

Private Profits, State Sanctions and Public Participation: The Disservice of the Media and Development Orthodoxy

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Abstract: This paper analyzes critically the state of regulated media in developing economies. In order to engender rapid growth and structural change the state is required to control the media to provide the essential conditions of stability and societal change. This media-for-development orthodoxy has held sway for more than six decades now, leading to governments, often authoritarian, utilizing the media to prolong their hegemony over society. Taking the welfare of citizens as the basis of public-private partnerships, this paper argues that it is precisely consideration of citizen well-being that is missing in media policy and practice in the developing countries in general and Malaysia in particular. The paper then discusses the emergence of the new media and provides an assessment of the possibility of media reform, leading to the democratization of media policy and structures.

Keywords: media, modernization, state, market, public service, reform

JEL classifications: H75, I28, L82

1. Introduction

Public-private partnerships (PPPs), such as they may be called in this context, have long been a feature of the media industry in many countries, particularly in the developing world. Often these partnerships have been deemed “necessary”, indeed beneficial, for these societies. In countries like Malaysia, Singapore, and certainly more authoritarian states like Vietnam and Cambodia, initial ownership of broadcast media have been in the hands of the various governments of the day. As we shall see in the following section, such state control and investment have been deemed necessary for a couple of reasons. First, the cost of start-up operations in the broadcast media even now is still quite prohibitive. This, coupled with the belief that the media (especially broadcast media) can play a pivotal role in integrating and developing newly-formed, post-colonial states – hence needed to be in the hands of “responsible” groups, such as, of course, governments – has narrowed down considerably the number of actors/stakeholders to a select few.

However, with the increasing liberalization of markets globally, propelled in the 1980s by Thatcher's policies in Britain and Reagan's in the USA, the media industries in many developing countries have become increasingly commercialized. Malaysia's first commercial television station, *TV3*, is a product of such a policy. Coming on to the scene in 1984, *TV3*, was essentially an outcome of (then prime minister) Mahathir's *Privatisation* policy. Since then, other similar media organizations have emerged under an acknowledged policy of deregulation which, unfortunately and ironically, is often state-regulated. This oxymoron, regulated deregulation, is the subject of much of this essay. Indeed, it is the existence of this oxymoron that provides the basis of much of the critique of PPP in this paper.

There are a number of ways in which PPPs have been defined. The two which seem to capture the essence of PPP – at least in advanced capitalist states – come from the UK and Canada and are as follows:

...risk sharing relationships based upon an agreed aspiration between the public and private sectors *to bring about a desired public policy outcome*.

(Commission on UK Private Public Partnerships 2009; emphasis added)

...a cooperative venture between the public and private sectors, built on the expertise of each partner, *that best meets clearly defined public needs through an appropriate allocation of resources, risks and rewards*.

(Canadian Council for Public-Private Partnerships 2009; emphasis added)

What we can understand from the above – and what frames our understanding of PPP in this essay – is that the public (and the myriad needs of the public) is at the core of such PPP. Terms such as “clearly defined public needs” and “desired public policy outcomes” put citizens, the people, at the centre of PPP. Granted, we are also talking about sharing risks and even getting returns on investments, but the point is that the cornerstone of such partnerships is the welfare of the people.

Unfortunately, it is this that is evidently missing in media policy and media practice in Malaysia and much of the region currently. Indeed, while commercialization of the media – especially broadcasting – has led to greater public-private interaction institutionally, it is questionable whose interests this satisfies.

The ongoing refrain is that the media – and the messages they carry – have a great impact on society's members, hence the need to be guided, often presumably by the keepers and protectors of the “public good”, those governing these societies. This “guidance” has taken numerous forms – from direct political and economic ownership of the media industries to the implementation of laws to purportedly curb “media excesses”.

This paper presents a critique of this theoretical orthodoxy that has dominated thinking about the media for almost five decades now and continues to inform policy making in many developing countries. It is an orthodoxy that is informed by modernization theory. As argued in this paper, it is an orthodoxy that has severely tainted the idea of PPP in relation to the media.

