

14/05/1998

Media savvy needed to handle negative Press abroad

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BETWEEN 1990 and 1991, the most prominent news on Malaysia that appeared in the American media was the feat of a countryman pulling a jet plane for a mention in the Guinness Book of Records.

It was one of those quirky news item with which television stations like to end their nightly broadcasts.

I was both impressed by the industry of my fellow countryman as well as amused that it took such a story for Malaysia to get a mention on the nightly news in the United States of America.

Being a journalist myself, I am quite accustomed to the maxim of the news business, which is, bad news sells.

Thus for Malaysia, no news was good news. We must have been sailing along fine then.

So when the New York Times, once the leading newspaper in the US, began putting stories on Malaysia on the front page last year, I knew the editors in this newspaper of record, were sensing some bad news emanating from our shores.

Our honeymoon, it seemed, was over.

After all, in New York, there is little interest in Malaysia.

There is even less interest about the country in the rest of the United States, except perhaps in West Coast and in the capital of Washington D.C..

Unlike in Britain, where there exists the traditional ties of a former colony, New Yorkers and most Americans are fairly ignorant about Malaysia.

You cannot blame the New Yorkers; the city itself is so huge that even the rest of the United States seems alien - as far as the media here is concerned, Idaho may as well been in the Third World.

But when Malaysia made the front pages several times - because of the haze, the financial problems, and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad - our relative anonymity among New Yorkers had ended.

There were commentators and analysts tsk-tsking and speaking rather authoritatively on the events in Mae-lay-zia, Mae-lay-ya, Ma-ha-tir, ring-it, Vision 2020 and Koo-a-la Lump-pu-or.

The gist of the reports was that the haze was an environmental disaster, the result of Third World haste in the pursuit of progress; Dr Mahathir was too outspoken; and the Asian financial situation was the come-uppance to a region that grew too fast to know what was good for them.

A sprinkle of comments from think-tanks, quotes from former ambassadors, gossip from the diplomatic cocktail circuits, statements from the Opposition and non-government organisations, and the obligatory government official who often seemed more inept at saying the wrong thing - the usual cast for parachuting journalists - form the backbone of the reports.

While in term of coverage we may have fared better than some of our neighbours, negative reports still have a large impact on the country.

During the currency battering, for example, they contributed to the bearish sentiment to the country.

Which is why one should be angry by the reports in two British newspapers that the Government poisoned Indonesians illegal immigrants to prevent them from doubling back.

Angered, obviously, if one is accused of practising genocide.

But perhaps, one should be amused as well.

If such highly-held British institutions could believe such things and

print them, then the joke is on them.

We can huff and puff, but when things settle down a bit the newspapers will have to live up to their stories and show the world whether they had done their reporting well, or whether they were easily duped.

Venting our anger is justified but more useful would be to convince them that they are wrong.

Hyperventilating will not do much except to satisfy our righteous rage; take legal action if we must, as nothing hurts a newspaper more than having its reputation questioned.

We must, in the eyes of media practitioners in the United States, be media savvy.

We must be adept at handling the media, quick at diffusing misconceptions and rumours by giving it all the information needed, and more.

As we have learnt from the financial troubles, poor communication led to chaos.

We must also be effective in communicating our points of view.

But there is not much than can be done when we do and say rather strange things...

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