



Cooperation Amidst Crises: Dynamics of Media Strategic Alliance Networks between Thailand and Malaysia

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Abstract

Issues relating to globalization and cross-border cooperation in the contexts of political, economic and trade have been discussed and explored extensively across both developed and developing nations. Nevertheless, not much has been discussed on the role of media in enhancing cooperation between nations. In practice, the media is always looked upon as the crises builder or enhancer. Anyhow, the fact is that different groups of people use the same media content for different reasons. The media can be interpreted in the hands of the users. The media actually is a perfect tool to generate dialogue across borders. In this case, media institutions, which encompassed both electronic media and print media, together with the new media that focused on information and communication technologies, have the capacity to strategically enhance the extent of cooperation between governments, societies and nations. In relation to this, the article has undertaken to examine how media institutions in both countries can play a more proactive role in strengthening bilateral cooperation between Thailand and Malaysia in terms of projecting the political, economic, cultural, and social image of both countries through media coverage encompassing television programs, news, films, advertisements, as well as the new media such as Internet communication. The discussion will be conducted in two levels of analysis, the macro and the micro. The article shall focus on the end results of these two methods by which consumers use the media and the anticipation by the mass communicator. The article also investigates the opportunities of dynamics media strategic alliance in terms of structural, content and the end results of information, by media institutions of both countries.

Keyword: globalization, cross-borders, strategic alliance network, media, content

Abstrak

Isu-isu yang berkaitan dengan globalisasi dan kerjasama melintasi-sempadan dalam konteks politik, ekonomi dan perdagangan telah banyak diperbincangkan, merintang negara-negara maju dan membangun. Namun tidak banyak yang diperkatakan tentang peranan media dalam menjana kerjasama di antara negara. Dari segi amalannya, media selalu dilihat sebagai pencetus dan penggalak krisis. Walau bagaimanapun ianya dilihat, faktanya, ialah kumpulan orang yang berlainan akan menggunakan kandungan media yang sama pada tujuan yang juga berlainan. Tegasnya, media boleh diinterpretasi oleh sesiapa saja yang menggunakannya. Sebenarnya, media adalah merupakan alat yang lengkap untuk menggalakkan dialog melintasi- sempadan. Dalam kes ini, institusi media yang merangkumi cetakan dan elektronik, bersama-sama media baru yang berfokus kepada maklumat dan teknologi komunikasi mempunyai kemampuan untuk secara strategik menjana tahap kerjasama di antara kerajaan, di antara masyarakat dan di antara negara. Sehubungan dengan itu, makalah ini mengambil langkah untuk meneliti bagaimana institusi media

di kedua-dua negara dapat memainkan peranan yang proaktif dalam memperkukuhkan kerjasama bilateral di antara Thailand dan Malaysia dalam usaha mengenengahkan imej politik, ekonomi, budaya dan sosial kedua-dua negara melalui liputan media; merangkumi program televisyen, berita, filem, pengiklanan dan termasuk juga media baru seperti komunikasi melalui internet. Perbincangan dibuat pada dua tahap analisis, iaitu, tahap makro dan mikro. Makalah ini akan juga meneliti akan peluang-peluang kepersekutuan kedinamikan strategik media dalam bentuk struktur, kandungan dan keberhasilan akhir maklumat, melalui institusi media di kedua-dua negara ini.

Kata kunci: globalisasi, melintasi-sempadan, jaringan kepersekutuan strategik, media, kandungan

Introduction

About 47 years ago, media guru Marshall McLuhan predicted that mass communication would turn the world into a global village. Since then, the study of international mass media system focuses on those media that cross national boundaries. Some media are deliberately designed for other countries; other media simply spill over from other country to its neighbors. Media content have always been done in such a way that they are designed for international consumption. A brief tour of the key players in this global business of mass-mediation of information will prove the extent of McLuhan's point.

The first is the print media, whereby there are many newspapers that provide foreign-language or international editions. The popular ones fall into two categories: general newspapers and financial newspapers. Some of these newspapers have enjoyed great international status such as the *New York Times* (USA), *Le Monde* (France), *El Pais* (Spain), *The Times* (UK), *The Statesman* (India), and *Al Abram* (Egypt). The international circulations of news have been dominated by global news agencies such as Reuters, Associated Press, Agence France-Presse, United Press International, and ITAR-TASS, the largest of these elites. In recent years, more specialized news organizations such as the New York Times Syndicate and the Los Angeles Times Syndicate have also become important players (Dominick, 2002).

