on communication and development in 1983, the then Director General of the Malaysian Department of Information asserted that,

> *Communication is important in providing the climate for*
> *development... In the Malaysian context, efforts are also made to*
> *change the society from that of traditional agrarian to a structured*
> *modern society which is industrialised. This process of change*
> *involves values, human interaction, life structure and the structure*
> *of understanding.*
>
> (Mchd. Kaus Haji Salleh, 1983:86)

It is, of course, easy for us to understand why any government in power, the Malaysian government being no exception, would wish to perpetuate and reinforce this "media-as-catalysts-for-social-change" line. Quite simply, it helps to preserve the status quo. As Lent (1982:51) has rightly suggested,

> *There are, no doubt, hidden agendas that the ruling elites hope for*
> *in setting media policy. In some cases, the leadership claims to*
> *keep out negative western influences; at other times it says it*
> *wants to develop the media for national integration purposes. But*
> *in most cases, it seems keeping out negative western values has*
> *more to do with keeping the national leadership stable than*
> *anything else.*

What is certainly clear is that this dominant perspective fails to locate, let alone analyse, the mass media within and as part of wider social, political, economic and even cultural contexts. Hence, it fails to even conceive of the possibility of the mass media being "cultural mechanisms for maintaining social order." (Elliott and Golding, 1974:249). What it does succeed in doing is to conveniently sidestep, among other things in the Malaysian context, the fact that broadcasting, for example, began as

> *part of the power structure built and transferred to the new*
> *government and designed to provide the same service that it*
> *provided for the colonial government, namely to safeguard and*
> *strengthen the authority of government [with a] built-in partiality*
> *towards people and parties in power.*
>
> (Karthigesu, 1988:767)

Sticking to the argument that the media are powerful change agents enables governments like that of Malaysia to keep a tight rein on them, more often than not for the supposed "good of the nation"

and in the "national interest", vague and undefined though these notions may be. It allows no less than the Malaysian Prime Minister to warn the Malaysian press that

> *So long as the press is conscious of itself being a potential threat*
> *to democracy and conscientiously limits the exercise of its rights,*
> *it should be allowed to function without government interference.*
> *But when the press obviously abuses its rights by unnecessarily*
> *agitating the people, then democratic governments have a right to*
> *control it.*

(Mahathir Mohamad, 1981:19)

As it is with the press, so is it more so with broadcasting, where State control and interests are even more evident.[1]  This scenario is especially true with RTM (*Radio Televisyen Malaysia*), the government broadcasting network, whose links with the Malaysian government have been clear and strong since it was set up in 1963.  And with two of its *raison d'etre* being to "*explain in depth and with the widest possible coverage the policies and programme of the government in order to ensure maximum understanding by the public*" and "*to stimulate public interest and opinion in order to achieve changes in line with the requirement of the government*", it is clear what the motivations of RTM are, what it perceives its primary role to be and its assumptions of its impact on audiences.

From the foregoing discussion of the ongoing official stand, it is evident that the theoretical orthodoxy[2] epitomized in two books, Daniel Lerner's *The Passing Of Traditional Society* (1958) and Wilbur Schramm's *Mass Media and National Development* (1964), has been instrumental in determining not only perceptions of the role of the mass media in a country like Malaysia, but also the purpose of media education.

It is relatively easy to recognise and understand the theoretical and political naiveté of the Schramm-Lerner view.  For instance, that it fails to consider the notion of power and the nature of power relations within and between societies; that it neglects the international dimension and international relations, or that, in the words of Elliott and Golding (1974:234) it "...systematically skirts around the existence of an international social system, initially of colonialism, subsequently of economic imperialism, to which these separate states are tied"; and even that it views development in an ahistorical manner, assuming developing countries to have emerged from static isolation and simply needing stimuli such as the mass media to bring them out of the Dark Ages and into the 20th century.

Despite its inherent weaknesses, however, it is clear that the Schramm-Lerner view of media role, or what Rogers (1976) has called the "Dominant Paradigm" is still dominant in Malaysia, as suggested earlier in this paper.

In the mid-1980s, with the increasing importance being attached to the private sector in the Malaysian economy due to the government's Privatisation policy, yet another influence on the development of the Malaysian media - commercialisation - came on to the scene in a relatively big way.