It is thus argued in this paper, first, that public-private partnerships in the media particularly, though not exclusively, do not take place in a vacuum; other, wider, societal factors inform and often impinge upon these relationships. Second, this paper outlines and critiques this theoretical orthodoxy regarding the media and development. Next, it discusses and illustrates why, despite the critiques, this orthodoxy still holds sway. Finally, culling from the Malaysian media experience, this paper argues for a more representative, a more democratic, approach towards media role; one that understands the need to problematize what constitutes “public-private partnerships” and, equally important, one that does not blindly follow the path that asserts the “private” will provide salvation.

2. Media, Development and Orthodox Theory

Although it has been stated often enough (see, for example, Shah, 1996) that American communications scholar, Everett Rogers, was the first to use the term “dominant paradigm” in relation to communication and development, it is nonetheless widely agreed that the paradigm was originally conceived in the late 1950s and provided the theoretical framework for much media research and policy making in the 1960s and 1970s.

The belief was that the poor and purportedly backward developing countries should develop and “modernize”, and, inevitably, would do so, following the framework and strategies designed by the developed nations, particularly the USA. According to this perspective, the problem stemmed from the individual – poverty and underdevelopment, quite simply, are consequences of the counterproductive attitudes of the poor, and that modernization can be achieved through individual, psychological change. Governments in these countries were assumed – and entrusted with the power – to be the principal, often the only, media stakeholder. Hence, it was assumed that media content should play this role of “moving” the people, with governments controlling the contents. Of course, in this scenario, the legitimacy of the messages conveyed was hardly, if ever, questioned.

In this regard, then, the media were seen as essential, indeed central, to this change, thus speeding up the modernization process. For Golding and Harris (1997: 4), this phase in the 1960s and 1970s was one of “happy optimism”, where the media were assumed to be “magic multipliers, bringing

development advice instantly, effectively and extensively to the information hungry multitudes'. The dominant belief, pioneered in media studies by the likes of Lerner (1958) and Schramm (1964), was that:

(I)ncreasing urbanization 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)

Briefly put, the belief was that the problems faced by developing societies stemmed from the counterproductive, traditional attitudes held by the peoples in these societies. In this situation, the media – deemed to be crucial *change agents* – “guided” (indeed controlled) by governments – would bring “modern” images and symbols to these societies and, like a magic wand, would change the peoples’ attitudes, thus leading them to modernity.

2.1 Problems with the Orthodoxy

It is abundantly clear that the arguments put across, while alluringly simple, even commonsensical, nonetheless, were – and still are - naïve and even ethnocentric. And, rightly, this orthodoxy has since undergone intense criticism from within (Rogers, 1976; Schramm and Lerner, 1976) and without (Golding, 1974).

Because policy makers and, more importantly in our context, communication scholars, continue to sing the praises of this orthodoxy which has gone way past its use-by date, it is imperative, I believe to outline here at least three of its main problems.

First, it ignores structures in the societies it purports to explain and aid. This, indeed, has been one of the main criticisms leveled against the early Schramm-Lerner perspective. The idea that communication systems, especially media, simply act as tools to convey benign “development” messages conceived by equally benign governments to the wretched poor disregards the realities of, for example, different, often widely divergent, political systems. Societies and governments, indeed, are more complex than that. History clearly shows us that not all governments have the interests of their people at heart.

Second, this media and development orthodoxy, like much of modernization theory which informs it, has had the tendency to dehistoricize these societies that it considers problematic and seeks to “help”. Viewing development in this ahistorical manner assumes developing countries to have emerged from static isolation, simply needing stimuli such as the media to bring them out of the Dark Ages to modernity. Hence, in promoting a

traditional-modern dichotomy, in asserting that so-called “counterproductive” attitudes are inherent only in these societies, a whole history of conquest, colonization and imperialism is conveniently sidestepped. In this way, it is then assumed that the problems of these societies are virtually always internally-generated, hardly externally-caused. Wider problems of sectoral, regional and global inequalities hence remain outside the theoretical frame of reference of this media and development orthodoxy.