As for magazines, the popular *Reader's Digest* publishes more than 40 international editions that are distributed to about 28 million readers in nearly 200 countries. Time Warner, in addition to the international edition of the *Time*, which is distributed in about 190 countries, also publishes *Asiaweek* and *Newsweek* in Chinese. The international edition of *Newsweek* alone reaches about a half-million readers. Hearst Magazines International oversees the distribution of eight major titles in more than 100 countries. As an example, the *Cosmopolitan* alone is sold in 31 countries. Smaller special-interest magazines are also growing internationally, example, *Popular Mechanics* and *Men's Health*. Even business magazines, including *Business Week* and *Fortune*, also have significant foreign readership (Herman & Chesney, 1997).

Secondly, about 150 countries are engaged in some form of international broadcasting. The biggest development in international broadcasting in recent years has been the proliferation of global news, sports, and music channels. The pioneer in this area was CNN, whose highly influential cable news are now accessible from thousands of hotel rooms and numerous cable systems in Europe, Africa and Asia: including Malaysia and Thailand. CNN International (CNNI), which started in 1990 have reached more than 150 million homes in about 200 countries in contrast to CNBC, which offers 24-hour business news to 147 million households in 70 countries worldwide. In addition, BBC World, a full-time news channel, is available in Europe, Asia, Africa, and some US locations (Wells, 1996).

Along with news channels, sports and music channels have massive audiences all over the world. MTV is available on every continent, reaching more than 200 million homes, and has

versions in many languages. ESPN International (ESPNi) is the biggest global provider of sports programming. Launched in 1988, the service is seen in more than 140 countries and territories and reaches about 80 million households. The News Corporation (Newscorp) also operates satellite services that beam news and sporting programs to more than 175 million viewers in Europe and Asia. The leaders in global television are CNN, MTV, ESPN, BBC World, and CNBC. Global radio broadcasters include the Voice of America, the BBC, Radio China International, Deutsche Welle, and RFI.

Thirdly, a good deal of global electronic media traffic consists of films on digital and video (compact) discs (DVD/VCD) which travel from one country to another. It is not surprising that the market is dominated by Hollywood films. American films still dominate the box offices of many foreign countries. In fact, in many cases, the formats of popular US series are licensed to overseas producers who later transform them into localized versions, thus extending the rent-seeking policy seemingly embraced by the entertainment industry in this context.

Finally, it is the Internet that has come close to fulfilling McLuhan's global village concept. The World Wide Web provides access to worldwide media on a scale never before possible. Furthermore, e-mail has made it possible to send messages across the globe in seconds. Many newsgroups are devoted to news about international events and other cultures, and people all over the world have web pages that can be visited directly. The name *World Wide Web* is particularly appropriate for this global channel.

By and large, most countries in the world belong to such a global development of the media development described above. There are perhaps several logical reasons which underpin this phenomenon. First, getting news or other informational materials via the global media networks are relatively low-cost including their ease of accessibility and wide-ranging news to choose from, making it easier and cost effective for most media practitioners. Second, the media content together with the end results of information and entertainment gesture at the enhancement of this global concept thus implicating that the media industry is at the forefront of globalization and not being left behind. Third, the media always assume that consumers would want to obtain certain news and entertainment with as much international or global aura as a wide range of sensational perspectives. Therefore and finally, is the important perception that global media are always favorably seen as a sustainable source of global entertainment as well as a reliable and credible source of global news.

Focus

As a caveat, the universality of any perception whatsoever should not be taken for granted by media and communication scholars. This is because, apart from the surveillance function that the media plays for society, not much has been done (or the media simply choose to forget the role it has) in enhancing cooperation between nations. The media is actually a perfect tool to generate dialogue across borders. Our definition of media here will include not only the mechanical devices that transmit and store the message, but also the institutions that use them to transmit messages. When we talk about the media, we will be referring to the people, the policies, the organizations, and the technology that go into producing and distributing mass communication. In this case, both electronic and print media institutions, together with the new media information and communication technologies, have the capacity to enhance the extent of strategic cooperation between governments, societies and nations.

Perspective

The so-called global news and entertainment are in fact modeled from the western perspective, thus raising the notion of cultural domination. Cultural domination refers to the process in which

national cultures are overwhelmed by the importing of news and entertainment from other countries – mainly from the United States and other industrialized countries (Golding, 1997). The existing flow of media content is one-way. Under such system, news from the Third World is scant, and what news there is reflects unfavorably upon the developing nations. For example, what do we know about South America? Most people will mention two things – revolutions and drugs – which are but two topics that dominate Latin American news coverage, overshadowing everything else that could and might have been imagined, hence newsworthy, about the whole continent.

