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PM tells of need to police advertising, Press freedom

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ADVERTISING and freedom of the Press are at various stages of development in different countries and need to be monitored or policed by the industry or by the authorities, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. Self-regulating industries must always take into consideration the interests of consumers and quick gains cannot be the objective of regulating, he said in his speech at the Integrated Strategic Communication Bullseye Worldwide Partners 1999 Annual Meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Dr Mahathir said the advertising industry in most countries is self-regulating but "in less developed countries like Malaysia, the Government still has to monitor and regulate".

The Prime Minister, who described himself as both a beneficiary and a victim of the advertising profession, raised the question of responsibility on the part of suppliers of news.

"If the manufacturers must be responsible for product liability, should the news agencies not be responsible for their products?" he asked.

In pointing out that product liability is something that is taken seriously, he said Cessna, for example, had ceased making single-engined aircraft as defects in the aircraft found 20 years after usage could still result in the company being sued or blamed.

"But when news agencies sell their news reports to their clients, readers and viewers, shouldn't they be made equally responsible for the products they sell?"

"If their distorted and inaccurate news results in wrong decisions being made and losses incurred due to missed opportunities, shouldn't the news agencies, the media be held responsible for their products, namely the news they broadcast to people who are their clients," he asked.

Dr Mahathir said the suppliers of news and the promises made in the course of advertising are no different from other suppliers of goods and services.

"Based on what they are told or led to believe, consumers act," he said, pointing out that adverse news reports have the same effect as advertising.

He noted that the participants of the Worldwide Partners meeting were initially sceptical, anxious, even fearful of coming to Malaysia "after hearing and reading about the allegedly deliberate beating up, trial and jailing of the former deputy prime minister (Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim), and the ensuing protests which, like advertising, have become larger than life through repeated worldwide media hype."

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