### Commercialisation And The Media

It is certainly evident that current trends in the Malaysian media indicate two clear developments. These developments may seem contradictory at first glance but, upon closer scrutiny, are not exactly at odds with each other, given the nature of politics and control in Malaysia. Firstly, there is little doubt that the government's Privatisation policy has resulted in greater commercialisation of the media, beginning in the mid-1980s, which, in turn, has resulted in more being offered. This has happened not by accident, but as part of the government's strategy. As Mahathir (1983:277) himself had announced in the early days of his administration,

> *"the government may be able to obtain substantial revenue from telecommunications, ports, radio and television, railways, etc....In view of this possibility, there is a need to transfer several public services and government owned business to the private sector."*

> *(The New Straits Times, 9.7.81)*

Secondly, this supposed liberalisation has not really resulted in a loosening of government control over the media, contrary to the initial beliefs of many. The reverse in fact has happened. Over the past decade, the main forms of control over the media - legal, political and economic - have certainly been tightened.[3]

Hence, what we appear to presently have with the media is a situation of, if you will pardon the oxymoron, "regulated deregulation". Within this type of environment, it is not surprising that although we appear to be getting more from the media, what we really are getting is more of the same. In this environment, invariably also where the ownership and control of the media are in the hands of a few who are closely aligned to the government and who also wish to profit from the situation, there has been increasing emphasis on the production and importation of "safe", often trivial, artefacts. From the endless quiz shows on television to the crossword competitions in the press, the emphasis continues to be on material that are non-contentious and easily marketable - those that will not question, examine or challenge the official discourse (see Zaharom, 1996). As Golding and Murdock (1991: 20) succinctly put it, when writing about commercial broadcasting,

> *The economics of commercial broadcasting revolves around the exchange of audiences for advertising revenue. The price that corporations pay for advertising spots on particular programmes is determined by the size and social composition of the audience it attracts. And in prime-time, the premium prices are commanded by shows that can attract and hold the greatest number of viewers and provide a symbolic environment in tune with consumption. These needs inevitably tilt programming towards familiar and well-tested formulae and formats and away from risk and innovation, and anchor it in common-sense rather than alternative viewpoints.*

It is our contention that this increasing commercialisation of the media and the attendant "new" imperatives which have emerged, coupled with an orthodox and narrow view of media role in national

development have, in turn, played a major role in shaping the type of media education largely available in local institutes of higher education.


## Media Education And Conformity

> *Education will tend to be harnessed and made to conform by means of specific mechanisms, not simply to the interests of particular groups and classes, but to the dominant tendencies of the whole system.*

> (Hall, 1977:25)

A study of media education in Malaysia conducted not so long ago (Zaharom and Kirton, 1989) argues that "US communications thinking - and a particular way of thinking at that - has dominated, and continues to dominate communications education in Malaysia". Our contention is that the influence is still very much in evidence.

This influence, to paraphrase Hall (1982:56), is one that is predominantly that of "mainstream" American communications education, decidedly functionalist in grounding, where the study (and teaching) of communications is conducted in a narrow context; where `skills' are taught, for example, without much questioning, if any, of the organisation and wider society within which these skills are to be practised; where "Larger historical shifts, questions of political process and formation before and beyond the ballot-box, issues of social and political power, of social structure and economic relations ... (are) ... simply absent, not by chance but because they...(are)... theoretically outside the frame of reference" (Hall, 1982:59).

A simple examination of the Communication Curriculum at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) bears witness to this orientation towards the market. The four main aims of the undergraduate programme are:

a.    To prepare students for job opportunities in the field of communication.
b.    To train students in various media skills.
c.    To help, through research, consultancies, etc., efforts to develop and improve the national communication system.
d.    To offer communication support for all development efforts in the country.
      (Universiti Sains Malaysia, 1994:17)

What is certainly obvious is that the communications courses offered in USM, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) and Universiti Pertanian Malaysia (UPM), by virtue of their being universities, have combined `theoretical' and `practical' components. The former, to maintain some semblance of academic respectability, the latter, to enable graduates to become more marketable. Some may argue that this is a forced and uneasy marriage. We would contend, however, that it is more a case of the presently `theoretical' being taught in isolation, indeed divorced, from the `practical'.

That is to say, while there certainly has been some reassessment of the philosophical and theoretical validity of the Dominant Paradigm in the theoretical courses (at least those being taught at USM), the ramifications of this reassessment are somehow not being thought through and put into practice in the practical courses. Hence, as an illustration, while undergraduates in the USM programme are presently being introduced to theories of dependency and political economy in their theoretical courses, when it

comes to their practical courses, they are certainly not encouraged, if not exactly discouraged, to attempt to question (imported) news values, forms, formats, and techniques, let alone creatively think up alternatives. The situation is one aptly described by Golding (1977:297), where in the practical courses students are steered "delicately clear of political sensitivities...[leaving]...a vacuum in which imported assumptions and conventions become the standards by which achievement or professional competence are measured".

Granted, in USM at least, as we indicate further on in this paper, there have been recent attempts to reassess the situation, to review the course curriculum. But, statements of intent are one thing; actually implementing these changes is another kettle of fish altogether. While recognising that curriculum planning requires tremendous time and effort, it is nonetheless argued that such planning will come to nought if a number of philosophical underpinnings, a few basic concepts, are not critically assessed. One of these is the whole notion of media education.