Likewise, we may frame the same concerns on what and how do we know about news coverage on Malaysia and Thailand since the era of borderless communications. An over-dependency on media outsourcing highlights an elitist western media hegemony which looms over the ‘open sky’ policies adopted by most nations today, appear to be the cause célèbre for pushing for greater regional cooperation in strategic media alliance to protect the common interests of sovereign nations. In actual fact, such dependency upon outside news does sound awkward even seemingly fraudulent when the voices, stories - the objective truth of the matter - is just outside our window or in our own backyard. It seems fair to claim that as neighbors, we should and deserve to know as it were, the ‘gospel’ truth about news and issues of common concern, more than everybody else in the world. But it will not be easy to break up an old habit nor to see such media policy reform ushered in sooner than one would have liked as sensationally ‘juicy’ but ‘bad tasting’ news will continue to be dominant. However, it is always important that the issues about us should be seen with our own set of meanings and interpretations, further reflecting our understanding of each other’s cultural awareness including our own personal experiences. Media institutions are the perfect tool to generate dialogues across political and socio-cultural borders.

It is important that the media institutions insist upon right-thinking yet politically-correct perspectives so that they can contribute towards strengthening bilateral understanding and cooperation in these countries. Indeed, perspectives do create multiple but relevant viewpoints. Here, those perspectives relate to the uses of mass communication, that is, whether or not they are justifiable and capable of fulfilling the myriad of anticipation from the masses in both societies. The media should uphold searching for the truth themselves with the spirit of maintaining goodwill and helping each other for towards success and harmony.

This paper attempts to examine the relationship between media institutions in Malaysia and Thailand, two bordering countries in Southeast Asia, as much as how they can aspire to assuming progressive roles in strengthening and developing a win-win bilateral cooperation. These include exploring some mass-mediated constructions of political, economic, cultural and social interests of both countries through films, print news and the ecology of the new media. This paper will eventually explore the opportunities for dynamics media strategic alliance in terms of structure, content and the end results of information by the media institutions of both countries.

Micro perspectives

There are perhaps several avenues for which the possibility for mutually progressive representations of both countries against one another may be mediated. Debunking and deconstructing popular myths and indeed, cultural stereotypes which are ‘regulated’ by historical narratives (facts as well as fictions), religious differences, socio-cultural practices and prejudices, whilst necessary, however, should only be maneuvered intelligently by both sides ‘at the border’, that is, within the mediated public sphere where strategic communiqués about both national identities, leaders, economies, societies and cultures are most susceptible to errant, slanted or gross representations.

One of the key avenues which should be looked into by policy makers, media practitioners and intellectuals in both societies at large, is that of popular culture and specifically, through the film medium. Film may enable members of both societies to attain important and useful insights into the intrigues,

intricacies and idiosyncrasies inherent in each society. That said, these benefits could only become part of one's new if improved understanding of either Malaysian or Thai socio-culturality if there were concerted efforts towards arriving at such noble intention. This implicates the film industries in both countries in terms of having or lacking the necessity financial as well political will to back-up such creative endeavor. How we imagine ourselves in relation to our neighbour, has to do, to some extent, with the cinematic will and the filmic constructions of each other that we have internalized and become endeared to.

The Malay film industry, being the backbone of the Malaysian national cinema, has a somewhat aberrant regard for certain characteristics which seemingly have been attached to the Thai people. This, of course, is a fairly recent observation following the release of *Kongsi* (2011) (lit. underworld gangsters) by Farid Kamil, an action-comedy film depicting a mortal revenge plotted against Kuala Lumpur's underworld gangsters. *Kongsi's* protagonist is, interestingly, a jackal-like bounty hunter of Siamese extraction called Tumulak, who spoke Thai and Kelantanese-Malay dialect and thus, signifying the unique ethnic and linguistic characteristic found along northern east-coast of the Malaysia-Thai border. This means that for many mainstream film audience watching *Kongsi* anywhere but Kelantan, this is likely to be the moment for anyone to be intimate with someone as fearsome as Tumulak. But more significant than such a character, it is probably the most intimate moment they will ever 'get' inside an artifacts like a kickboxing school, a Buddhist temple and a representative from southern Thailand. Politically, it is the most volatile region in Thailand, yet socio-culturally and historically, it is very much a Malay country and was part of the Malay kingdom before the 1826 Anglo-Siamese pact perforated it along the famed River Golok, a daily crossing point for humans and contrabands – just like Tumulak and his arsenal of weapons and identity cards. In this regard, whilst *Kongsi* may have wanted to maintain a semblance of reality of life for the once timid Tumulak as much as his socio-cultural environment, one feels that it may have achieved, consequently, stigmatized framing about Southern Thais, which has been framed less subtly through Tumulak's slapstick odyssey. He decidedly suffers from a deficit of integrity when he took on a Malaysian police officer, his one-time sparring-partner, whilst having made the whole police force look like fools with his comic exploits and escapades.

