Crossing the Threshold of General Public Relations Practices: Assessing Malaysia's Experience in the First Quarter of the Millennium

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Abstract

Public Relations (PR) is nothing new to the present day global community. In fact, mankind had exercised PR since the day they first decided to live together. Since then, an essential beacon of wisdom in the history of mankind was planted. The birth of the modern PR began in 1948 when the *Public Relations Society of America* and the *Institute of Public Relations* in Britain were founded. Today, the influence of this communication field has engulfed almost all professions of global organizations. Majority of these organizations apply the PR principles and practices into their organizational structures. This paper begins with the historical backgrounds of the international PR culture, studies, and definitions. From there, the discussion penetrates deeper into the realm of the Malaysian PR culture. This analysis deals with many aspects of the PR, i.e. professional ethics, social and legal contracts, aimed at giving a considerably critical understanding of the Malaysian PR culture, which differs in definitions and practices. At the end of this paper, readers are presented with an overview of contemporary threats and challenges facing the field. This concept paper deals with the past, the present, and the future uncertainties of the PR field. Whether we are aware or not, PR today has been tremendously used for managing social stress in view of globalization. Yet, the forces of tolerance and brotherhood grant the country confidence in facing future challenges and threats. Indeed, the world of global PR is changing inconsiderately. Come what may, Malaysian has chosen to toughen up for a journey of her own in the wake of PR uncertainties.
Keywords: Malaysia's Experience, Public Relations, Anticipation.

Introduction

We are in the cultural milieu where everybody seems to agree with the notion that moving faster is the best approach in management. Indeed, globalization is a scary terminology – it removes and reshapes faster than the will of mankind. To some Malaysians, globalization began with the arrival of the Internet into the country's public domain in 1992. Since then, the landscape of the Malaysian PR culture has changed. Three decades ago, Malaysia was an agricultural-based country. Then came the foreign investment initiatives that gave many

Malaysians a good start to fixed-income living. The gradual influx of foreign multinational corporations indirectly have assisted the country to set up a healthy climate for exploring new frontiers of governance. These new landscapes were then stimulated by the emergence of Information Communication Technology (ICT) revolution in the late 1990s. This plethora of technological proliferation happened in a structured progression - one after another. Technological improvements began to tangibly influence the Malaysian way of life. Primary schools today, for instance, are equipped with ICT teaching tools. Indeed, ICT plays as a key enabler of globalization that sets the Malaysian PR culture at a crossroads. Of late, the public life is changing very fast in many, many ways.

In this chaos, Western lifestyles and cultures have been consistently blamed for the erosion of the Asian traditional values. After the September 11 tragedy, ICT in Malaysia had becoming a security requirement other than a tool for good governance. Thus, this concept paper will explore the impact of globalization on the Malaysian public along with the country's aspiration towards building a k-society through ICT development. In achieving these goals, Malaysian Government prefers not to relinquish the national integrity as our primary policy - watching closely before taking any action is still the best approach for this fragile region. In fact, moving hastily in this era is simply behaving like moths being drawn to a burning flame. Indeed, a rethinking on new technology is imperative.

Malaysian Public Relations Culture
The Root of Malaysian Public Relations Culture

The roots of ethnocentrism in Malaysian PR culture can be traced to the heyday of the colonial rule. Historically, Malaysia gained its independence on August 31, 1957 through the Constitution of Malaya. During the colonial period, the British kept the different races (Malays, Chinese, and Indians) physically apart. This prevented racial conflicts but it also kept the culture of the different groups almost intact. At the time of the struggles for independence, a majority of the people of Malaysia were Malays. Since British rule in the Malay states was through treaties with the Malay rulers, independent Malaysia should ideally revert to Malay rule. The Chinese and Indians would legally have no status in Malaysia. But the Malays decided that they should share political power with the Chinese and Indians and other non-Malay indigenous people. Malaysia's approach to race relations, like everything else, is unconventional (Mohammad, 2006).

The Malays harboured hopes that they would mix with the other races. But the other races were too big and strong for this to happen. In addition, the Chinese were economically powerful, and this enabled them to challenge the political power of the Malays. The differences in the religions of the three different races also militate against assimilation. Attempts to make Malay Culture the official culture were not very successful. In the end it was accepted that the different races should retain their cultures but the official national culture is largely based on the culture of the Malays. Thus, the official language is Malay but other languages can be preserved and used as the media of instruction in schools. This contrasts significantly with some countries, which do not allow the languages of the minority communities to be used at all (ibid.). The culture of the country developed within separated ethnic compartments. The Malays and non-Malay will have different attitudes, beliefs and behavioural patterns. Attitudes concerning political power, political competition, the rights of citizens and minorities, and the capacity to emphasize on ethnic boundaries became more

important than the shifting tides of support for individual leaders those days. In evaluating the operations of a political system, some attention must be given to those core beliefs and attitudes that affect political balance and maintain the institutions and political life of the country.