### (Media) Education And Functionalism

It has been suggested earlier in this paper that it is functionalism which is the dominant philosophy of education currently pervading the communication programmes offered at local institutions of higher learning.

The functionalist philosophy attributes education with two major functions. Firstly, education is seen to socialise the individual to fit into the roles and role expectations of that society, inculcating determined sets of ideas, principles and values deemed necessary to coordinate and maintain a given social structure. Socialisation here, is, of course, seen to be a good thing. Secondly, education is seen to prepare the individual for allocation or selection to roles that ensure society functions effectively and smoothly. (Blackledge and Hunt, 1985).

Education, according to this philosophy, "is above all, the means by which society perpetually recreates the conditions of its very existence." (Durkheim, 1971:91). Durkheim eliminates the power of the individual to shape or change the existing structures of society which dominate. He asserts (Durkheim, 1956:122) that "the man whom education should realise in us is not the man such as nature has made him, but as society wishes him to be; and it wishes him such as its internal economy calls for".

Yet another major influence, Talcott Parsons, one of the earliest functionalists, defines socialisation as the process by which the values of society are internalised in the individual's personality. In other words, society's values become the individual's values. (Parsons, 1971:39). Society's values here invariably being the values of those who dominate society. For functionalists, therefore, individuals are taught to be committed to high achievement to sustain the internal economy and social order. They are then differentiated and selected for roles based on their performance and level of achievement. This spawns the belief that there is equality of opportunity for all to be selected for various roles within that society. As Parsons himself says: "it is only fair to give differential rewards for different levels of achievement, so long as there has been fair access to opportunity, and fair that these rewards lead on to higher-order opportunities for the successful." (in Blackledge and Hunt, 1985:68).

In order to do what they are committed to, and to move up the rungs of a stratified society towards Parson's `higher-order opportunities', people must then be equipped through the process of education with "*a range*

*of technical and social skills.* In this way, education sustains the common culture of society and provides the appropriate `human material' for the social structure." (ibid:73, emphasis added.) This notion, not surprisingly, is similar to the Schramm-Lerner idea of traditional, backward societies evolving into modern ones with the aid of the mass media.

In Malaysia, it is clearly functionalism, then, that has left an indelible influence on education, communications education being no exception, leading to greater emphasis now being placed on technical competence and vocational skills. These skills are by no means unimportant, but they are not crucial elements in the education of good communicators, including journalists, and they are even less crucial in an academic setting. What is essential is an education which conscientises and provokes critical awareness.

Unhappily, though, as Ivan Illich (1970:3) pertinently points out, this functionalist ideology continues to lead society astray, to "confuse teaching with learning, grade advancement with education, a diploma with competence and fluency with the ability to say something new."

It could be pertinently argued that, generally speaking, students, communication students being no exception, are presently being provided with the necessary qualifications, ideas and beliefs that sustain the economy, thus making them ideal workers for the existing labour market. In other words, education - and in this context, mainstream media education in particular - is presently being harnessed as an apparatus that attempts to suppress the consciousness of individuals. It perpetuates an ideology that is both subservient to the dominant class, and is dictated by the economics of that society.

It is argued, in other words, that media education in Malaysia currently primes students for the competitive labour-market, armed with skills with which to compete, but, sadly, with little intellectual depth. Indeed, it has fast become the convention in Malaysia that what journalists write or produce should conform to what sells; where news and other media artefacts are commodities on the market; where advertising and public relations are given greater emphasis, because they evidently draw in huge amounts of revenue.

Cultural reproduction of this sort, as Masterman (1985:27) rightly observes, "is a poor aim of media education. It is uncritical; it enslaves rather than liberates; it freezes the impulses towards action and change; it produces deference and conformity." More depressingly, Halloran's warning in a report on the USM programme could even turn out to be prophetic, where

> *The overeager attempts to respond to national/professional*
> *manpower needs and demands...[would]...lead to a further*
> *emphasis on the practical and a neglect of the intellectual...*
> ***producing students who have learned how to make media***
> ***artefacts - but often these students have nothing to say.***
> (1985:16, emphasis added)

In a climate of virtually unbridled commercialisation in Malaysia, where the privatisation of industries - those of the media being no exception - is going ahead at a rapid pace, it would seem that the options open to communications courses are fast dwindling. The pressure to stick on to and subsequently reinforce a particular market-oriented, skills format is all too real. But resistance is necessary, and alternatives needed, because, as Masterman (1985:24-25) rightly argues,

*Widespread media literacy is essential if all citizens are to wield*
*power, make rational decisions, become effective change agents,*
*and have an active involvement with the media. It is in this wider*
*sense of 'education for democracy' that media education can play*
*the most significant role of all.*

One of the crucial areas we believe that needs to be examined in order for genuine alternatives to emerge, and for a more critical and socially-relevant form of local media education to evolve is the area of actual research conducted in communications. Presently, however, it appears that the research arena is also being forced further to conform to the needs of market forces.