Strangely enough, Malay film audience, nay, most Malays, may already have a rather horrific yet popular imagination about their northern neighbor reflected in the making of two versions of *Raja Bersiong*¹ mythology (lit. the fanged-tooth² king) in the span of five years, one in 1963 by Ramon A. Estella, another in 1968 by Jamil Sulong. Whilst a popular Thai horror film like *Nang Nak* (1999) may naturally reinforces unsavory perception towards Thai folklore and 'demonic' practices, Siamese shamanic prowess is ridiculed if rendered somewhat hopeless for the purpose of exorcism in the hit Malaysian horror comedy *Hantu Kak Limah Balik Rumah* (lit. Kak Limah's demon comes home, 2010) by Mamat Khalid. Folklore aside, it is *Jogho* (1997) (lit. the champion) by Uwei Haji Saari, through which a Malaysian filmmaker finally seems to have something important point to say to the audience in South Thailand and Malaysia. Mamat is a *jogho*, one who trains fighting bulls, a sporting practice that has been outlawed by the Malaysian government but not in Southern Thailand. Mamat's socio-cultural environment subjects him to the manipulative and risky business of gambling, his sole means of income. It is a vignette into the lifestyle of the Thai Malays who are continuously caught in cycles of bloody violence not just over fighting bulls, but with the Thai security authorities which make impressionable screen appearance.

Malaysian film industry has generally shown that they are 'comfortable' with the Thai Other, as it were, rather than with the dominant Thai Buddhist society. One of the long-term repercussions that may arise from a mediated and discursive knowledge as such lies in the fact that Thailand will forever be perceived as a divided country by Malaysians. It does not help the Thai government's public relations efforts to project itself as benevolent and people-centric to its

¹ It tells the story of the Siamese-blooded king of Kedah, Raja Ong Maha Perita Deria, whose sheer brute and tyranny struck the deepest fear into the hearts and minds of his people. Following a culinary accident, whereby his favourite spinach dish was laced with the blood dripping off his cook's cut finger, the king started to grow fangs but only for the worst, as he literally became blood-thirsty and mindlessly killed his people everyday before they banished him into the forest.

² In reality, fang-like stones can be seen today in the Baling district of Kedah, traditionally a Siamese settlement located within the north-western Malaysia-Thailand border.

people in the south, thus, attempting to sooth the cyclical unrest. In this regard, Amir Muhammad's *Show Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* (The Village People Radio Show, 2009), a documentary articulating the ordinary lifestyles of former members of an anti-British outfit who have made Patani's 12th Chulabhorn Development village their permanent home, demonstrates importantly that a truly enlightening and reconciliatory perspective against the misgiving on Southern Thailand's notoriety as a communist den can be achieved. Indeed, politics aside, Malaysian filmmakers should be drawing more on positive resources of Thailand's socio-culturality for which their works can be utilized inter-culturally further beyond the border. Alas, what about a Thai filmic perspective of Malaysian society? To date, there is hardly any oeuvre in which a glimpse of life of its southern neighbour as part of the aesthetic narrative and imaginary of the Thai people. Understandably, religious, linguistic and socio-cultural diversity between both societies may have played a major part for this 'amnesia'. Thai government should be willing their filmmakers – possibly through joint commercial production – to seek inspiration and local knowledge from both societies towards the culmination of a regional, cross-cultural cinematic agenda, much like the Malaysian-Indonesian joint film productions since the 1980s. In fact, one is reminded of the Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh who made *The Rice People* (1994) the second film adaptation of Shahnnon Ahmad's famous Malay novel, *Ranjau Sepanjang Jalan* (1966), and later screened it at the Cannes film festival. The historical narrative of the *bunga emas* dowry, the artistic performances of *mak yong*, *menorah* and *wayang kulit* are examples of Thai-Malay historico-cultural legacies that have been taken for granted and showcased as part of the popular and traditional Malaysian culture. Indeed, such opportunities should also be extended to the broadcast media in both countries. Television programs are windows into the socio-cultural realities and they are invaluable as a psychologically-engaging and intellectually-stimulating mechanism of cross-cultural communications. Since the introduction of satellite television network in late 1980s, Malaysian television audiences have endeared themselves to serial dramas from Southeast Asia to Northeast Asia to Latin America without having any clue to the Thai *lakorn* and its socio-cultural constructions.