The third problem with this orthodoxy, which indeed underscores the first and second, is that it ignores questions of power and complex power relations at domestic and international levels. (Golding, 1974; Samarajiwa and Shields, 1993). Links, for example, between transnational media corporations providing media hardware and software to many of these dependent countries and the governments of these countries and the local business and media elites are hardly analyzed.

3. State Sanctions and Private Profits

Given these critiques, it would not be far fetched to believe that this orthodoxy would have been cast aside long ago. Unfortunately, this has not been the case. It remains dominant in both policy-making and academic circles in many countries, including Malaysia.

A couple of decades ago, for example, as India was preparing for the 21st century, there were increasing investment in information technology (IT). One critical analyst (Thomas, 1991: 35) has argued that “the reasons for the large-scale use of IT in India are couched in the language and ideology of modernization. The lack of information has once again been resurrected as the main reason for underdevelopment. Well-worn phrases like the ‘take-off’ stage of growth, and the ‘trickle-down’ theory have once again come into fashion. It is widely stated that IT will catapult India into the 21st century.”

The same refrain indeed could be heard in Malaysia in the mid-1990s when the Malaysian Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) was launched. Malaysia’s then premier, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad asserted that the MSC, apart from being Malaysia’s gift to the world, would certainly help the country ‘leapfrog’ to the information age.

A decade earlier, a couple of years into his premiership, Mahathir’s Director General of the Malaysian Department of Information (Mohd. Kaus Haji Salleh, 1983: 86), had 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 industrialized. This process of change involves values, human interaction, life structure and the structure of understanding.

It is clear then that regimes recognize the possibility of the media being “cultural mechanisms for maintaining social order” (Elliott and Golding, 1974: 249). Indeed, as Lent (1982: 51) has observed:

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.

Or, as Karthigesu (1988: 767) has put it, broadcasting in Malaysia 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.

Hence, sticking to the assertion – as the theoretical orthodoxy does – that the media are powerful change agents, enables governments like that of Malaysia to keep a tight rein on them, often for the supposed “good of the nation” and in the “national interest”, vague though these notions often turn out to be.

Indeed, even during the heyday of Mahathir’s privatization and Malaysia Inc policies and strategies, while commercialization of the media was stepped up more than a couple of notches, legal, political and economic controls on the same media were never loosened. Instead, they were tightened considerably. In a very real sense then, reiterating the “media for change” line, while commercializing the media further enabled greater imposition of sanctions on the media in Malaysia. At the same time, it increased the profits of new and established media companies, many of which, as have been consistently illustrated elsewhere (see, for example, Wang, 1998; Zaharom and Wang, 2004 and Zaharom, 2002) belong to groups and individuals closely aligned to dominant political parties.

But the whole modernization rhetoric about the need for governments like Malaysia’s to own and control media institutions for national development – including helping to foster national unity – becomes very much a lie when these very same media do the opposite. Indeed, since the 2008 general election in Malaysia, the mainstream Malaysian press and broadcast media, many owned by major political parties in the BN coalition, have openly adopted and advanced racist and inflammatory views that are clearly aimed at undermining social ties; views about the supremacy of one race or ethnic group over others which clearly go against the government’s avowed aim of promoting “national unity” and working towards “national integration”.

Indeed, the comments in UMNO-owned Malay-language dailies, *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* following the tragic death of DAP political secretary, Teoh Beng Hock, in mid-July 2009, while in custody at the headquarters of the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC), illustrate this disturbing trend. No less than the Group Managing Editor of the New Straits Times Press (NSTP), Zainul Arifin, writing in a commentary on Teoh's death in the Sunday edition of the Malay language *Berita Harian* (*BH*, 19/07/09), attempted to depict public criticisms of the MACC in racial terms.

Hence, in criticizing the Selangor Chief Minister in his article, Zainul asks "*Kenapa Menteri Besar Selangor, seorang Melayu, meragui kebolehan orang sebangsanya bertindak dengan tulus dan adil?*" ("Why does the Chief Minister of Selangor, a Malay, doubt the ability of fellow members of his race to act in ways that are transparent and fair?")

