

Macalester International

Volume 12 *Malaysia: Crossroads of Diversity in Southeast Asia*

Article 22

Fall 2002

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Recommended Citation

Steinman, Clay (2002) "News from Malaysia: Comparative Reflections," *Macalester International*: Vol. 12, Article 22.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/macintl/vol12/iss1/22>

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News from Malaysia: Comparative Reflections

Clay Steinman

The month we traveled to Malaysia, January 2002, was a time still marked by the horror of September 11th, so much so that many of our loved ones worried about us while we were gone, needlessly it turned out—or at least no more than one should worry about loved ones traveling anywhere these days. While we did spend most of our time in the most economically developed areas, the cities, what we saw was more like home than I had expected—more affluent, more Westernized in architecture and commerce, and more dominated by familiar discourses, at least those that I could understand.

As a former journalist and one who teaches and writes about media in the United States, I was struck by the formal similarities of the Malaysian English-language newspapers to those in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth countries. I should not have been surprised, given that Malaysia had been a British colony until 1957, and until recently, its children had been required to learn English. Some of the newspapers had at one time been owned by U.K. companies. In contrast, television news in Malaysia seemed mostly cloned in style from local news in the United States.¹ Those of us who value the press freedom guaranteed by the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, however, quickly ascertained the defining differences between U.S. and Malaysian corporate media. In essence, Malaysian corporate media are required to have government licenses (as only broadcast channels are in the United States), and are owned either in large part by the government, by the leading pro-government political parties, or by political allies of the governing parties, which is not the case in the U.S.²

The familiar concept of “free press” carries as its shadow its putative opposite, which in market culture has come to mean forms of media that are government controlled. Yet this is a contestable binary. I would like to explore that binary, review its origins, and test its applicability to the Malaysian news media, and then explore ways these media may more closely resemble U.S. news media than this binary indicates.

Common sense, in the United States, argues that the purpose of the news media is to provide a check on government. Civics courses teach that the First Amendment’s guaranteed freedoms are rooted in responsibility: the responsibility of the media to protect democracy by speaking truth to state power. This argument, in turn, rests on the assumption that the unfettered exchange of ideas serves the common interest as the surest road to truth, much as in capitalist economic theory the invisible hand of the market is considered preferable to and, in the end, more rational than social control.

The Bill of Rights, of course, was written in the 18th century, a time when the few newspapers in existence were partisan organs supported by cover prices that confined their circulation to elites. The change began in the Jacksonian era of the 19th century, when white male literacy and the right to vote were extended. Over the next two decades, in response to this wider literacy and urbanization, entrepreneurs like Benjamin Day (*New York Sun*), James Gordon Bennett (*New York Herald*), Horace Greeley (*New York Tribune*), and Henry Raymond (*New York Times*) realized that the real money in newspapers was the selling to advertisers of access to consumer/readers’ eyes. They developed popular newspapers that sold for a penny or two. Advertisers began paying most of newspapers’ costs — something not envisioned by the authors of the Bill of Rights.

Although the system took another century to refine (with profits dependent mostly on advertising revenue rather than circulation), by the 1950s, publishers and radio and television executives were increasingly pushing the journalists who worked for them to be more politically bland, so that larger numbers of readers could identify with their representations of the world, and to be more entertaining and service oriented in a consumerist sense. To be sure, the commercial news media did serve as government watchdogs, at least now and then (viz., CBS on Joe McCarthy and Vietnam, the *Washington Post* on Watergate, the *New York Times* on the Pentagon Papers), but increasingly the *thens* have outnumbered the *nows* as news budgets have been cut and con-

glomeration has led to pressure for higher quarterly profits. For a whole host of reasons, the watchdogs now are more likely to congregate around the Bill Clintons and Gary Condit. Coverage of the Gulf War and the Afghanistan War has been more characteristic of lapdogs than watchdogs. Critical coverage of private power is rare, nearly nonexistent, in fact, unless tracking government action or litigation brought by others.