### Research, Acquiescence And The Market

*... the university is one institution which could illuminate the*
*historical and social context of private discontent. It offers the*
*time and resources for the pursuit of questions and approaches*
*which would develop an understanding of how we arrived at the*
*present malaise. It offers a setting for challenging the premises of*
*the present society, for appreciating what deserves to be*
*retained, and for developing a new environment worthy of the best*
*in man.*

R. Engler (1969: 167-168)

In all institutions of higher learning, research is perceived as an invaluable pursuit. Research projects that are undertaken by academics are normally regarded as those which not only contribute to the building and accumulation of knowledge, but also provide vital and useful service to the larger society. Similarly, research endeavours in the field of communications are seen in this light.

This notion of providing service to the community through research, however, is problematic because of two differing views of "service". One perspective contends that service to the community should be selective, should question the legitimacy of the status quo and at the same time should be educative. In the words of Roszak (1969:32), "It means performing the service of criticizing, clarifying, dissenting, resisting, deriding, exposing: in brief, *educating* in the fullest of the word as a member of the 'party of humanity'." (Emphasis in the original). The other notion of service, however, puts emphasis on the need to seek ways to improve conditions within the existing social structures at best, or indiscriminately work for anyone who is willing to pay for the service at worst. This academic inclination is well summed up by Roszak (ibid.:18): "'Service' by becoming a blanket willingness to do whatever society will pay for, has led the university to surrender the indispensable characteristic of wisdom: moral discrimination."

Dallas Smythe and Tran Van Dinh (1983) argue that there are two types of research, namely (a) critical, and (b) service or administrative. Generally speaking, the first type has the effect of questioning, if not undermining, the status quo while the second has the effect of perpetuating it.

In a political and socio-economic environment where the media industry and the private sector are collectively seen as an engine of growth, it is hardly surprising that the second approach towards "service" through research has gained currency and legitimacy in Malaysia. In fact, it has become almost

fashionable for academics to be coaxed into doing research that can be regarded as providing "significant contribution"and is of practical use to the the industry and, by extension, the nation. Thus, under such a circumstance, academics are expected to accept, welcome, and review positively - through their research and writings - the advent of a certain communication technology, for instance, rather than critically assess and ascertain whether such a technology can indeed contribute more harm than good to the majority of Malaysians. At best, the academics would be asked to assess the degree of acceptance by the people or consumers of the technology concerned.

At the School of Communication in Universiti Sains Malaysia, the dominant trends in research reflect the overall political and socio-economic desires of the dominant groups in the country. Many of the research projects undertaken appear to indicate an inclination to "help" the media industry and media-related sectors improve their performance and, in the process, help maintain the status quo. Over the past few years, academics in the Programme certainly have researched areas as diverse as Communication and Social Change; Media Content; Media/Communication Theories; Media Institutions; Media Audience; and Raw Data Collection.

While there are research projects that are critical in nature, the majority of them tend to veer towards the second type of communication research, that is those that help perpetuate the structures that govern the local media industry as a whole and are also aimed at meeting the demands and needs of the market. Examples of such research projects include the extension education campaigns in certain agricultural regions of the country; audience research of Radio Malaysia listeners; descriptive surveys of the newspaper and advertising industries in Malaysia; an assessment of advertising in the tourism industry; and the study of the national language and its use in local advertising.

What is obvious from the research carried out is that there is an ongoing tussle between the two types of research in the School. Subsequently such tension will be more severely felt when the "service" type of research gains further ground and increasingly becomes accommodative to the dictates and interests of the market forces. Indeed, with the current emphasis on the "corporatisation" of universities, this has certainly become the case in USM. Lecturers at the School of Communication were informed by the School's Dean during a recent formal meeting[4] that the emphasis now would be on finding ways of making revenue. Research, to paraphrase the Dean, would need to be more oriented towards the market. Some of the more "ingenuous", certainly far from original, research projects which the Dean proposed the staff should now engage in included audience market surveys, similar to the ones conducted by commercial market research outfits such as Survey Research Malaysia and Frank Small Associates, and research on the tourist industry in collaboration with Malaysia's Tourist Development Corporation and local hotels. Research and media education, stressed the Dean, should not be for their own sake (nor presumably for the sake of opening and liberating minds or increasing knowledge and testing the validity of current knowledge; let alone for the sake of conscientisation and empowerment) but should be geared towards the needs of the market.

