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The best medium wins the readers

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CRISES and tragedies sell newspapers especially when they occur on foreign soil. Also, tired journalists around the world are, despite their facade, deep down, unabashed nationalists.

Net surfers can seek to debunk this by visiting newspaper sites, but they are unlikely to find succour nor enough ammunition to fight this argument.

The media is the microcosm of the people at large. Unapologetically, we love our countries. We loathe seeing our homelands fall apart. It is human nature.

In many countries, the local Press has intimate details of little foibles of their Presidents and Prime Ministers. They snigger and mock the leaders behind their backs. But to write negatively about them will be an act of treachery.

The media will instead rush to judiciously cover up the drawbacks. The media in turn reserves unkindness to foreign leaders, which is why personality flaws of Joseph Estrada make hot news elsewhere.

The "real" political dramas that fill Singapore's newspapers and fire the imagination of Singaporeans are, inevitably, Malaysian-made.

Home-made political stories and intrigues in Singapore are scarce. They are a net importer of excitement. Scathing remarks against Lee Kuan Yew or Goh Chok Tong are unheard of.

True to form, one columnist in the Singapore Straits Times recently had a go at Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The most prestigious American newspapers are susceptible to trumpet American "triumphalism" even in their coverage of the 25th anniversary of the ending of the humiliating Vietnam War this week.

Former Senator John McCain is back in Vietnam where he was held captive for five years. Look at the flattering coverage he enjoys. The Great American Dream lives on. Even the Indonesia Press is increasingly protective of their Gus Dur.

And, why would you think newspapers around the world splashed on page one, the powerful picture by an Associated Press photographer showing Elian Gonzalez's captor pointing a gun at the young Cuban boy's rescuer when he was shipwrecked four months earlier.

Foreign crises are probably a safe option. No matter how you dramatise and milk an event unfolding in a foreign land, the decision will still not explode in your face.

It will not backfire. You will not be inundated with legal suits. Your country is sheltered. Such journalistic decisions may even feed the "dark" desires of readers. This is self-explanatory. Most importantly, mankind wants to belong to something, globalisation or otherwise.

The citizens are stakeholders and the last thing they want is for things to go horribly wrong. The world over, the media will be most meticulous when offering details of a news-breaking event at home. Foreign events are covered with a swagger.

You will be able to relate to this argument better when you next see file pictures of a Kuala Lumpur protest led by Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim pop out on CNN and CNBC.

You may actually frown at the wild exaggerations. This inescapably brings us to the question of Press freedom in Malaysia. What is the definition of Press freedom?

A senior British editor once said that ideally there should not be one force or power or grouping that monopolises the dissemination of information, and thus unilaterally influences public opinion.

In Malaysia, public opinion was once dictated by what the television and dailies said. Perhaps the most brutal display of the media power was seen in 1993 when TV3, NST, Utusan Malaysia and Berita Harian sought to destroy the credibility of Tun Ghafar Baba whose number two post in Umno was being relentlessly pursued by Anwar.

A few years earlier, Anwar had engineered a takeover of the New Straits Times Press Bhd group and he craftily planted his supporters in key positions. Anwar received flattering coverage especially on TV3.

In the run-up to the 1993 Umno elections, Anwar was depicted as the faultless hero, Tan Sri Sanusi Junid who backed Ghafar was the villain and Ghafar was made out as a simpleton.

The trick was simple. It is done through unashamedly slanting the coverage. Whatever the Prime Minister said too could be twisted to strengthen the Anwar cause.

It was a turning point in Malaysian journalism. Ghafar (invitation sent out earlier) told a Press awards night during the height of the media campaign against him, he hoped the editors own downfall would not be too humiliating.

By then, a third English daily, The Sun had entered the market. The Edge, a business weekly, followed suit. As prosperity crept in, the circulation of Asiaweek, the Far Eastern Economic Review, Newsweek, Time and the Economist soared.

Practically, the hardworking classes were buying these magazines to read that one article on Malaysia. In the intervening years, more and more Malaysians warmed up to the writing styles and presentation of the foreign publications.

They were hunting for depth and for writers to interpret the nuances and hints cryptically hidden between the lines in the local media.

To sell, the foreign magazines unflinchingly played on the alleged Dr Mahathir-Anwar rivalry to the hilt until the tumultuous episode of September 1998 dawned.

Then, journalism in Malaysia once again embraced changes. Some talented writers sought refuge behind a cloak of secrecy and unleashed contempt from the Internet sites.

The writing style however, was refreshing and laced with fresh information.

It attracted readership at a furious speed. Material was being churned out at a frenetic pace. Soon the sites were clogged. You don't know what to read and which site to believe anymore until Malaysiakini burst onto the scene.

"Burst" because it gained publicity in important places - Asiaweek, FEER, CNBC and the likes.

Next came the Malaysians' Notebook and AgendaMalaysia featuring articles mostly by Rehman Rashid.

In the meantime, Astro had recruited over 300,000 subscribers with its satellite dish adorning Malaysian rooftops.

Who's controlling public opinion now? Malaysiakini, CNBC, or those Chinese news networks, the New Straits Times, TV3, the Star, the Edge (Edge is tying up with The Sun) or the radio stations, perhaps?

Quite, clearly, diversity of opinion has arrived in Malaysia. No single grouping can dictate public opinion as TV3-NST-Utusan-Berita Harian did in 1993.

The best medium, presenting their stories and analyses intelligently and in a refreshing way will get the most readers or viewers.

The likes of NST cannot be begrudged for deciding to back the nation in its editorial and opinion pieces as in the same way we must not lose any sleep over Time magazine strutting the American superiority.

In fact in the United Kingdom, the Daily Telegraph, an unabashed supporter of the Conservative Party will enjoy roaring sales whenever the Tories are in power.

Likewise during the Labour Party's rule, the choice is its backer, the Daily Mirror.

The idea is these "crony" newspapers provide you with an insight into the thinking of the Government of the day.

Yes, of course, if and when PAS rules Malaysia, Harakah will be the mass-circulation newspaper.

There will probably be a daily Harakah edition in English, Chinese and on the Internet.

Press freedom? Malaysian media has long elected not to speculate every other day that the Government is on the verge of a tragic collapse or the Prime Minister is about to resign if that is what tantamounts to Press freedom.

But that's not what we want, many will roar. "We want to be able to write what we want and exercise our right to provide fair comment" is the oft-repeated reaction.

We will then have to get expert advice from the likes of Rehman Rashid, Amir Muhammad and Steven Gan (Malaysiakini). They will be able to tell us whether they are allowed to write as they please.

In the meantime all Malaysians are praying that the Sipadan hostage-taking saga will end soon with a minimum or no casualties. Admittedly, all of us have a stake in the story. We don't want the tourists to be horrified.

As for viewers and readers elsewhere, the saga may well nourish their sense of adventure, which is why the likes of CNN and Blomberg Television have unfailingly given prominence to the drama.

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