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Media must not detract from goals of a nation

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THE media, more than ever before, has become a formidable rival in the critical struggle to control what the people should know and when they know it.

Richard Reeves, in his book "What The People Know - Freedom And The Press" says "But that was more power than the press could handle - and journalism crashed towards new lows in public esteem and public purpose" adding "the dazzling new technologies, profit-driven owners and celebrated editors, reporters and broadcasters made it possible to bypass older values and standards of journalism."

Reeves was of course, commenting about the state of the American media today.

"The essence of a good or an impartial journalist's or reporter's reputation is that he or she should be free from suspicion of having a personal agenda and bias or a latent brief.

It is not the duty of reporters to comment on the news, he or she should not be permitted to do so. The reporter, however, can interpret the news. Opinion should be left to the editorial writers, columnists and commentators.

The BBC, many a time slanted news inspite of its self-proclaimed much cherished integrity of the news. I ask you - can the BBC, an instrument of the British Foreign Office, and funded by its budget, be really independent of British Foreign Policy?

Well, well, the belief is widely held that BBC correspondents are thinly disguised British government employees and sometimes British secret agents.

So, what is the difference between a BBC correspondent and that of a SBC's (Singapore Broadcasting Corp) reporter or that of RTM's (Radio and Television Malaysia) journalist?

Why are Singaporean and Malaysian reporters subject to being called government hacks or mocked as propogandists and not BBC's or ABC'S? (the Australia Broadcasting Corp).

Are they inferior, not insightful or so dumb they can't smell news or a setup?

In fairness, does not each nation want publicity for itself in the best possible credible light? One can achieve it without having to demonize other people, deride or cast aspersion on other nations and discrediting them.

At least, my country does not pretend we don't want it. Though we do not rule according to approval ratings we do occasionally need a pat on the back when we do well and indeed we have achieved something remarkable since independence 42 years ago. Even our harshest critics will agree with that.

I know for certain neither Lee Kuan Yew, a respected figure in the US and a friend of America as well as China nor Goh Chok Tong, his successor had ever been governed by public opinion or followed popular opinion just to appear consultative.

I can confirm that my Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is not obsessed by how he is perceived overseas. He, of course, cares how he is regarded at home.

Political stability, racial harmony, economic prosperity, equitable distribution of wealth, modernisation, universal education and becoming a

developed nation by 2020 are our national goals.

We are not going to allow anyone nor the media to distract the people from those cherished targets. Like our close neighbour Singapore, we will persuade and if that fails we will not hesitate to point out what we want from our mass media; gently reminding them that we are not the US and therefore the role of our press, TV and radio are different from that of their American counterparts.

Reporting news is about truth, not packaging. Hollywood grossly and offensively profits by adapting and inevitably distorting the news of the day into plausible fiction.

Reeves stresses that "entertainment is a delicious lie, sometimes poisoned. But the sweetness of it may have something to do with a nation high on myths, more and more comfortable with or tolerant of deceit and lying. If politicians quietly or casually lie, the honest ones doing it only when they have to, our job is to shout."

In the same way, if the media does what the lying politicians do, our job is also to shout.

War creates strange bedfellows. I am glad to reiterate here something which you should have already known that we are rooting your victory in Yugoslavia. We are, at least, on this score your ally.

The US is right not to sit by and do nothing as genocide is committed. You pay a much greater price later on had you not acted. But more importantly you would have encouraged many more would-be Milosevics all over the globe.

I look forward to many more instances of Kuala Lumpur and Washington working together and for an improved and abiding relationship for mutual benefit.

The ultimate test of American leadership in the world is not just how you respond to adversity in war, but how you deal and keep peace as we all seek a goal higher than peace alone.

We want Americans to inspire the rest of the world by good examples of deeds and actions which you are displaying in Yugoslavia for which the majority of people are grateful. You must punish people who ever they are who commit genocide. Period.

Likewise, the ultimate test of the media is it must have a mission that will unify and inspire the society it serves. Like you, we also manage news and information to achieve and maintain what are crucial and vital for our survival as a young multi-ethnic, multi-religious and democratic nation.

Like your reporters, editors, writers and intellectuals their Malaysian counterparts are neither heroes nor cowards. They strive to do their jobs as best as they could. In Malaysia, as in Singapore, aping the Western or American media and too much of politically correct egalitarianism, disregarding the local situation and traditions, would be a self-inflicted wound for which there would be no cure.

Would you wish that for us? I think, the answer is no. All races in Malaysia work together to keep peace. And the mass media - coloured only by the national perspective - has played, is playing and will perform a major role to ensure we have a sustainable political, economic and social development we can be proud of.

We want to be friends of all nations, the US in particular. Let's resolve today - each to his own according to his special circumstances and needs.

Malaysia has weathered the carping of Western critics for as long as we have been independent, but God willing, the Malaysian people will again prove our detractors wrong.

We had a difficult time in 1997 and 1998. Malaysia's real gross product

contracted by 6.7 per cent. We had the first recession in thirteen years. The Malaysian Government - in order to arrest continuing unfavourable external environment and the impotence of conventional macroeconomic policies to restore economic stability quickly enough -- took the unusual but brave step of implementing selective exchange controls last September to deal with the situation.

After seven months despite widespread skepticism spearheaded by foreign media and other groups with invested interest, I am glad to tell you, that some beneficial effects have become quite evident.

We have accelerated the pace of reforms, recapitalisation in the financial sector, consumers' confidence has revived; inflation remains tame, the fiscal deficit is being financed mainly by high level of domestic savings, our exports are on the rise, our international reserves increased by nearly 30 per cent from US\$20.2 billion at the end of August 1998 (prior to the implementation of exchange controls) to US\$26.2 at the end of 1998, sufficient to finance 5.7 months of retained imports.

These positive developments augur well for our economic recovery process and for 1999, we expect the real gross domestic product to increase by one per cent. This means our economy is no longer in the decline.

Had you believed what you read in your newspapers and on the Internet and saw on your television screens we would have been bankrupted and become a clone of the Indonesian financial zombie. But we did not precisely because we dared to say no to IMF.

No one likes his country, people and their hard work belittled, taunted and ridiculed. I don't lose sleep over it. We know who we are and where we came from. We are a vibrant and flourishing democracy in Asean, which is an achievement.

As a one-time-reporter-turned-politician and now a diplomat, I have a good perspective on politics and the media.

I have notions about politics and journalism in the US and at home when they are practised well and when they are not. But that is another story."