Further on in the article, he poses the rhetorical question: "*Bukankah banyak pegawai agensi atau institusi kerajaan orang Melayu? Adakah polis, hakim, guru, penyiasat, doktor, pensyarah Melayu semuanya tidak boleh dipercayai?*" ("Aren't there many officers of government agencies or institutions who are Malay? Are the Malay police, judges, teachers, investigators, doctors, lecturers all not to be trusted?")

4. Whither Public Participation?

Any talk of public-private partnerships or collaboration in the media, I believe, would, first need to problematize and clarify who and what constitute this "public". Often enough, in many countries, "public" media institutions, while certainly being run on public funds, unfortunately are not representative of the numerous segments of society. Instead, they are run in the interest of particular groups and individuals, often based on certain personal or group agendas.

When this happens, as it does in the many authoritarian regimes in the region, including, unfortunately, Malaysia and Singapore, institutions deemed "public institutions" invariably are anything but that. In such cases, public access, representation and participation turn out to be more imagined than real.

And, to make matters even more problematic, private media organizations often do not emerge and operate in a competitive and unrestricted environment but, instead, are subject to state-imposed quota systems, such as press and broadcasting licensing systems. Within this scenario, particular media institutions, producing particular media artifacts tend to dominate the market. As a consequence, as Hall (1986: 9) has put it:

Some things, people, events, relationships always get represented: always centre stage, always in a position to define, to set the agenda, to establish the terms of the conversation. Some others sometimes get represented – but always at the

margin, always responding to a question whose terms and conditions have been defined elsewhere: never centred. Still others are always “represented” only by their eloquent absence, their silences; or refracted through the glance or gaze of others.

Within this kind of environment – and the unfortunate reality is that there are many countries, certainly in the Southeast Asian region, which have this kind of environment – any talk of a win-win situation developing from public-private media partnerships will remain just empty talk. In this regard, it is interesting to note that in Malaysia, promises have been generated by the media and the power brokers since the historic events of March 8, 2008, when the 12th Malaysian General Elections were held. Yet, in the short space of time since, new developments illustrate the dangers that lurk and the obstacles to greater media freedom and representation.

5. The Stranglehold of the State? State-Media Links in Malaysia

The links between the state and Malaysia’s contemporary mainstream media of television and the press go as far back as the 1960s. For television, it began with the setting up of Malaysia’s first free-to-air television station, *RTMI* (now *TV1*), in 1963, under the control of the Ministry of Information. For the press, the takeover of *Utusan Melayu (UM)* by the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), after the *UM* journalists’ strike in 1961, signaled the beginning of political party ownership of Malaysian newspapers. During the 22 years of Mahathir’s administration, (1981-2003), such links were further reinforced. Mahathir introduced policies soon after he came to power, such as the privatization policy and Malaysia Incorporated, ostensibly to offset the reported wastage within and by the Malaysian public sector (Jomo, 1990). Under the privatization policy, new media companies – especially radio and television – were created and developed. The majority were – still are – owned and controlled directly or indirectly by the investment companies of the main component parties of the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) coalition, particularly UMNO, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) (Zaharom, 2002).

While this was going on in the two decades, existing media laws were tightened and new ones introduced. In 1984, the much-criticized Printing Presses and Publications Act (PPPA) was introduced to replace the 1971 Printing Presses Act. The PPPA which, among other things, requires every local regular publication to have a yearly-renewable license or printing permit granted by the then Ministry of Home Affairs, was further amended in 1987, giving the Home Minister (fortuitously Mahathir at that point in time) immense powers to decide whether a publication can continue to be published.

It was the PPPA that was used after the *Operasi Lallang* crackdown in 1987 to stop the publication of three newspapers, *The Star*, *Watan* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* for an indefinite period. Again, in 2000, it was the PPPA that was used to enjoin the hugely popular *Harakah*, the paper of the opposition Islamic party, PAS, to slash its frequency from twice weekly to twice monthly. It was also the PPPA that was used in the same year to revoke the licenses of pro-*Reformasi* and pro-opposition publications, *Detik*, *Al-Wasilah* and *Eksklusif* (Zaharom, 2002:134).