Elsewhere, stories may also be inspired by and around culinary experience and shared by both societies, particularly, in the case of the ubiquitous *tom yum kung* (tom yum stalls) introduced mainly by Southern Thai restaurateurs. Whilst one must acknowledge capacity of the cinema for mediating mutual if greater socio-cultural understanding about both countries remains wanting and undermined by preconceived notions if prejudices, the above gastronomic referent in actual fact, is quite a 'food' for thought. A rather serious allegation against the nationwide *tom yum kung* business was made by a former Thai minister a few years ago (Zan Azlee, 2011). He condemned these *halal* and inconspicuous tom yum eateries, implicating them in discreetly sponsoring most of the Patani independence movement led by the Patani United Liberation Organisation (PULO), which maintains a secular and political public profile since 1968. However, non-PULO factional groups have been carrying out guerilla-like insurgencies targeting primarily the Thai military forces in the region although at times, innocent civilians have also fallen prey in their attacks. This scandalous connection between the *tom yum kung* and violence in the deep south seems worth deliberating as far as media practice is concerned.

Whilst it is probably typical of the mainstream print and broadcast media who will 'go to town' with 'hard' news like the Kreu Se Mosque massacre as their main headlines, one must not completely lose sight of the underpinning dialectic of such habitual practice. On the one hand, most of these stories, regrettably, are syndicated from international news agencies like Cable News Network (CNN), Reuters or Associated Free Press (AFP), instead of retrieving actual reportage from either Malaysian or Thai journalists embedded on the ground. In fact, there is some truth in suggesting how 'we', speaking on behalf of either side of the divide, have become rather dependent on news agencies in the west for 'border stories' (say, of human rights crimes by the authority) against perhaps a more accurate observation or better judgment from one of our own (and a plausible feat if we had given our own localized reportage due credit for its authority

and integrity). On the other hand, and arguably more important in times of crises, there is also evidently a sense of self-restraint or self-censorship admirably demonstrated by the media for the mutual benefit of both countries. When Zan Azlee, a freelance Malaysian broadcast journalist and filmmaker, received clarification on the link between the Patani freedom campaigners with the *tom yum* entrepreneurs in Kuala Lumpur, he did not speculate upon it further in his book despite his futile efforts to make his informer to separate “the urban legends from the facts” (2011:32). Azlee wisely attributed his ‘yes-no’ line of questioning to “rumors”, before resigning to his main priority, “to find out about the people of Patani”, for he “really hadn’t come (t) here to dig into the story of the militants” (33). Azlee’s decision to ignore the rumor-mill is a sound example of how Malaysian media practitioners should exercise strategic discretion to close out public outrage and protest against such *tom yum* restaurants. Media practitioners should know when to draw the line and toe it for the greater good of this nation and its northern neighbor. It also seems to be the view of the National Security Council that Azlee’s apparent documentary on Patani’s life and culture would not be shown on local television channel though it had passed the Malaysian censorship standard. This was not done out of spite, rather it was purely out of respect as the country then was about to play host to the Thai prime minister Abhisit Vijajeva, and such forethought will always be counted on in order to maintain a peaceful and respectful relationship, an ‘understanding’ thoroughly enjoyed between these countries.

This ‘understanding’ seems to be a sensible media practice from the northern perspective as demonstrated by the Thai media. It has done a great service to the rest of the Moslem societies in the south and naturally across the Malay Archipelago by highlighting the admirable gestures of its monarchy in sustaining interreligious tolerance and piety between co-existing Moslems and Buddhists in Thailand. In fact, this is something that media in both countries should continue to promote because these religious denominations constitute a majority-minority structure. The highly revered and ‘hands-on’ Thai monarch, King Bhumibol Adulyadej, as informed by the Nation newspaper, has a habit of visiting and holding dialogues with Moslems in and around Bangkok during the holy month of Ramadhan. His majesty also provides financial donation to support religious bodies and their activities. One wonders if such news is not newsworthy to Moslems in Malaysia for there is hardly any ‘buzz’ about it by any of Malaysian press - lest it was a visit to the Buddhist temple in Kelantan by its religious Menteri Besar, perhaps, which would be a fodder for local politicking. The monarchical system that exists in Malaysia and Thailand must always be regarded with esteemed by media institutions in both countries for it can be mobilized to effective and desirable consequences as far as strengthening bilateral relations between both nations. Perhaps, one must insist that both Malaysian and Thai press agencies to ensure that positively discriminated framing of their royal families are advantageous to the peoples both across the border.