The communication research scenario is almost the same in the other institutions of higher learning in Malaysia. The bulk of the research projects is focused on communication and media-related aspects of concern to government development agencies, government media organizations and the media industries in the private sector.[5] These projects indubitably are aimed at helping to improve the performance of these agencies. Such research enterprises are conveniently regarded as making useful contributions to "national development". To reiterate a point, it is quite evident that it does not matter to these researchers whether such academic contributions would perpetuate inequalities and aid in unquestioningly upholding the status quo. Indeed, as with functionalist media education - and functionalism generally - such

possibilities are evidently outside their theoretical frame of reference. It would seem that what matters most for these researchers is that institutions of higher learning provide service to anyone who can afford to pay for it, particularly those with substantial influence in the marketplace.

Our argument is that a preponderance of service or administrative research over the critical ones in the country's institutions of higher learning, if left unchecked, will give rise to worrying implications. For one, we believe that the dominance of such research will only serve to magnify the influence and power of the market, thereby marginalising concerns for the "victims" of the media industry. Secondly, such research tendencies will devalue, if not make a mockery of, the very real importance of questioning or critical research in institutions of higher learning. Thirdly, the body of knowledge built up over the years by such mainstream research projects can - and indeed will - influence the types of communication-related courses offered to students. Finally, universities particularly will become no more than mere research appendages of the media industry, and not organisations that can challenge convenient and fashionable arguments and practices, and subsequently offer alternatives. Indeed, whatever little autonomy left in universities will be all but eroded. Universities have traditionally been the centres for generating new knowledge, centres of innovation, and centres for questioning the validity of established knowledge. Subsequently, if autonomous research, not influenced or determined by the dictates of politicians and big business, is now and in the near future forced to be beyond the scope or realm of universities, then there really is cause for concern.

### *Alternative Media Education*

For Brazilian educationist, Paulo Freire (1972) (1976), true education begins with the questioning and testing of established knowledge, norms, values, ideas and practices that define our reality and shape our consciousness; to see if they are necessarily true or otherwise in one's own social, historical and ideological reality. This, he calls 'conscientisation' - in which the people are given the tools to perceive and name their world. These 'tools' are, rightly, communication tools - language and literacy, and numerous forms of expression (newspapers, posters, dramas, films, photography).

However, true media education does not primarily lie in the acquisition of language fluency, social skills, or the ability to collect and string together facts. Neither does it lie in one's dexterity at twiddling knobs and manipulating hard and soft ware. Rather, education that conscientises creates a *critical awareness* of the structural boundaries set up by the dominant groups and classes to control our lives; and the realisation that radical transformation of our social reality *is* possible. For Freire(1976:225) :

> *Conscientisation is a permanent critical approach to reality in order to discover it and discover the myths that deceive and help maintain the oppressing dehumanising structures.*

A critical approach to media education, we suggest, does offer us that opportunity to 'penetrate' the media, 'and know it', as Freire advocates. This, however, requires a grasp of the fundamental links between the numerous realms - social, cultural, political and economic - in society, something which is sadly lacking in the functionalist, skill-oriented media education programmes in Malaysia. It is essential that media students not only learn how to construct media artefacts, but to also 'deconstruct' media messages and recognise the underlying institutional and organisational power relations as well.

Masterman (1985:26) rightly acknowledges that "...it will obviously be helpful if they have first-hand experience of the construction process from the inside." However, he equally rightly points out that "practical activity does **not**, in itself, constitute media education." (ibid, emphasis added). It can never be assumed then that students involved in practical work automatically acquire critical abilities and can demystify the media. Critical awareness and understanding are elements to be worked at. They are based on a conscious effort to link practical work with analytical activities. It is an effort, we maintain, that must be made by both students and educators.

An education that conscientises necessarily calls for a tearing down of barriers and a bridging of the gulf between students and lecturers; thus encouraging critical autonomy. Both parties should be free to enter into dialogue with each other, in which the contributions of students are as valued as those of educators. There must be a freeing from what Freire calls the "banking concept of education, which serves the interests of oppression...transforms students into receiving objects...attempts to control thinking and action." (1972:51) The illusion that learning only takes place with the one-way depositing of selected knowledge (in this context, largely functionalist communication theories and skills) by teachers to passive, receiving students, needs to be shattered.

If media education in Malaysia is to be truly critical and liberating, there must be freedom and opportunity to be critical and sceptical towards media messages and artefacts that shape our lives. Students must be equipped with `radical doubt' (Illich, 1969,1970) in order to be perceptive and critical towards the socio-political structures which exploit and constrain.