In 1986, the *Official Secrets Act 1972* was used to convict two local journalists for reporting a military document deemed “secret” under the Act. Despite opposition by journalists and NGOs, the Act was amended to make it all-encompassing, giving officers of the state almost total powers to deem what is “officially secret”. International journalists and media too were not spared in this period. In September 1986, the *Asian Wall Street Journal* was banned by the Mahathir regime for three months and its two Kuala Lumpur-based journalists, Raphael Roy Pura and John Peter Berthelson, were expelled from Malaysia for purportedly publishing news deemed ‘official secrets’ (Chan, 1986).

More notoriously, in October 1987, the Internal Security Act 1960 and the Sedition Act 1948 were used by the regime to crack down on dissent. The crackdown, known as *Operasi Lallang*, came at a time when there was a leadership crisis within UMNO. As mentioned earlier, three newspapers, including the hugely popular English tabloid, *The Star*, were closed for an indefinite period because of their coverage of the crackdown. This crackdown was significant for the Malaysian media. As Wong (2000: 134) puts it:

Virtually overnight, a tentative culture of inquiry was cowed and eventually disappeared, as a generation of journalists left the trade taking their skills and experience with them. And not all of them were from banned newspapers; there were also refugees from other dailies.

The “taming” of the media notwithstanding, the trend of increasing concentration of media ownership in the hands of companies and individuals closely aligned to the regime, of political interference in media coverage of events, of using the legal apparatus, and of increasing commercialization of media content, continued well into the next couple of decades (1990-2005).

Studies on the state of the Malaysian media through this period (Mustafa, 2004; Loh and Mustafa, 1996; Zaharom and Mustafa, 2000) indeed have indicated that while commercial media, especially television and radio companies, increased substantially during the decade – from just the one, *TV3*, in the 1980s to three new ones in the 1990s, plus a cable station and a satellite network – most of the companies that were given licenses to operate the different media were invariably ones close to the regime.

6. The Dictatorship of the Market?

The privatization policy of the 1980s invariably accelerated the commercialization of the Malaysian media. New television stations and print organizations came into the market. Indeed, in 1984, Malaysia's first commercial television station, *TV3*, started broadcasting nationwide. Two and a half decades on, three other commercial stations – *ntv7*, *8tv* and *TV9* – have now combined forces with *TV3*. And “combined forces” may, indeed, be the proper phrase to use, given the fact that all four commercial television stations are owned by Media Prima, an UMNO-linked company. Media Prima came to prominence in 2003 when, in August that year, it took over *TV3* and New Straits Times Press Berhad (NSTP), making it “Malaysia’s largest listed media company” (Zaharom and Wang, 2004: 264). And in just a little over five years, Media Prima has managed to take control of all four free-to-air commercial television stations in Malaysia, hence monopolizing this large segment of Malaysia’s commercial television airspace.

What is clear is that, since the mid-1980s at least, Mahathir’s initial “liberalization” of the Malaysian economy has resulted in what I (Zaharom, 1994: 188) have previously termed the “regulated deregulation” of the media. While space was indeed opened up during this period, allowing for new media companies to come into the picture, legal controls have tightened. This, coupled with the lack of an open tender system, has resulted in the ownership and control of Malaysian media companies being in the hands of a few, closely aligned with the government. And there has indeed been increasing emphasis on the production and importation of safe and uncontroversial “light entertainment” materials that are non-contentious and easily marketable – those that will not challenge or question the official discourse. Indeed, the commercialization of the Malaysian media arguably has resulted in a situation similar to the one described by Golding and Murdock (1991: 20, emphasis added):

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.*

7. Moving on – Media Reform and Structural Challenges

On the basis of the discussion thus far, it may be argued that the current Malaysian media scenario and the roles played by the state (and dominant

political parties) and the market is indeed unhealthy. The many instances of state-market collusion most definitely hinder transparency, accountability and democracy, contrary to the assertions of the media-for-development rhetoric. There is clear need for reform, as has been demanded by numerous political parties and, more importantly, Malaysian civil society. However, as we all know, asking, or even demanding, for reform is one thing. Actually seeing reform take place is another thing altogether.