By and large, Thai media’s sensitivity, arguably, has proven to be crucial to the stability in the border region. A couple of incidents will be briefly invoked as examples which will show that much like the relationship between Malaysia and Singapore, socio-cultural and political harmony and stability are of paramount interests. The first scenario recounts the tragedy of a devout northern Thai Buddhist called Juling Pongkanmul, who was assaulted to death by Muslim women in the war zone of southern Thailand. Although Juling was in comatose for eight months, Thai filmmakers had already begun working on her documentary in *cinema verite* style, which concluded with footage of the coup d’état that brought down Thaksin’s government in 2006. But the four-hour film did not pass the government censor until 2009. Teacher Juling’s fatal abduction in Narathiwat might have seriously sever Muslim-Buddhist relation throughout Thailand and beyond, had it not been for the reverence and unifying aura of their King, whose portraits were ubiquitously seen in the acclaimed documentary. The issues of Islamic insurgency in southern Thailand, the context of *Citizen Juling* (2008), are apparently never-ending and they will overshadow other border stories which are newsworthy such as the main economic activity in the Gulf of Siam, a joint-venture oil and gas development project between Malaysian

conglomerate, Petronas and the Thai government. Unfortunately, such success story is likely to be marginalized in the broadsheets although its economic value to national development is critical.

At the moment of writing this article, the border towns of Sg. Golok and Narathiwat are again in the news of both countries for one reason only. The news of the bomb blast detonated by suspected Patani separatist group which killed several Malaysian men and injuring over sixty people, has eclipsed all other border stories like smuggling and illegal crossing. The way, or so it seems, the incident has been framed by the Malaysian official press release is rather interesting. Whilst pointing firmly to the insurgents, it also appears to be linking another possible culprit to the bombing, which it described as a “retaliatory attack by drug dealers who has been affected by the recent raids by police on drug dealers leading to the discovery of 14,000 amphetamine tablets” [*sic*]. This is almost like reading news trivia on Malaysian men who go to border towns to seek sexual pleasure from Siamese women although claiming that others may bring marriage proposals (read for polygamy) with them. It is difficult it seems for the media to be (too) objective without having to throw in a red herring or two, as it were. On the one hand, the Bangkok Post reported that a senior Thai military officer had claimed that “the attacks were related to a drug operation in Sg. Kolok district early last week”. On the other, the New Straits Times played down the identity of the attackers as a “mysterious [...] network of shadowy groups”, hence, making it a “daunting job for the Thai security forces to snuff out the extremists for good”. It is somewhat apparent that underpinning the close cooperation between Malaysia’s foreign ministry and Thai authorities is the way forward in order “to get to the bottom of the bombing”, somewhat implies a ‘strategic’ media coordination with a similarly measured response from both sides of the border during such time of crisis.

It is perhaps significant to recall here the point made by Azlee’s ‘fixer’, Tuwaedaniya Meringing, a veteran local journalist who argues that the Patani people do not regard the Thai media as fair and credible in their journalistic practices due to the fact that it has always been a lop-sided public sphere. Meringing believes that this one way traffic of information that comes mainly from authority-defined sources only is merely creating a heavily biased view and hatred from non-Muslims against Muslims – a classic Islamophobic reporting by Thai media. The backlash of this media policy is clear enough; Muslim Thais in the conflict zone sought to international as well as Malaysian news and broadcast agencies for a fair and truthful reportage. This enviably positions the Malaysian media vis-à-vis Thailand’s internal affairs in a critical yet delicate spot for they will be expected to play the role of the devil’s advocate, as it were, to both parties. However, this sense of media and information ‘dependency’, according to Meringing, has triggered another interesting media development in Thailand, namely, the rise of peace journalism. Meringing realizes that the everyday-defined socio-cultural, economic and political realities in the region must be disseminated to the nation so that the rest of the Thai people will be better informed of the real stories in the deep South. Peace journalism here is conceived as practices of educating and engaging journalists (mostly from Bangkok news and television stations) with the people and their everyday lifestyles so that the process of ‘unlearning’ the problematic of Patani insurgencies can truly begin. This is also where BERNAMA, Malaysia’s foremost news agency can take a leaf from the strategic media alliance between Thai journalists in promoting peace journalism and there is no other better avenue to kick-start this effort than through the new media technologies.

