Malaysian journalists' perceptions on the role of the media

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

In this study, the authors examined the perception of Malaysian journalists with regard to the role of the media in Malaysian civil society. A total of 182 journalists participated in the study via self-administered survey questionnaires. Results revealed that Malaysian journalists have mixed views on the role of the media in the Malaysian media environment, which is highly regulated by the government. They are highly supportive of the role of the media as "interpreter", "disseminator", "analytical-objective", "mobilizer" compared to the role of media as "watchdog", in support of the argument that the country's socio-political environment shapes media environment, which in turn influences how journalists conceive their roles. Education and training background and years in journalism have no significant influence on their views concerning the importance of the role of the media. Implications of these findings are discussed in this study.

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1. Background

Malaysia is a multiracial nation with a population of twenty nine million people. Case (1993) calls Malaysia a pseudo-democratic country. Since she achieved independence in 1957, Malaysia has grown by leaps and bounds and much economic and national development has taken place. There has also been much progress in the media and political landscape of the nation. The media landscape in Malaysia has seen major economic and technological developments over the years; however, there has been growing concern over the role and standard of journalism in the country (Anuar, 2006; BERNAMA, 2006). From the government's perspective, the news media should be pro-government. It is an agent for national development and political stability and should practice responsible

journalism and self-censorship. The ruling political party linked media and press system has been subjected to direct and indirect controls to ensure and reinforce the role of media as a partner in national development. But there has been a radical shift in the socio-political landscape in the country recently. The ruling coalition party (*Barisan Nasional*) has been under pressure to maintain the status quo since the 2008 general election when it lost its long-held, two-thirds parliamentary majority. This political development marked a new political chapter in the country. Despite the increasingly restrictive media and journalism environment, the public's awareness and aspirations for greater democracy has led to dissatisfaction and criticism of the role of the media in Malaysian society. Given this development, it is timely therefore to reflect on how journalists in Malaysia view their roles in media and society. Heeding Liow's (2012), Smeltzer's (2008), and Weiss's (2012) call to understand media's role and influence in context, it is important to consider the media environment and socio-political characteristics in the country when determining Malaysian journalists' conception of the role of media. In this sense, taking Malaysia as a case, the authors intend to provide empirical support on the importance

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and usefulness of a particularistic approach in understanding variation in the media roles and journalism practices. Malaysia presents an interesting case for such particularistic approach view because its political structure is unique and different (Lee, 2012), its media and journalism environment is highly regulated by the government (Anuar, 2006), and the state of relations among its people of different ethnics and religions is described as in the "state of stable tension" (Baharuddin, 2005). There is a growing body of western literature on media role conception; however, published journalism studies in Malaysia (e.g., Anuar, 2006; Mohamed & Khalib, 2006; Ng, 2004; Wong, 2004) are not many. More importantly, little is known about Malaysian contemporary journalists' perception of the role of the media in these seemingly challenging times. Journalists' conception of media role is important because it bears relationship to what is reported (Weaver & Willnat, 2012), and news coverage matters because it influences public opinion. The present study aims to fill the knowledge gap on media role conception among Malaysian journalists in the present challenging times and makes theoretical contribution by integrating media and socio-political factors that influence journalists' views on the role of the media. The study examines 182 fulltime journalists and their perception of the role of media in an environment which is highly regulated and controlled by the government.

1.1. Changing Malaysian media and socio-political landscape

The beginning of journalism in Malaya, later Malaysia can be traced back to the pre-independence period, with the publication of newspapers in English and vernacular languages of the main ethnic groups. Today, after five decades of independence, the number of newspapers in circulation has reached to about one hundred. Likewise, the number of radio and television stations has also increased since the first stations were established in 1920 and 1963 respectively. The central role of journalism and the news media during the formative years of the country was to disseminate national policies, educate the masses and foster economic and national stability (Hachten, 1996). The state-run radio and television stations had been broadcasting news and information pertinent to national development while also supporting the ruling government's ideologies and policies. National privatization policies introduced in 1984 resulted in the expansion of privately owned media outlets, and developments in this arena were further enhanced during the deregulation period that followed in 1995. One major consequence of developments during this period was the consolidation of private media ownership. As can be seen today, most private mainstream media in Malaysia are owned by one of the largest media conglomerates, Media Prima Berhad. This conglomerate has political links to and is controlled by the ruling political coalition party in Malaysia.

It was also during this time that on-line journalism began to make a significant impact on Malaysian media. This was especially true during the late 1990s. While mainstream media continued to dominate and influence the nation, online journalism also grew rapidly and

gained dominance. The emergence of online independent news media provided the public with an alternative source of news that was often not reported in mainstream government-linked news media. The development of alternative online media sought to challenge the state-controlled media and was perceived as trying to undermine government propaganda (Kenyon & Marjoribanks, 2007). These developments have impacted journalism in the country, and it remains highly regulated by restrictive media laws and regulations (Nain, 2007). These laws and regulations are put in place to ensure that the news media functions mainly as an agent for national development. Often, these actions and efforts on the part of the government face dissenting voices from pro-democracy activists.

The political dominance of *Barisan Nasional* since 1957 is maintained by political and cultural factors (Lee, 2007; Singh, 1998). Many political analysts have pointed out that the numerous media laws and regulations were created to ensure continuity of power of the *Barisan Nasional* government. Politically contentious journalism that undermines the *Barisan Nasional* propaganda is suppressed through existing legal mechanisms. Government intervention and political party ownership of Malaysia's mass media has limited the concept of free, fair, and fearless journalism. The political dominance of the *Barisan Nasional* however, is now being challenged after five decades in power. This political development is facilitated by the growth of internet-based media. On the one hand, while the growth of internet-based media provides opportunity for greater democracy in the country, on the other hand, it also poses challenges to the ruling government's legitimacy and hegemony. As such the government has tightened the nation's already restrictive media environment and redoubled its efforts to minimize the internet's political impact on distribution of and access to information, particularly contentious political information, and have included defamation charges, monitoring and/or censoring contentious political or anti-government information. Traditionally, the primary focus of government linked media has been nation building, political stability, racial harmony and economic prosperity. Findings of a study on democratic attitudes conducted in 1996 showed that Malaysians were willing to limit democracy, particularly under conditions that threaten social order (Welsh, 1996) and support the notion that news media must function as government machinery. Additionally, it is also important to note that Malaysians exhibit cultural traits that emphasize modesty, consensus, non-confrontation, respect for seniority and authority and harmonious relationships – and avoid confrontation, outspokenness, and aggressiveness (Tan & Goh, 2006). This means that the media must not be used to openly and critically discuss sensitive issues that challenge the country's socio-political status quo as this would disrupt political stability and racial harmony in the country (Tan & Goh, 2006).

Since the last national general election in 2008 which sounded the clarion call for greater democracy, Malaysians are now more critical of the role of the media in society. The economic and technological changes and developments in the media landscape have not necessarily led to improvements in the performance, standards or quality of the state