Yet because of the legal separation of media and the state in the U.S., news coverage here retains the potential to be critical. This is not the case in a country like Malaysia. Although more social democratic than the United States (e.g., it has universal health care, more progressive income and luxury taxes, extensive if not adequate public housing), Malaysia politically lacks crucial American freedoms (e.g., freedom of the press and of assembly, the right of *habeas corpus*, an independent judiciary, trial by jury, the right to engage in political activity for public university students and professors). Economically, it is even more neoliberal than the United States, promoting comparatively unfettered private economic development as the key to future prosperity. It is not surprising, then, that Malaysia's news media are at the same time both commercial and government controlled. While we were there, I heard this system described as "authoritarian democracy." Others call it "soft authoritarianism."³

I spent 1986 in Beijing working as an editor for the Chinese government at Xinhua, the New China News Agency, so I have some familiarity with state media in a non-Western authoritarian country. Yet not even Xinhua's dispatches were as obviously party propaganda as a typical issue of the *New Straits Times*, a leading English-language "quality" newspaper in Malaysia. The *New Straits Times* is controlled by the governing coalition, the United Malays National Organization (UMNO), through investment and holding companies.⁴ In the January 24, 2002, edition of the paper, for example, the lead story is a UMNO-sourced account of the return of a former opposition party to the ruling coalition. Five stories on the topic dominate page two. There are two other stories on the page: one reports about Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's promise of "stern action against militants and extremists"; and the other reports of a multimillion-dollar libel suit planned by a government leader against an unidentified opposi-

tion politician, a tactic favored by the rulers of Malaysia, and even more by those of Singapore, for harassing and impoverishing whatever limited opposition exists. On page three, the main story reports on the new loyalty oath for undergraduates at public universities. According to the education minister, "The agreement requires them to, among others, be loyal to the King, Government and university, and to heed orders," such as those against participation in politics. It also says an official student organization had compiled a list of the "names of lecturers spreading anti-Government messages," and that the education minister would soon take action against them. On page four, the lead story quotes the head of a party in the governing coalition advising the opposition to learn from its mistakes in a recent election. Another story, about supposed anti-government activities in some Islamic schools, quotes the education minister as saying, "I understand that there are students being taught to hate leaders and tear up their pictures," and asking for a new law to close schools where this is happening. Yet another story features a coalition leader denying his party committed sabotage in a recent election, although it doesn't clearly state what kind of sabotage might have been involved. Not one of these stories gave sources with other points of view significant space. We saw examples like these in the media day after day.

Unlike traditional state media in Communist countries, the media in Malaysia are not obviously government run. Most people we spoke with knew who controlled what, but many (yet by no means all) also seemed to lack a clear sense of precisely what arguments the opposition might have offered that were absent from the government-controlled news.⁵ However cynically the media might be viewed, they accomplish their work of denying access to competing voices, and support for the ruling coalition in Malaysia seems to be overwhelming. I learned that many journalists want to do critical reporting but cannot, given the draconian laws and self-censorship — unless there are vocal splits within the ruling groups.

As I was completing this essay, *The New York Times* published two articles that include material that illustrates how the distinction between the "soft authoritarianism" of Malaysia and our "empire democracy" has become so uncomfortably blurred, accelerating developments that began with the onset of the Cold War and the creation of what Robert Corber and others have called the National Security State.⁶ The first article reports on declassified documents about the Angolan war of the mid-1970s, pried out of the U.S. government with

the Freedom of Information Act (itself under attack from military agencies and their supporters).⁷ The story indicates that the documents “seem to overturn conventional explanations of the war’s origins.” This understates the situation. After U.S. covert involvement was exposed, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and others baldly lied to Congress and the U.S. people, saying that the U.S. had intervened in Angola (on the side of South African-supported guerillas against a left-wing government) to counter what was called an “invasion” by Cuban troops on the Angolan government’s side. Kissinger and others said that the Cuban support for the Angolan government was a “Communist take-over” since, as Howard W. French put it in the recent *Times* article, “Cuban troops in the continent were typically seen as foot soldiers for Soviet imperialism.” However, as French reports, the documents show that the United States intervened on the South African side before any Cubans arrived — indeed, before the Central Intelligence Agency had any inkling at all that Cubans were on their way. According to research based on the documents, which also includes material from Cuban, Angolan, and other archives, when Cuba did send 5,000 troops, it was in response to a CIA-financed invasion through Zaire. Contrary to U.S. disinformation, the Cubans were not only *not* agents of the U.S.S.R., they initially came to Africa without the U.S.S.R.’s permission.