Moreover, basic assumptions about power and politics between Malays and Chinese were derived from different sources. The Chinese relied upon Confucian patterns while Malays from Islamic Sources. Traditional Malay ideas about power and authority were based on status, hierarchy, and ritual patterns of deference. The Chinese relieved anxieties created by political conflict by passing on rumours and seeking sympathy from bystanders. The Malays preferred to remain silent and withdrawn on the assumption that 'talking about trouble makes matters worst' (Hock, 1991). Looking back, Malaysia began as an agricultural country. As time goes by, the country has no choice but to reform. Malaysia started to emerge as an industrialized manufacturing-base economy from 1990's onwards under a careful administration of its Government (Mehra, 1989).

From the day Malaysia gained its independence, the country has had to constantly battle trials and tribulations. These obstacles were embraced with great courage and most of the time, Malaysia triumphed. The fact that Malaysia was able to overcome many obstacles through her media serves as an interesting point to ponder. Throughout the years, Malaysia had accomplished an astounding record of a civil Government – save for a brief emergency period that started on May 13, 1969, when a racial conflict erupted. The National Operation Council then, ruled the country. The conflict erupted out of a controversial post General Election (GE) results. Malaysia's major races, Malay, Chinese, and Indian, were all dissatisfied with the results and confronted one another (Khoo, 1988).

However, conflicts do not necessarily signify the incapability of the Malaysian Government in ruling the country. An English proverb says: "The glory of life doesn't stop you from falling". The root of the problem was the imbalance of the structural social system inherited from Malaysia's former ruler – the British. The structural social system introduced by the British was *divide and rule* – by which the major races were first divided according to their race before certain tasks and occupation were assigned to them. Each division was governed by certain specific rules and regulations. Malays were bound to rule and occupy the rural areas; Chinese were designed to generate economy and occupy the urban areas; and Indians were nurtured to be agricultural workers and work in the rubber estates (Hock, 1991).

Contemporary Malaysian Public Relations Culture

For decades, economists and sociologists have grappled with the question, "Why have some countries developed economically and becoming prosperous, while others remained mired in backwardness and poverty?" Until now, none has been able to find a convincing answer. Undoubtedly, many factors were responsible. Culture is one of the major factors (Huntington, 1999). A common pitfall awaiting those who try to describe a culture is to create the impression that the culture is fixed and unchanging. Nothing could be farther from the truth that all cultures are dynamic (Salzmann, 2011). The rate of cultural change may vary from one society to another, or from one institution within a society to the next, but no culture stands still. Cultural changes proceed at a much slower pace in societies that are only slightly affected by new technological development (Mohamad & Abdul Manaf, 2003).

What enables the different cultures in Malaysia to be sustained and to coexist is the spirit of tolerance and pragmatism displayed to everyone. Malaysians know that any attempt to impose any one culture would cause resentment, non-cooperation, and perhaps racial confrontation. The country would become unstable and unable to grow. We believe in Malaysia that it is better to have a slice of a growing cake than the whole of a shrinking cake (Mohammad, 2006).

Today, the cultures of the different races are preserved but some elements of the non-Malay cultures have become a part of the national culture. And the Malay culture has in turn become a part of the cultures of the non-Malays. The preservation of the cultures of the three main races is such that they remain distinct enough to be recognisable and identifiable yet they are different from cultures of their countries of origin. Thus the Chinese spoken in Malaysia is sprinkled lavishly with Malay words while the Malays use Chinese words for certain things. It is the same with the Indians. The difference in the cultures of the different races are such that Malaysia claims to be truly Asia because you can see the Malay/ Indonesian, the Chinese and the Indian cultures in Malaysia, including their ethnic cuisines (ibid.).

The Demand for Cultural Adaptation in Malaysians Public Relations
Many countries are facing and will face the problem of peoples of differing cultures living together. There will be problems in the management of cultural integration. When the dominant culture is that of the vast majority, the best solution would be to adopt the dominant culture. However, cultural integration is not just a national problem. It is also an international problem. It has become so because of the development of communications technology, especially television with its real-time news broadcast 24 hours a day. It has brought the world into everyone's living room. Between the Hollywood and the electronic media, the cultures of the ethnic Europeans, in particular American culture, have been spread worldwide. There is no culture in the world that is not affected or influenced by this onslaught. In this view, back in the year 2006, the then Malaysian Premier Dr. Mahathir Mohammad stated that when cultures meet, three things happen. First, one culture may completely dominate so that the other culture (or cultures) would wither away and disappear. Second, the culture may absorb each other so that there would be a new culture (of which is a mixture of two different cultures). Third, all cultures can co-exist - at times harmoniously, and sometimes conflictingly (Mohammad, 2006).

