

THE MULTIMEDIA ASIA 1997 (MMA `97) CONFERENCE AND EXHIBITION

THE MINES RESORT CITY, SERI KEMBANGAN, SELANGOR DARUL EHSAN,
16 SEPTEMBER 1997

INVENTING OUR COMMON FUTURE

On behalf of the National Information Technology Council (NITC), let me warmly welcome all of you to the second Multimedia Asia Conference and Exhibition, the MMA `97.

2. At last year's MMA, we officially announced the MSC - - as a giant test-bed for experimenting with not only multimedia technology but also, and more importantly, the evolution of a new way of life in the unfolding age of information and knowledge. The MSC is therefore our 'gift to the world' -- a creation that would welcome the participation of the global community in sharing the useful lessons of multimedia development.

3. One year has gone by and much water has flowed under the bridge. There have been raised eyebrows as to whether Malaysia can pull it off but, on the other hand, there has also been much support for the MSC. Both the international community and Malaysians alike, I believe, understand better the concept of the MSC now. I am sure as more programmes under the MSC roll out, greater understanding and clarity will ensue.

4. Several ground-breaking events had taken place since the launch of the MSC. In January, we had the first meeting of the MSC International Advisory Panel (IAP), a panel made up of CEOs from leading IT companies around the world. In May, the foundation stone for Cyberjaya, MSC's dedicated intelligent city for multimedia companies, was laid. In addition, the other anchor-projects in the MSC, Putrajaya -- the smart new administrative capital -- and the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) are progressing well. In the month of May also, four cyberlaws were tabled and passed in the Malaysian Parliament. In July, the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDC) issued the Concept Request for Proposals (CRFPs) for bids by private companies to spearhead four of the seven flagship applications -- electronic government, smart schools, telemedicine and multipurpose card. And today, the MMA -- with its theme of 'Benchmarking Smart Solutions' -- is our attempt to invite and emulate best practices from around the world. We want to learn from the best.

5. We have a clear vision for Malaysia called Vision 2020 -- to attain developed-nation status by the year 2020. We want to become a developed nation in our own mould. Malaysia's IT Agenda defines the content of the mould as the creation of a Civil Society. By Civil Society we mean a community which is self-regulating and empowered through the use of knowledge, skills and values inculcated within the people. Such a society will allow every Malaysian to live a life of managed destiny and dignity, not just in the here and now, but also in the hereafter. The million dollar question is, of course, 'How can we achieve it'.

6. The manufacturing sector has become the mainstay for Malaysia' s sustained economic growth of between seven to eight percent over the last two decades. According to our calculations, to achieve our target of a developed nation, the growth rate must continue to average at least seven percent until the year 2020. However, we anticipate that the manufacturing sector' s contribution to GDP will peak at around 38 percent by about the year 2005. It is obvious to us that we need a second engine of growth if we are to achieve Vision 2020. This second engine has to be jump-started by the year 2005. But, can we do it?

7. We read the charts and studied the trends. We tried to put our finger on the pulse of the forces that will shape the socio-economic tapestry of the future. One consistent pounding beat was digital. Thus, we decided to make the Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) the dynamo for growth -- within all economic sectors. To get a clearer focus on this new and powerful agent of change, in 1995, we formed the National Information Technology Council (NITC).

8. The basic role of the NITC is to advise the government on ICT policies and strategies and to help operationalise them. Since we are literally moving into the unknown and we expect rapid and radical changes it is prudent to test our ideas first before implementing them nation-wide to avoid costly mistakes. Hence, the MSC as a test-bed. We hope the MSC will make the first ripple which will turn into a tidal wave and engulf the whole country, transforming it into a global multimedia hub in its wake. The National IT Agenda provides the broad policy framework for propelling this transformation towards the creation of a Civil Society. The Agenda outlines a three-pronged strategy to achieve a knowledge society through people, infrastructure and application development. Needless to say, digital technology will provide the underlying creative force.

9. If you had noticed, I used the word `creation' with reference to Vision 2020. This was deliberate. `Evolution' or `development' would imply maintaining the status quo -- of mere continuity. The digital wind is the harbinger of discontinuities. Breaks will take place -- breaks will have to be made -- in the way we think, work and live. To our minds, the break from the past will be the most crucial -- and the yawning gulf to the future must be bridged -- the MSC is our tentative first bridge. It is within this context that the MSC must be viewed. We see the MSC as the seed that will sprout the Civil Society. The MSC is our first investment for the future. In fact, the MSC is our experimental tool for inventing our common future.

10. Inventing the future does not mean forecasting the future -- no ordinary mortal can do that. It means setting in motion certain agents of change now, taking into account current realities and future uncertainties, in the hope that what we envision may be attained. This implies reinvention -- reinvention in virtually every field of major significance. This is precisely what we are attempting to do with the MSC. For example, through the electronic Government Flagship, we hope to reinvent governance; through the Smart School Flagship, we hope to reinvent education; through the Telemedicine Flagship we hope to reinvent healthcare; and, through the Borderless marketing Flagship we hope to reinvent

business practices.