In *The Truth About Lies*, his 1989 PBS documentary about the history of U.S. government deception, Bill Moyers demonstrates how vulnerable we are to such fabrications, uncontested in the news media until their exposure years or even decades later, long after anyone can do much about them, except, perhaps, for those wanting to settle old scores. Such lies devastate democratic decision making all the more in and around wartime. There is no reason to believe that these untruths do not continue, and this raises questions about the efficacy of the news media, even unlicensed and with backing by the First Amendment, to provide a check on government that protects us against dictatorial power.

Television entertainment in Malaysia has become dominated by U.S. and Hong Kong programs despite nominal government commitment to indigenous production.⁸ Between 70 and 80 percent of television programs, including satellite programs, are not of Malaysian origin, and 60 percent of those come from the United States.⁹ My informants told me that aside from normal sexual censorship, government control of television was mostly limited to news programs — for local

entertainment programs, self-censorship sufficed. In the United States, of course, commercial entertainment programs do occasionally critique government policies, however gingerly. There is *The West Wing*, for example, which interestingly enough is popular on Malaysian government TV as well. But if the government in Malaysia does not choose to make its entertainment programs an arm of the state, the same cannot be said in the United States—as the second illustrative *Times* article shows.¹⁰

The April 30, 2002, episode of *JAG* (short for Judge Advocate General — naval prosecutors and defense lawyers) was at this writing scheduled to show a fictional version of the military tribunals revived after September 11 by the Bush administration and denounced by civil libertarians. This version, based on confidential Pentagon briefings for one of the show's writers, "will show conscientious *JAG* officers treating terrorist suspects to many of the rights of the judicial system." This idealized version of the tribunals was designed by the Pentagon to influence the U.S. public outside of normal journalism. The Pentagon regularly cooperates with television shows and movies in ways that make them "a tool of wartime public policy." The article quotes the star of *JAG* as saying, "We send our scripts to our [Pentagon] liaison and they weigh in on it," and the producers tend to follow what the Pentagon says, "because they certainly lend a great deal of production value that we couldn't buy." Pentagon officials confirmed that they were less likely to give a show free assistance if that show told a story from a point of view that the Pentagon did not like. The creator and executive producer of *JAG* said the news "puts forth the glass half empty, and we put forth the glass half full." One might want to argue over the fractions, but there is little argument among media scholars that many people get more "news" from fictional programs than they do from those that represent themselves as journalism.¹¹ The makers of *JAG* "want to show people that the tribunals are not what many people feared they would be." The writer of the episode told the *Times* that, "he felt obliged to inject heroism into the story to raise the morale of viewers and the troops."

Here, then, we have a popular commercial television show glorifying the military trials that the American Civil Liberties Union and others have condemned as violations of human rights and international law

(i.e., they can be conducted in secret; evidence can be introduced without the defendant being able to confront it; a guilty verdict requires only a two-thirds majority of the military officers on the tribunal's jury; and there is no adequate right to appeal).¹² No doubt civil liberties conscious U.S. citizens watching the equivalent show on Malaysian television would label it as government propaganda.

In his valuable book *Agents of Power*, J. Herbert Altschull argues that whatever the form of press ownership in a country, "the news media are agents of those who exercise political and economic power."¹³ In both Malaysia and the United States that power is economic, but in Malaysia it is more directly political. The elites who control the media in the United States may be connected to the political elites but they are not identical to them. Combined with journalists' professional obligations, that opens up spaces of possibility, however meek. The two *Times* articles expose state media power but their existence also contests that power.

Democratic media require a democratic social system, one genuinely multiple in its structures of influence and power. A democratic media system should "empower people by enabling them to explore where their interest lies," "foster sectional solidarities and assist the functioning of organizations necessary for the effective representation of collective interests," "sustain vigilant scrutiny of government and centers of power," "provide a source of protection or redress for weak and unorganized interests," and "create the conditions for real societal agreement or compromise based on an open working through of differences rather than a contrived consensus based on elite dominance."¹⁴ It requires multiple sources of political and economic power so that it is accountable to multiple groups and interests. In this sense, the Malaysian media system has little to do with democratic goals. In the United States, those goals do survive, if in residual form. Yet with more conglomerate pressure for profit, more government deregulation, or with one or two more September 11s, even that residual could be lost. Economic policy or political pressure rooted in fear could make our major media as unified as the counterparts we observed in Malaysia. ●

Notes

I am grateful to Macalester College and to Ahmed Samatar, Michael Monahan, and the staff at the Macalester International Center for supporting and organizing this seminar. Special thanks in Malaysia to confidential informants in the media and to our hosts at the University of Science in Malaysia in Penang, most especially to Dr. P. "Mourthy" Sundramoorthy, Chair of Sociology and Anthropology, and to Dr. Shanti Balraj Baboo, Professor of Mass Communication. My fellow travelers from Macalester, especially the off-campus research teams, contributed much to my experience and choice of materials.