Nurturing New Malaysia's Public Relations Culture
ICT as Public Relations Tool
ICT of Malaysia has allowed for the efficient and cost effective flow of information, products, workforce, and capital across national and regional boundaries. Though ICT is not a panacea for all rural development problems, it has the potential to help the rural poor to leap from some traditional barriers to development. Many aspects have been significantly improved via ICT with effective application of ICT strategies. As for the case of Malaysia, the use of ICT is expanding rapidly. ICT that came into the country comprises of a diverse set of technological tools and resources to create, disseminate, store, and manage data and information. Traditional ICT tools such as television, radio, and telephone have proven their effectiveness in promoting development in marginalized areas (Omar, 1985). ICT came along with the emergence of computers with an international networking facilities - a cordless

communication technology, attached to the powerful soft wares for processing text, and audio-visual materials (ibid.).

However, despite the opportunities for development, developing countries like Malaysia also have to face some negative aspects of ICT. As a result, a few gaps were created – i.e. the rich against the poor, the developed against the undeveloped, and the technologically literate against the illiterate. All of these misfortunes have led to the creation of another terminology – 'the digital divide'. However, a recent study on digital divide observes that all countries around the globe are increasing their access to ICT - though the developed countries move faster than the developing countries (Ahmed, 2001).

In accordance with this, wireless voice communications in Malaysia have expanded significantly in the past decades. Wireless technologies are nevertheless seen as the prime movers in the telecommunications arena (Mohammad, 2000). To date, all universities in Malaysia have provided free wireless networks or Wi-Fi at every corner of their campus. These networks enable staff and students to access public data from any point, at any convenient moment. These advancements have affected the overall telecommunication culture among Malaysians. In such regard, Malaysia has also introduced the *Communications and Multimedia Act in 1998*. The Act is the first legislation of its kind in the global effort to address the issues arising from the convergence of the telecommunications, broadcasting, and computing industries. In this regard, Malaysia is among the pioneers in electronic Government (Mohammad, 2000).

The Overall Impact of ICT on Malaysia's Public Relations Culture

Since the dawn of ICT in this country, Malaysia has steered towards the industrial age that has affected her society. Manufacturing hubs became evident for ICT development as the rural dwellers migrated into the urban areas. Foreign investors ensued. Almost in the blink of an eye, Malaysia had transformed into a manufacturing hub with the best infrastructure in the Southeast Asian region. The patterns of information culture changed abruptly then. Improvements in the capability of hard wares, soft wares, media storages, and communication infrastructures allow more progression. On media storage side, floppy discs were transformed into high density diskettes, then to the higher capacity hard discs, and later to a user-friendly media optics CDs, VCDs, DVDs, so on and so forth (Jaafar, 2002).

This bears affinity with Wilbur Schramm's opinion in 1972 upon the integrative, nation-building role of mass media in developing countries (Schramm, 1972):

- Firstly, communication can be used to contribute to the feeling of nation-ness.
- Secondly, communication has a role as 'the voice of national-planning'.
- Thirdly, it can help to teach skills attendant to development.
- Fourthly, it can be used to extend industrial and commercial markets.
- Fifthly, people can be prepared to play new parts and responsibilities, and face new problems that come with development.
- Sixthly, communication prepares a nation for its role among other nations.

Apparently, all of the earlier revolutions (be it physically or spiritually) have had their shares in developing Malaysia. With the arrival of ICT on the country's doorstep, Malaysia aimed at developing a knowledge society according to the needs and requirements of her citizens. In

short, in whatever way ICT may change the country's PR, it has to consider a great deal of the society's needs and values that were inherited and adopted from the past (Jaafar, 2002).