The Internet has been a critical and fertile frontier for one of its most powerful group users today, that is, the cyber bloggers. Blogging and micro-blogging platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are universal hallmarks of a healthy if evolving democratic media(ted) practices of the everyday amongst globalized citizens. Because bloggers are by and large self-proclaimed citizen journalists, their stories cannot automatically assume the legitimacy enjoyed by authority-defined online media agencies. The work of Meringing and his Bangkok-based fellow journalists is an example of how the new media technologies can be utilized to promote peace vis-à-vis alternative storytelling. Contested narratives are part and parcel of democratic and responsible

journalistic ethics, which should only be suppressed if they are nothing but fabricated lies which can be exploited by certain quarters to manufacture consensual opinions which are detrimental to public and border security. Since online news are indispensable, news portals run from both sides of the border must always try to be in reciprocity. To achieve this, Malaysian and Thailand desk editors should be established to maintain the legitimacy of their online news as much as their synchronicity and veracity. In saying this, there are of course many websites on Patani cultural and political history that can be googled, thus providing alternative information and viewpoints.

The revisionist approach adopted by these activists-cum-bloggers, whereby Patani's neo-historicism and the relevance of its struggle for independence or self-rule are digitally archived, has actually widened the horizon of expectations on the conflict. In fact, besides portals devoted to Patani news, the activism of PULO and its splinter groups, Thai Malaysians like Isma Ae, a young Malaysian writer of Patani Malay extraction runs a blog in which both the narratives of his genealogical and geographical roots become voiced and outsourced by Malaysian publishers. Whilst his readership will increase by tenfold, a diasporic writer like Isma, nevertheless, is just an example of a peace-loving and mature member of his own mediated imagined community, to put the Andersonian concept within the new media ecology. The latest forms of micro-blogging through Facebook and Twitter seem to have given the much needed edge for news reporters and agencies who have to put up with, much less to face up to, the atmosphere of 'carnival' often associated with macro-bloggers. With Facebook and Twitter, Malaysian and Thai media should be thinking of sending their fixers into the far country, as it were, where most of the news gets picked up, selected and distributed by international news agencies. Their domination should be gradually overcome if journalists on the ground are more competitive in sniffing out exclusive news so that when something happened in the east or our backyard like the Sg Golok bombing, both Malaysian and Thai audiences did not have to 'read-all-about-it' from the west, time and again.

Structure

Although the role of a mass media system in Malaysia and Thailand might differ, the principal role is still to help develop and build a nation, and an extension of such role to the neighboring countries. For many developing countries including Malaysia and Thailand, we are more concerned primarily with economic and political development. This concern is translated into a rather focused definition for the role of mass media. In general, the media are expected to help further modernization or other national goals, in terms of projecting the political, economic and socio-cultural images of both countries. In fact, the phrase 'developmental journalism' has been coined to describe this philosophy (Hachten, 1999; Volkmer, 1999). In short, developmental journalism means that the role of the media is to support both countries' national interests for economic, political and social development and to support nation-building objectives such as national unity, stability, and cultural integrity of both countries.

The developmental perspective can be seen through two conceptions as the extreme. On the one hand, developmental perspective entails finding ways to make news and information about economic activities, political policies, agriculture, cultural integrity, social development and educational goals understandable to viewers and readers and to highlight the developmental goals achieved by both nations. On the other hand, developmental can also mean that the media refrains from any criticism of opinion based, of the government and will only print and aired only what the governments deem helpful to their cause. The philosophy falls somewhere between these two conceptions of developmental perspective. This should not be a problem, since the media is supposed to inform the truth (the concept of reporting) and refrain from perspective opinions. The role of the media in the bilateral cooperation is straightforward, as sources of information and entertainment.

Thus, the bilateral cooperation should involve the government and government agencies in the upper portion. Both government policies and the ties with respective international agreements should be considered important. Since most media organizations in Malaysia and Thailand are privately owned, there must be an institution that can unite them together, perhaps a professional based institution, e.g. the Press Institutes comprising of the Malaysian Press Institute and the Thailand Press Institute. Another form that can be taken into consideration is the formation of union and professional associations. The activities of bilateral cooperation and dialogues of the media industry between the two countries should be done by these institutions. Government and government agencies should act as supporters to the cause.