What future - and present - media practitioners in Malaysia need is a form of education which, in Gramsci's words (in Blackledge & Hunt, 1985:308), will develop "the love of free discussion; the desire to search for, truth rationally and intelligently." Unfortunately, as long as media education in Malaysia remains firmly rooted in functionalism, and is constrained by the pressures of the market place, the freedom and opportunity to be critical towards the media and media education will continue to be severely restricted.

However, if those who have had the privilege of being conscientised through some form of alternative education are "unwilling to be constrained by the apparently all-determining forces and structures of the industrial age"(Illich, 1969:18), then perhaps there will still be a ray of hope left for media education in Malaysia. As Illich (ibid) further suggests, "our freedom and power are determined by our willingness to accept responsibility for the future."

In this connection, it is quite obvious, therefore, that we also strongly believe that the concept of `public service' is essential to media education. Media education, and communications, too, for that matter, must not be allowed to serve only the power structures or dominant groups in society. Communications has, instead, a grave responsibility to serve `society' in its true sense. And as Halloran rightly states (1985:34), in a different but, nonetheless, related context,

> *it best serves when it is free and independent; when it questions*
> *basic assumptions, challenges conventional wisdom and suggests*
> *alternatives to the established way of doing things.*

### *A Balancing Act? Universiti Sains Malaysia's New Communication Curriculum*

Despite the pessimistic tone of our discussion thus far, we believe that resistance to the conformist, market-oriented form of media education that currently dominates is not only necessary but possible. At USM, the new curriculum[6] of School of Communication's Bachelor of Communication degree, implemented in the 1994/95 academic session, is designed to provide a balance, albeit an uneasy one, between the theoretical and the practical. It is underpinned by the concern that students of communications ought to understand quite comprehensively the political, social, economic and cultural factors that influence and possibly impinge upon the development of the mass media - and the consequences. From this understanding, it is hoped that students will appreciate the limits that confront the media industry as a whole. At the same time, it is anticipated that they will try to explore and exploit certain "spaces" that may be available; spaces within which they can harness their talents and employ their creativity towards the goal of improving situations in their future workplaces.

Put another way, on paper, the new curriculum believes it is imperative that communications students in USM are trained as thinkers who can be critical and creative, apart from equipping themselves with the necessary professional skills. It is crucial that these students be provided with a holistic approach towards communications and the media industry so that they will realise that the compartmentalisation of communication studies into (artificially) discrete subject modules like Journalism, Broadcasting and Persuasive Communication is in many ways merely for analytical convenience. In other words, the person who produces a television programme, for example, still needs to be aware of the linkages between broadcasting organisations, the press etc. and social structures, which, by and large, govern the processes of media production.

This "balancing act" is therefore a product of an awareness in the School of the desire to try to accommodate the needs of an industrialising nation and, at the same time, instil critical and independent thinking among students.

In the new curriculum, the first two and half years provide students with as much theoretical exposure as is possible, in particular a social scientific exposure with the primary purpose of giving them necessary knowledge about society, apart from offering them introductory courses in communications. Thus, for instance, the first-year students not only have to take up courses like *Introduction to Mass Communication, Communication and Society*, and *Media History and Law*, but are also encouraged to do courses offered outside the School, like *Introduction to Political Science, Introduction to History*, and *Sociology*.

In the second year, students still take up theoretical courses such as *Communication Theory and Research I, Communication Theory and Research II*, and *Communication and Culture*. In the first half of their third year, students continue to be exposed to theoretical courses such as *Communication Theory and Research III, Communication, Class and Conflict*, and *Communication Technology*. It is only in the second half of their third year that the students enter their chosen specialised areas of communications, i.e. Journalism, Broadcasting or Persuasive Communication. It is here that these specialised students are exposed to the practical components of their respective areas of specialisation. For example, Journalism majors will be gradually introduced to the rudiments of *News Writing, Writing for the English Media, Feature Writing, Photojournalism, Editing* and *Newsletter publication*. Other majors will also go through similar practical processes.

The fourth year of the new curriculum, called the "immersion year", marks a substantial break with the academic tradition of the Communication School as well as that of Universiti Sains Malaysia. Here, students, as the name of the fourth year suggests, are fully immersed in all things "practical". This means that students are totally engaged in the production of a newspaper and a magazine; the production of television programmes and films; and also in carrying out extension campaigns, conducting public relations exercises, and designing advertising campaigns. The students' academic performance in the final year is completely assessed based on their ability to do their practical work. This is in addition to the academic requirement that students undergo their practical training during the long semester break in the private as well as public sectors in order to gain some experience of the "real world" of work.

The rationale behind this new approach to media education, as alluded to earlier, is to assist students in understanding the social and political contexts in which the mass media in the country operate. From there, they are urged to try to comprehend the problems faced by the media themselves, and eventually try to intelligently seek solutions to overcome them. The first two and half years of study are crucial because it is during this period that students are given the opportunity to view the mass media and their social context in a critical light. With this deeper understanding of the media and media-related industries, it is envisaged that students of the Communication School will then go into the "practical world" with open eyes and ears, so to speak.