11. I see governance as the `umbrella' concept embracing and defining this process of reinvention and therefore is the most important. Reinventing government is not something that we have just thought about. In fact, we have been doing it for sometime. As a first step, we started to restructure the government machinery -- slim it down to make it more efficient and effective. The idea is to hold only strategic public portfolios within the government machinery such as defence, justice, finance and to privatise much of the rest. In this respect, public good service functions such as telecommunications, power and railway transportation, traditionally under the aegis of the government, have now been privatised. This process is tied closely with another idea we experimented with -- the Malaysia Incorporated Concept -- where the government and the private sector work closely together to develop the nation. And I must say, we have been quite successful in implementing both these concepts.

12. The idea of an Electronic Government is the second stage in our ongoing quest for right-sizing governance. Electronic governance is not merely governing through electronic means. The technology is just the means to an end -- the end being revamped structures, systems and procedures to implement change and striving for excellence above and beyond previously attained levels. Therefore, the move from Kuala Lumpur to Putrajaya is more than a physical migration. It is also symbolic of discarding old legacies and old mindsets -- a move towards information- driven frameworks for performance-based management and services. And, we hope, this move will set in motion a paradigm shift in ways of thinking, working and living.

13. We in Malaysia are, of course, fully aware and realistic that inventing the future, and by implication reinventing existing realities, is not as easy as it sounds. The journey is going to be difficult -- dotted with pitfalls and challenges all the way. We are also aware that we cannot do it all by ourselves. We admit that we do not possess the required technologies nor the knowledge within ourselves to do what we want to do. But our spirit is willing; our bodies are strong; our economic fundamentals are right; and, we are willing to work with others and to learn -- and to learn fast.

14. Learning by doing -- that is how we did it in the past and that is how we intend to journey forward. Through the Malaysia Incorporated Concept, we successfully transitioned from an agricultural-based economy to an industrial one within two decades. And, concerns for distributive equity were not ignored either. We now have time tested techniques -- we are confident they will stand us in good stead for a repeat performance.

15. Therefore, with the MSC we would like to take the concept of Malaysia Incorporated a step further -- towards global smart-partnerships. We would like to invite the world community to join us to shape a common future together. We invite collaboration instead of confrontation, enrichment instead of exploitation, sharing instead of grabbing. These should remain the watchwords -- these should provide the basis towards evolving a just and equitable global society.

16. The recent United States' 'Framework of Global Electronic Commerce' initiative advocates non-regulated private-sector leadership. The market, as you know, rewards the efficient and punishes the inefficient and the less able. Efficiency and equity do not go hand-in-hand. Therefore, leaving the digital economy to a self-regulating market will only widen the gap between the info-rich and info-poor. The laissez faire market is myopic, interested only in the bottom-line -- with no concern for social justice. Can a free market really replace responsible governance? Laws and regulations are irksome. We should reduce their roles but certainly anarchy cannot be better for the market place.

17. In the information age, the new basis for power, wealth and influence will be knowledge. No one has a monopoly of knowledge or wisdom, meaning no one can have all the power, wealth and influence. Potentially, therefore, anyone can add and acquire power and wealth. This should lead to a more open and equitable society. However, currently knowledge tends to stick with the well-endowed. The children of the well-to-do and the well-educated will have a head-start to a good education over the less fortunate, giving them access to power and wealth. This will lead to a society where the rich and educated will get richer and more powerful, and the poor and uneducated, poorer and weaker. How do we prevent this from happening?

18. These questions, more than anything else, point to the need for a new framework of governance where the concerns of distributive justice exist alongside a free market system for the digital economy. There is therefore a need for the international community to begin a dialogue towards formulating a new global framework for information age governance and towards nurturing a global civil society. May I suggest a virtual forum called the Virtual Commonwealth of Nations where all nations are equally represented and the participation truly democratic.

19. The world, figuratively speaking, is shrinking rapidly. Multimedia and networking technologies will, through videophony and videoconferencing, put people from around the world in face-to-face contact. Multiculturalism will be the way of life in the future. The signs of a global village are already here. We need to make adjustments so that our closeness to each other will not result in our stepping on each other's toes too frequently. Instead our closeness and more frequent exposure to each other and to information about ourselves should enable us to develop a strong sense of neighbourliness. In time we should be able to develop a multicultural global society.

20. As we witness the death throes of the industrial era ethos and sense the birth of another -- one that will be founded upon information and knowledge -- should we not take it upon ourselves to manage our destinies instead of leaving it entirely to the free market system? We are not retreating from the borderless world and unfettered trade. It is simply that human society needs order and a degree of certainty for it to function at all. Occasional chaos may be managed but endemic chaos must affect society and life negatively. The disappearance of the border between nations simply means that a bigger entity or a new and world

encompassing nation would emerge. Knowledge by itself is not going to make this huge single human tribe live in peace. Certainly unregulated free trade even if backed by massive information will not result in wealth and happiness for everyone.

21. We can all plunge into the information age with our eyes closed. But why should we when there is the possibility of testing and finding out how things will work or will turn out. Malaysia' s MSC is an attempt to create the environment for testing not just the technology but the way of life itself. The opportunities for experimenting are unlimited. We need only to think up possible scenarios in order to experiment and test. We will not get all the answers but we should not be groping in total darkness as we enter the next millennium and the Information Age.