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It is better to confront issues directly and debate them openly

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FIRST we were slammed by The Economist. And then we were placed way down at 110 of 139 countries in the world index of Press freedom by Paris-based organisation Reporters Without Borders.

Time and again we have had negative publicity like this but somehow we have hardly brandished our fists and entered the arena. That is not our style. Our strength is diplomacy.

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, we should not be bothered. Malaysians are intelligent. They can distinguish dirt from pure dirt.

We have withstood many of their criticisms of our political compulsions. We have kept our cool even when the foreign Press was fanning our small flames to large uncontrol-lable fires. But we kept these flames down and our heads high.

With globalisation, the Malaysian public has had an influx of news from all quarters. We have handled it well. We are not as fragile as we were a few decades ago.

All may not be that liberal in our land of paper-and-ink and we have our reasons for it. Besides, it is our business. I do not think that we should lose sleep over what the foreign Press says or how it assesses us.

After all, the Western media, on the whole, despite all their espousal of human rights, universal freedom and common destiny, merely promote their national interest.

Large corporations have influenced our markets. They have shaped us on what to look like, what to wear, what to eat and how to feel.

As we witnessed in the episode of the Iraq attack, we can see how little they are willing to accept the pre-prescription they handed us.

Universally, there is no democracy in mass media. It is about individuals who control what is to be communicated to a larger audience.

Rupert Murdoch, the media baron who owns more than 100 newspapers and the influential extreme right-wing Fox channel in the US, is one example. Almost single-handedly he influences the course of many nations.

We must be clear, however, that what may help move towards an issue in one society may not be appropriate in another.

Malaysian journalists have toiled away at their keyboards to give accurate and timely information on issues of public interest.

We have crusaded on doubled-edged issues like polygamy, high-lighted police abuse, provoked the release of information and even pushed for government expediency, like in the Health Ministry, for in-stance.

In the process, we have questioned ourselves many times on what our role is and how far we can go. And while we do that, we try not to step over the thin line between the truth and being socially responsible.

The media can only be powerful or liberal if they are used for good purposes. Bad news is like cancer that spreads malignantly.

Nonetheless, we are living in an era where it is virtually impossible to control news. Good or bad. No one power can control it any more.

Hence, it is probably better for us to confront it directly and debate its merits openly. Too often there is the perception that the Press is not liberal because of the lack of debate on opposing views.

In the West, however, the perception that they are freer is because of this debate.

For instance, in the New York Times, while there are liberal columnists

like Paul Krugman and Maureen Dowd who almost always criticise the Bush administration, there is William Safire, a conservative, who reflexively supports Bush.

It is this debate that makes people think and react. That allows them to choose. In fact, in the Iraq attack, the loudest voices were from the Americans themselves.

In Malaysia, to some extent, there is constructive engagement of issues. From the letters that are published in the editorial pages, we are aware that people need and want to be informed. Some of these issues that surfaced have even provoked debates in Parliament.

However, our generation so far has respectfully abided by certain unsaid rules, deeply rooted traditions and the laws of the country.

But the next generation, however, may be different. And with the new education policy which Education Minister Tan Sri Musa Mohamad has just announced, we will be facing a generation of thinking, intellectual and creative children.

They will be critical of their pre-decessors just as we were of ours.

But when they demand to know why problems remain unsolved, we cannot silence or shrug them off by saying "that's politics".

They would expect dialogues, debates and discussions over differing viewpoints. We cannot close our eyes to that.

I just hope we have less to justify than what our parents had to.