Strategic alliance network

Strategic alliance network emerged from micro-level collaborations between both media organizations of both countries, comprising of subsets of media firms within an organizational field of news and entertainment that are interconnected by their repeated and overlapping partnerships through time. A strategic alliance network constitutes an opportunity structure that simultaneously facilitates and constrains the possibilities of media practitioners (of both countries) to form new collaborative combinations (Baker & Faulkner, 2002).

The areas of collaborative combinations can be done through mass media symbiosis. Media institutions of both countries should form an association for mutual benefit, for the organization and the societies at large. For a start, the media of both countries should access news and information in particular, directly to the consumer, thus eliminating the intermediary, or 'middleman', who might typically supply the news and information. The Internet and the World Wide Web is a good example in creating a ubiquitous and easily accessible network where both parties make direct contact. This is a disintermediation process that can be used for strategic alliance network pertaining to media content and the end results of information for both Malaysian and Thai media.

Areas of collaboration and dialogue by the media can be viewed as functions of mass communication for both societies. First is the surveillance function, which we popularly call the news and information role of the media. The surveillance function can be divided further into two main types (Dominick, 2002). The warning, or beware, surveillance can be done where the media of both countries share to inform the society about threats from hurricanes, erupting volcanoes, depressed economic conditions, increasing inflation, or military attack, to mention a few. These warnings can be about immediate threats (a television stations interrupts programming to broadcast a tsunami warning), or they can be about long-term or chronic threats (a newspaper runs a series about air pollution or unemployment) through sharing of news and information between the two media institutions of both countries. Instrumental surveillance has to do with the transmission of information that is useful and helpful in everyday life, like sharing information on stock market prices, fashion ideas, recipes; to name a few.

Closely allied with the surveillance function is the interpretation function. Besides supplying just facts and data, media should also provide information on true, ultimate meaning and significance of events based on actual interpretation from one's own viewpoint. It is important to be aware of dysfunctional situation.

The media of both countries must be able to join different elements of society that are not directly connected through linkage. As an example, telethons that attempt to raise money for the treatment or researches of certain diseases like the bird flu can be done in both countries. The needs of those suffering from a disease are matched with the desires of others who wish to see the problem eliminated. The best example of linkage for the media itself is the use of websites, newsgroup, and chat rooms on the Internet for discussion, exchange of ideas and dialogue between media in Thailand and Malaysia. If applicable, it can be prolonged to the public too.

The transmission of values is a subtle but nonetheless important function of the mass media. Through the news and entertainment, socialization function can be done by subtly adopting values and behavior that can be shared by both societies. The mass media present portrayals of our society, and by watching, listening, and reading, we learn how people are supposed to act and what values are important. For the media, this can be done through exchanging magazines' entertainment contents, newspapers' features and televisions' telenovelas.

Conclusion

Of late, there is much preoccupation with border stories which does make it difficult to try to distinguish the fact from fiction. Part of this confusion is a result of the failure of media institutions in both societies to plug key information gaps, which can be done by reclaiming their vantage position as storytellers who tell their own stories. Unless some policy initiatives are introduced by both sides, the 'sad' picture will remain unchanged and unchallenged. Gleaning at some crude generalizations, for example, most non-Moslems will mention two things about Malaysia: that it breeds Muslim terrorists; and that it is a country of Muslim extremists. As for Thailand, it will be thought as a country that spread the global bird flu virus; and that it prefers to use violence on its human rights campaigners and prisoners of conscience. It is important to take note that this blame game is a cold war mentality played out by the hegemonic global media. There should be greater socio-cultural and economic vistas in our media content from now onwards in order to try to tilt the scale that is always laden with sensational and political news.

This article has attempted to dissect a certain aspect of the phenomenal concept of global village propounded by McLuhan as plausible and tangible strategic option in the context of two regional nation-states which keep finding that the dynamics of their political and socio-cultural relations are constantly shifting. Media strategic alliance then perhaps appears the most strategic and viable media framework which will avoid from straining bilateral cooperation that have long been established or costing those that are mutually beneficial to both countries. The discussions have shown that media strategic alliances are indeed critical in order to reinforce the legitimacy and authority of mainstream reportage as much as representation by news agencies and media institutions across all spheres of public existence, particularly for and about those within the border worlds.

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