In the area of media reform, we can outline at least four main structural challenges. The first is the challenge of increasing media access *for* a variety of stakeholders and increasing media access *to* a variety of stakeholders. In the first instance, what would be proposed is at the media production level, where different groups (class, gender, age, region, political parties, etc.) are given similar access to the various media organizations to get their ideas/views across to the wider society. In this case, the ideas, projects, perspectives of these groups are given a platform by the media.

The second challenge, increasing access to a variety of stakeholders, is at the consumption level. Here the challenge would be for the media organizations to provide artifacts targeted at the needs of the different groups and not just artifacts that celebrate the state and/or the market, as too often is the case.

Third, would be the challenge of minimizing the dominance of particular, vested interests, particularly political parties, in the media. Party newspapers with limited circulation and owned by political parties, such as PAS's *Harakah*, are understood by all to be politically affiliated. But such a situation becomes quite untenable when mass circulation newspapers and/or television stations that broadcast nationwide (and are paid for by taxpayers' money, as in the case of *TV1* and *TV2*) end up as state propaganda producers.

Fourth, though not least important, would be the challenge of diversifying media ownership. Current practices which allow Malaysian media organizations to be monopolized by a few companies, often linked to BN political parties, do not speak well for the representativeness of the media.

Underpinning these four challenges, of course, is the challenge of increasing the public service role of the media. This is no mean task, given the tradition of political intervention in the Malaysian media.

8. Media Reform and Socialization

Indeed, for these structural reforms to be implemented, there would need to be at least two related elements. First, the implementation of such reforms would call for considerable political will, especially on the part of the ruling coalition. This, of course, is easier said than done, given the relationship over the past three decades or so between the media and dominant Malaysian political parties.

Second, and equally important, but often ignored, is the element of education or socialization. This happens at both the workplace and, much before that, in universities and colleges. Much criticism has been leveled at journalists and broadcasters who practice “self censorship”, even worse, practice “cue journalism”.

“Cue journalism” is a form of reporting that uncritically transcribes speeches and comments, for example, from especially ruling party politicians and their representatives (see Mustafa, 2006). These practices have often come about not due to the journalists’ choosing, but due to the conditions at the workplace. As veteran journalist and Editor-in-Chief of the *Sun* in 2008, Chong Cheng Hai, said in an interview with Malaysian journalist and playwright, Kee Thuan Chye (2008: 272):

There is never really a loosening, not when you have a division in government whose sole job is to monitor the press (and other publications), when there are laws which say the minister can shut you down without notice and his action cannot be challenged in court. The loosening and freedom exist only in the mind. You think it is less restrictive, so you push the envelope a little further until there is a tug (in the form of action against other publications or a gentle reminder) and you start checking yourself again. The leash may be loosened but the noose remains.

Be that as it may, it is also true that the Malaysian media have generally been compliant because media education in Malaysian universities is profoundly conservative, preaching conformity and compliance (Zaharom, 2003). The emphasis is very much on form rather than substance; the focus is on training students the technical aspects of media, to reproduce established media practices, rather than deconstructing such practices and questioning why they are producing the artifacts that they do. Indeed, unless the challenge of reform is taken on at the education level, it is quite likely that the vicious circle will continue.

9. Media Reform and the New Media

While media reform either in the form of a public or private initiative indeed seems quite a distance away, nonetheless, the arrival of the New Media (or what was previously widely termed Information Technology [IT] or Information and Communication Technology [ICT]) appears to have brought new hope for such reform in Malaysia.

It virtually (no pun intended) started off during the days of *reformasi* in the late 1990s. In 1996, Mahathir had launched the much-hyped Multimedia Super Corridor and the equally-hyped Bill of Guarantees promising non-censorship of the Internet.

And from there, things just took off. With the combination of new and old technology, many websites, predominantly anti-government and pro-opposition, were downloaded from PCs, photocopied in bulk, and distributed widely at public places, such as the mosques and the *pasar malam* (night markets). Sure, there was harassment, but it certainly did not deter the websites from mushrooming. Run mainly by amateurs with little or no journalistic training, many thrived on rumors and innuendoes and had relatively short shelf lives. Of the few that remained once the dust had settled, many owed their survival to the resilience of their web masters more than to the quality of their reports.