1. Journalists I interviewed told me that the Bahasa Malayu, Chinese, and Tamil newspapers and programs were similar in content to their English-language counterparts, but I cannot verify this personally.

2. A. Lin Neumann, "Malaysia's Press remains Shackled as the Country prepares for Snap Elections," *Committee to Protect Journalists Briefings: Press Freedom Reports from Around the World* (30 November 1999), found at <http://www.cpj.org/Briefings/Malaysia/Malaysia22nov99.html#neumann>. Interviews with Malaysian journalists and media scholars in January 2002 confirmed this analysis. For a more scholarly view, see Indrajit Banerjee, "Cultural Industries and Cultural Dynamics in Malaysia: Critical Problems of Content in the Age of Infrastructure," *Jurnal Komnikasi* 16 (2000): 33–50. Banerjee argues that the privatization of formerly state media has, in the end, only led to more state intervention, through regulation and indirect ownership via ruling political parties (p. 40). I am grateful to colleagues in the Department of Communication at the Malaysian National University for their hospitality and insights, and for making available this and other sources.

3. Claudia Derichs, "Competing Politicians, Competing Visions: Mahathir Mohamad's *Wawasan 2020* and Anwar Ibrahim's *Asian Renaissance*," in *Mahathir's Administration: Performance and Crisis in Governance*, edited by Ho Khai Leong and James Chin (Singapore: Times Books, 2001), p. 188.

4. Banerjee, p. 40.

5. I understand that what we were told by people with whom we spoke may not have been identical to what they knew.

6. Robert J. Corber, *In the Name of National Security: Hitchcock, Homophobia, and the Political Construction of Gender in Postwar America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995).

7. Howard W. French, "From Old Files, a New Story of U.S. Role in Angolan War," *The New York Times*, Late National Edition (31 March 2002): 4; Piero Gleijeses, *Conflicting Missions: Havana, Washington, and Africa, 1956–1976* (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002).

8. Zaharom Nain, "Pathetic Press: Journalism that Fits and (what happens to) Journalists who Don't," <http://www.malaysia.net/aliran/high9808.html>. Nain's article appears on the website of the independent periodical *Aliran Monthly*, a valuable source of critical news and information about Malaysia, as is <http://malaysiakini.com>. Johan Saravnamuttu has argued that the Internet has become home to independent journalism in Malaysia, though he warns that even cyber publications are "not free from the long arms of government surveillance, control and manipulation." See Savanamuttu, "Reflections of a Journalist of the 1960s: Malaysian Journalism in the Doldrums," <http://www.malaysia.net/aliran/monthly/2001/1d.html>. For more about the Internet in Malaysia, see Jörg Becker and Rahmah Hashim, eds., *Internet in Malaysia* (Selangor

Darul Ehsan: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001). I was told that all Malaysian Internet connections go through a government-related ISP, so that it may be that Malaysians who visit these sites may face consequences if that becomes government policy. In any case, as of 2000, only about 11 percent of Malaysians had any Internet access at all (Banerjee, p. 41).

9. Banerjee, p. 42.

10. Katharine Q. Seelye, "Public Relations: Pentagon Plays Role in Fictional Terror Drama," *The New York Times*, Late National Edition (31 March 2002): 12. All subsequent references to this matter are from Seelye's article.

11. See Michael X. Delli Carpini and Bruce A. Williams, "'Fictional' and 'Non-Fictional' Television Celebrates Earth Day: Or, Politics is Comedy Plus Pretense," *Cultural Studies* 8.1 (January 1994): 74–98.

12. <http://www.aclu.org/congress/l112901b.html>.

13. J. Herbert Altschull, *Agents of Power: The Media and Public Policy*, 2nd ed. (White Plains: Longman, 1995), p. 440.

14. James Curran, "Rethinking Media and Democracy," in *Mass Media and Society*, 3rd ed., edited by James Curran and Michael Gurevitch (London: Arnold, 2000), p. 148.