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Educating the West

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BY NOW, I believe, our anger with The Economist has either dissipated - knowing our generally unimpressive attention span - or been relegated to the deepest recesses of our consciousness.

This is neither new nor unique. Foreign newspapers, magazines and television networks have often said bad things about us.

By the same token, banning, burning, boycotting and demanding an apology have become our standard response. In reality, though, we are better at barking than biting.

Because we bark too often and hardly bite, the foreign media does not take our objections very seriously. Instead of writing to them to exercise our right of reply, we would rather fight the battle in our own media.

To begin with, The Economist has been taking pot-shots at us for as long as we care to remember, with a great measure of consistency. For one reason or another, the magazine seems to hate us enough to make Malaysia-bashing a regular feature.

Whether about the passing of the baton from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi later in the year or the economy, The Economist has never been very positive about Malaysia.

The leadership transition is only an excuse for The Economist to do a special survey on Malaysia and say what it has always been saying. One needs only to make a cursory examination of its reports in recent years to realise that it has always been critical of Malaysia and Dr Mahathir.

If we are serious about confronting the foreign media, then we have to change our approach. Banning makes it a hero. In fact, some foreign publications and their journalists cherish such a prospect.

At the rate things are changing in the area of information and communications technology (ICT), the situation can only get more complicated as the atomic world gives way to the digital.

We can ban, burn, boycott or delay the distribution of the 'atomic' (printed) versions of foreign newspapers and magazines, but there is nothing much we can do about their digital versions that can be read and downloaded literally at the press of a button from the Internet.

Thanks to our Government's own policy and programmes, Malaysia is, today, one of the most Internet-savvy countries in the developing world. The multi-media legislations, which were passed by our Parliament in 1998 in preparation for the launching of the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), literally guarantee the free flow of information.

Thus, a growing number of our young people don't wait anymore for the next day's newspapers or for the TV news to get the latest information. They visit the websites.

They don't go to libraries and archives as much as we did in our younger days. If they did, they are more likely to do so online.

Like the guided missiles and smart bombs that rained on Iraq a couple of weeks ago, today's news and information are being remotely disseminated - from Kuala Lumpur, London, Moscow and Washington - via the Internet.

Anybody who wants to read anything about Dr Mahathir needs only to type 'mahathir' and press 'go'. As of May 5, there were 54,500 mentions of 'mahathir' in Google, 48,700 in Yahoo! and 30,621 in MSN.