This so-called balancing act also stems from the desire to steer away from too heavy an emphasis on the practical side of media education which, it is believed, makes students lose sight of the enquiring, the questioning, aspects of a university education. In other words, this balancing act has come about based on the notion that an unabashedly utilitarian approach to university education, which often gets linked to what is deemed as national needs, needs to be avoided as far as possible. We are aware that, as with most balancing acts, the scales could tip either way. And we are equally aware that there are increasing pressures towards conformity, as illustrated by the earlier stated comments made by the Dean. Nonetheless, the way the new curriculum has been structured does allow for some relatively autonomous space, some independent way to continue the struggle against blind conformity.

### *Media Education In Malaysia : Some Suggestions*

On the basis of our experiences in helping to design the new curriculum at USM, which we believe still has its limitations, we wish to conclude by suggesting the basic outlines of an alternative scenario of media education - a bald sketch, as it were. An alternative which challenges the prevailing orthodoxy.

What we feel is urgently required in media education in Malaysia is the provision of courses which provide adequate understanding, sufficient context. That is, adequate understanding of the mechanics of society, based on the belief that "...it is impossible to consider the media or practices within them separately, with the implication that communicators and communications are an independent variable whose injection into a society in a modern, professional form will trigger development." (Golding, 1977:291).

In addition, by 'sufficient context', we mean a situation whereby the study of communications, both theoretical and practical, is appropriately located within - and as part of - a wider study of society. In this connection, this paper shares the views of Golding and Murdock (1977:12) who argue that the study of communications "... should be incorporated into the wider study of stratification and legitimation", based on "...the recognition that social relations within and between societies are radically, though variably, inegalitarian." (Golding and Murdock, 1978:353)

We believe what is needed are courses and curricula which examine the relationships between, for example, the ownership and control of communications industries and inequalities in the distribution of power and wealth in society and between societies. Courses and curricula which turn certain assumptions on their heads and ask what we feel are crucial questions, such as, do the media *reflect* reality and how? Or do they refract or even distort reality? Whose 'reality' are they presenting? Why? What roles do the media - and communications generally - play in the process of legitimation, the reinforcement of a particular order - if they do play such roles, that is? How may we produce alternative artefacts, based on alternative assumptions?

In order to ask, examine, and possibly answer these questions, we believe the theoretical frame of reference of communications courses would, necessarily, have to be greatly expanded, or radically overhauled. From busily and unfruitfully contemplating narrow 'theories of communication', we would need to look outward and examine theories of society in a critical manner, and contextualize media education within these wider developments and theories, at both the so-called 'theoretical' and 'practical' levels.

What we are proposing, therefore, are at least the following:

1.      That the desire by communications departments in our universities to meet the needs of the industry, while understandable, nonetheless must be tampered with reason and rationality. These departments need to remember their central and vital role of educating students to be inquisitive and critical, to hunger for knowledge and to build on existing knowledge. This awareness must be reflected in the curricula and courses offered.

2.      That with the emergence and development of many new communication technologies, universities must not only encourage research that critically assess these technologies and their social implications but also offer courses that provide ample opportunities for students to critically evaluate them.

3.      That postgraduate programmes of universities offering degrees in communications must incorporate this critical component as this is one of the important ways in which universities can and must help in building new, critical forms of knowledge regarding communications and the media industry in the country.

4.      That there must be provision and support for critical research and courses which will go a long way towards maintaining some degree of academic independence for the universities in their relations with the industry.

It is, therefore, obvious that we appreciate that the current orthodoxy, indeed ideological strategy, is for media education to consider ways of somehow "fitting in" nicely into the needs of the media industry, short of becoming subservient to the dictates of the industry. However, our agenda in this discussion has been quite different. We believe that media education needs to start by problematising the industry and the circumstances surrounding and impinging on it. To those who would assert simplistically that we are 'idealistic' and need to be 'realistic', we would counter by arguing that "realities" are never given, but constructed, and largely constructed according to the structures of power in society. And just as these realities are social constructions, so can - and must - they be deconstructed. As for being "idealistic" - a term often used pejoratively to imply naivety - we would respond, following Freire (1972: 4), that "That which is utopian is not that which is unattainable; it is not idealism; it is a dialectic process of denouncing

and announcing; denouncing the dehumanizing structure and announcing the humanizing structure. "

Ours, quite candidly, is indeed a wider concern about the process of conscientisation through media education. Through this process, the main ingredients of which we have tried to outline here, we believe that we can then begin to understand more comprehensively how the media - and mass communications generally - may act, at the present moment, as linchpins in the overall machinery of political, economic, cultural and social control and dominance. We propose that only through such understanding can we start thinking about ways of possibly dismantling that machinery and replacing it with a more egalitarian one.