Then Malaysia's first web-based newspaper, *Malaysiakini*, came on to the scene. Launched on 20 November 1999, just prior to the 10th General Elections, *Malaysiakini* was initially funded largely by the Southeast Asia Press Alliance (SEAPA). Within a year of its launch, *Malaysiakini*, received numerous international awards for courageous reporting. Constant harassment by the authorities over the years and the difficulties faced in meeting their costs evidently have not deterred the relatively young and idealistic staff of *Malaysiakini*. A decade on, it still provides critical news coverage and analysis, often scooping the mainstream news organizations, the most widely reported being its coverage of the 12th General Elections on 8 March 2008.

Newer news portals, such as *The Nutgraph* and *Malaysian Insider* have come on to the scene to compete with *Malaysiakini*, but it seems to be holding its own. A more recent phenomenon, "citizen journalism", in the form of blogging, appears to have adversely affected the BN ruling coalition in the March 8 elections. Hence, after the elections, BN politicians were urged to set up their own blogs to counter opposition comments, often with hilarious results. Even if anecdotal still – although more thorough studies, such as Wan Zawawi and Tan (2008), are now taking place – many accounts indicate that this more recent phenomenon of blogging will be with us for quite awhile yet. It has become something akin to a "last resort" for citizens totally disenchanted with the lack of reforms in every important sector, and have grown disgusted with the continuous spin doctoring that happens in the mainstream media, both public and private.

It is quite evident, therefore, that numerous events leading up to the 2008 elections, and events since, indicate that there is much disenchantment and discontent among many Malaysians. The Lawyers March for Justice (26/09/07), the BERSIH rally (10/11/07), the HINDRAF rally (25/11/07), culminating in March 8, 2008, all seem to point to an emboldened Malaysian population, one that appears to be demanding change. But thus far, sadly it appears that there are those politicians who refuse to budge, to consider the need for change. This is all quite understandable, perhaps, given vested interests and unfamiliarity with losing power and control.

10. Looking Beyond the “Media for Development” Rhetoric

By and large, then, the observations and ideas presented here are meant to problematize the current situation. Indeed, the aim is to urge us to move beyond simple and simplistic media-state-market relationships. More than that, the aim has been to initially determine what the essence of PPP is, based on a couple of available definitions. It is then illustrated that the theoretical orthodoxy informing much media and development policies and strategies results in public-private media partnerships not benefiting the public. As such, they reinforce the existing inequalities and power structures. By outlining, certainly in the context of Malaysia, how these structures are undemocratic in nature, this paper has then attempted to discuss strategies for reform and the challenges to be faced.

The stand taken here is that such resistance and opposition in the media could indeed come about and be reinforced through an understanding and application of PPP that puts people – public needs, public service – at the core. Unfortunately, as we have tried to illustrate, thus far this has not taken place. Indeed, informed by modernization theory, media strategies and policies, certainly in Malaysia, have worked to reinforce power structures which, in turn, have hindered public participation in the media. Public-private media partnerships, such as they may be called, have certainly not led to the emergence of a public service media akin, say, to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). Instead, such partnerships *ala* Malaysia have led to greater concentration of power, with political parties within the ruling BN coalition government having a stranglehold over the various print and broadcast media. This, thus, goes against the very spirit of PPP as defined in this paper.

In sum, we need to move beyond the simple and simplistic – but, nonetheless, still influential – media and development theoretical orthodoxy. In its place, in the words of Latin American media analyst, Martin-Barbero (1988: 462) there is indeed a need “to understand the texture of hegemony/subalternity, the interlacing of resistance and submission, opposition and complicity”.

Note

1. Revised version of a paper presented at the Faculty of Economics and Administration (University of Malaya) International Conference on “Public-Private Partnerships in Development”, Petaling Jaya Hilton, 15-16 January 2009. Some of the materials for this paper come from a USM RU project (2007-2010), titled *Squabbling Siblings, Feisty Friends: the Media, the People and Singapore-Malaysia Relationships*.

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