Essential Suggestions in Maneuvering The Overall Impacts of Ict on Malaysia's Public Relations Culture

By virtue, technology is neutral. It is up to mankind to manoeuvre them to whatever direction they wish. As Malaysian society become more information-based, the public is getting hungrier for faster, and better information. And this trend will continue. Undoubtedly we are now witnessing a technological progress forging ahead faster than ever in human history. It is sweeping forward in an unexpected fashion on a wave of powerful global communication networks of ever-increasing performance and capacity. One thing that we must always remember is that any form of development will implicate the societal values in three major areas (Hassan & Abdul Rahman, 2000)

    (1)   The Positive Implications
    (2)   The Negative Implications
    (3)   The Unpredictable Implications

(1) The Positive Implications
Among those areas are in allowing the impossible to happen. Malaysian society nowadays could gather vast essential information via internetworking across the globe. There is also a bigger freedom of choice in broadening one's view through numerous specialized applications. Among those are e-Commerce, e-Telemedicine, e-Government, e-Sovereignty, and so on (Jaafar, 2002). There is also an open platform and effective medium of interactions in a borderless frontier. Every member of the society has an equal chance to be heard and accessed by one another (ibid.).

(2) The Negative Implications
Among those areas are in dividing the society digitally. It is almost impossible to get every single person in the society to embrace the ICT at the same pace. The Malaysian society today is consistently divided between the haves and the haves-not venture into the digital knowledge (Jayanath, 2016). Failing to access ICT nowadays might result in failing to seek knowledge in future and running the risk of being left behind. This major weakness of ICT lies in rapid technological advancement. Keeping up with the pace of ICT technology requires continuous investments. With the recession affecting the lives of the global community, developing country need more than patience and perseverance in keeping up with the ICT pace. Another implication is upon the unhealthy contents of ICT. Most of these involve mindless activities such as hacking and pointless chatting.

(3) The Unpredictable Implications
This in fact, is the scariest of all domains of ICT. There is nothing certain to prepare, nor something definite to fear of. While the Internet allows effective information transfer, it also allows users to be tracked by others. No one will ever know the actual identity of that watcher. Nonetheless, there is also a concern on whether the Internet will transform the global society into a single entity on the basis of mutual information sharing, or end up being manipulated and utilized by others (Greider, 2000). As for Malaysia's experience, since the mid-1990s, the concept of electronic PR had begun to be heavily emphasised by the majority of Malaysian

citizens. This marked a significant shift from the previous emphasis on the traditional method of serving the public (Leong, 2006).

From the above suggestions, it is highly recommended that every PR sectors to be aware of all changes – regardless of being predictable or otherwise. None should be taken lightly, even from the most awkwardly negative experiences. Only by exercising such awareness, the future of PR will forever be secured and competent. In fact, Malaysian public officials firmly believed that the success of the Malaysian civil service sector would largely depend on the extensive use of ICT. A lot of efforts had been spent on creating the Electronic Government as an application for the development of Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC). For instance, under the Sixth Malaysia Plan (1990-1995), RM1.36 billion was approved for projects and purchases related to IT. Under the Seventh Malaysian Plan (1996-2000), RM2.3 billion of IT-related investments in its ministries and agencies was spent, an increase of nearly 70 percent (Jaafar, 2002). To date, almost the entire PR existence had been transformed from the moment the microchip was invented. It changed the way we live and the way we do businesses as well as the way we communicate. The demand for faster information, anywhere, anytime is also stimulating an unprecedented growth in the telecommunications industry (Mohammad, 2000). All of those will in return, enable the country to spearhead its pioneering efforts in the vast unchartered territory (Abdul Karim & Khalid, 2003).

Conclusion

Today's Malaysian netizens are prone to be reckless in crossing every communication borders. More and more countries are becoming multi-ethnic as people migrate in all directions to seek a better life in virtual form. In fact, this trend will become more intense in the coming years – so much so that there will be substantial percentages of the population of any country which are of different ethnic origins, belonging to different cultures. Figuratively speaking, our world is getting smaller by seconds. Unless there is greater understanding and tolerance of the numerous differences between people, differences in colour, religion, language and culture, conflicts are bound to occur. Such conflict may even lead to civil war. Due to of all these possibilities for conflict, it is important that Malaysia to first understand the situation before moving any further. In the past, when culturally different people meet due to migration or conquest, there was usually no room for cultural coexistence.

In the Malaysian context, the Government policy with regard to regulate the media can be regarded as liberal with the exception of certain controls. One should never perceive the numerous restrictions as an intimidating factor to the freedom of expression in Malaysia. In fact, despite all restrictive media laws and regulations, more and more freedom is being offered to the public. PR Personnel are now required to consistently change the way they work, beginning with their mind-sets and behavioural paradigm shifts. We do not deny the importance of acquiring new gadgets and applications – but the impression that desired change would occur by default with the new technological advancement is truly a wishful thinking. Change has never been easy nor comfy – especially in the wake of the second quarter of this millennium.

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