**Notes**:

[1]     Apart from direct State control of Malaysia's TV1 and TV2 through RTM, political control of what until 1995 was the only local commercial television station, TV3, is also rather obvious. (See Gomez, 1994: 116-138).   To top it all up, the *Broadcasting* Act (1988) gives the Malaysian Minister of Information extremely wide-ranging powers to determine who has the opportunity to broadcast and what may or may not be broadcast.

[2]     The belief of this orthodoxy, also called the *Dominant Paradigm*, is that the poor and supposedly backward Third World nations *should* develop and 'modernise' and, inevitably, would do so according to the patterns and structures designed by the industrialised nations, particularly the United States.   As one critic succinctly put it, "Development becomes a question of how 'we' (the bearers of 'modernity') can make 'them' more like 'us' (Foster-Carter, 1974:81, emphasis in original).

The problem of underdevelopment, according to this school of thought, can be traced back to the individual.  Underdevelopment, quite simply, is due to the outmoded, counterproductive attitudes of the peoples of the Third World.   Hence, modernisation can primarily be achieved through individual, psychological change. Lerner (1958), for example, utilising a simplistic traditional-modern dichotomy in his study of the Middle East, stressed the need for the emergence of "mobile" persons in the region. According to him, to do so, the individual in 'traditional' society needed to have and, subsequently, cultivate the ability to empathise.  In his words,

> *This is an indispensable skill for people moving out of traditional settings....high empathic capacity is the predominant personal style only in modern society, which is distinctively industrial, urban, literate and participant.    Traditional   society   is nonparticipant - it deploys people by kinship into communities isolated from each other and from a center......*

> (Lerner, 1958:50)

Schramm (1964:115), clearly supportive of Lerner's argument that psychological factors are central in the process of development, similarly argued that for social change to take place,

> *First the populace must become aware of a need which is not satisfied by present custom and behavior.   Second, they must invent  or  borrow  behavior that comes closer to meeting the need.*

> *A nation that wants to accelerate this process, as well developing nations do today, will try to make it's people more widely and quickly aware of needs and of the opportunities for meeting them, will facilitate the decision process, and will help the people put the new practices smoothly and swiftly into effect.*

Both saw the mass media as playing a pivotal role in this process of behavioural change. Calling them the "mobility multiplier" (Lerner, 1958:52) and seeing them as performing "watchmen" functions and creating "a climate for development" (Schramm, 1964: 131-132), both scholars urged for an all-round expansion of the mass media systems in developing countries. This, they believed would trigger-off economic growth. The basic assertion was that more media were a good thing, because they speeded up the modernization process. It will suffice to say that the dominant belief, pioneered belief, pioneered by Schramm and Lerner, was that:

> *increasing urbanisation would raise......literacy levels, which would lead to increased use of information media which would in turn increase per capita income and an interest in democratic citizenship, thereby binding the new societies together and increasing economic prosperity.*

> (Smith, 1980:61)

With the benefit of hindsight, perhaps those of us in the Third World could castigate the planners, policy makers and politicians for naively believing in the supposed developmental power of the mass media. And, indeed, many of us have done so. But even so, for a long time now, the Schramm-Lerner view is one that has held firm, despite also the systematic and comprehensive academic critiques that have been leveled against it (see, for example, Elliott and Golding [1974 and 1977], Hedebro [1982]) and the equally convincing critiques that have been leveled against the philosophical underpinnings of modernisation theory (see, Bernstein [1979], O'Brien [1979] and Frank [1969], for example).

³     Legally, there is a variety of laws, ranging from the Defamation Act, 1957 (Act 286) to the Printing of Quranic Text Act, 1986 (Act 326) which guide the operations of the media. Most of these laws are widely regarded as just and necessary and do not impinge on these operations. These laws rightly allow for the injured party to seek recourse in the courts and for the accused to conduct a defence. However, it has been observed (see Mustafa, 1990, Zaharom, 1991 and 1992) that alongside these laws, there also exist others which are clearly designed to curb the media from conducting open, legitimate and rational discussion of issues - mainly political - curiously deemed to be "sensitive".

⁴     The comments by the Dean were made during the inaugural Board Meeting of the School of Communication on Saturday, 6 May 1995.

⁵     For details of research conducted by the universities concerned and also the Institut Teknologi Mara, see for instance Mohd Dhari Othman, Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri and Mohd Yusof Abdullah (eds) (1992: 1-44).

⁶     This paper was written before it was officially announced that the majority of first degree courses in local universities would have to trim down their duration from four to three years.

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