

# THE CONDUCT OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN MALAYSIAN MEDIA

Shafezah Abdul Wahab, Siti Najah Raihan Sakrani, Noor Soraya Mohd Jamal  
Assoc. Prof. Dr. Mohd Adnan Hashim  
Universiti Teknologi MARA Melaka  
Kampus Alor Gajah  
National News Agency BERNAMA

**Abstract** this research focused on how the media play its role in assisting the government aspiration by disseminating news that can elevate the understanding and awareness of foreign readers on Malaysia. The purpose of this study is to gain greater understanding on whether local prime media fulfil its function as an agent of Public Diplomacy for the country. The result of this research contributes in reflecting a clear current situation and planning for the next step and progression as well as suitable adjustment. The main objectives for this research are; to study how much priority is being given to the news that portray good image of the country and finding out to what extent has the local media fulfil their responsibility to protect the national interest. The research utilised in-depth interviews with the main news gatekeepers. The main findings of this research are local prime media plays a role in Public Diplomacy and in which its element is included in reporting by the media. The characteristic of the articles selected to be published are genuine facts and statement; newsworthiness value; clarity; accuracy; the coverage should support the national and government agenda and tailored towards meeting its aspiration; real time; sensitive to religious, racial and diplomatic relationship; in tandem with foreign policies and international grouping that Malaysia's belong to; balanced viewpoint and objectivity. The research also found the local prime media gives full priority in portraying good image of the country as well as always gives priority in protecting the national interest and fulfil its responsibility to protect national interest.

**Keywords:** Public Diplomacy, Local Prime Media

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For the last 50 years, Malaysia's foreign policy has been single mindedly geared towards fostering better relations with its neighbours and trading partners. It has worked collectively with its partners to secure an environment that is conducive to national development. Malaysia have remained an active member of the international community and contributed towards enriching international discourses on issues that affect humanity. It has worked for peace and justice. Its foreign policy has consistently remained free and independent and it has been able to articulate its views on issues that matter most. Malaysia have built friendship across continents and established 104 diplomatic missions worldwide. Its mission is towards building trust and confidence on a well-tested mantra of mutually beneficial cooperation. Malaysia would need to be quick and responsive to mega trends and developments (*Malaysia Kita*, 2003).

Malaysia's initiatives at various regional and international levels have put the country on the world map. Increased economic prosperity and political stability has in fact enabled Malaysia to carve its own niche in the international scene. Making its presence felt has allowed it to exercise some influence in setting the international agenda. Being less dependent on foreign aid and assistance, Malaysia has been able to speak up on issues that other developing countries feel constrained to voice for fear of retribution by the major, particularly western, powers.

An overview of Malaysia's foreign policy by Ministry of Foreign Affairs indicated that developing close bilateral relations with its neighbours remains a high priority. As an extension of domestic policy, foreign policy is designed with the purpose in mind of defending and promoting the country's national security, economic and other vital interests. Despite the diversity of views regarding the perception and explanation of foreign policy, no foreign policy can be formulated in a vacuum. It must serve to function in a dynamic environment but the basic objective remains the same, i.e. the pursuit of Malaysia's national interest at the international level.

Malaysia's foreign policy stance began to take a much greater economic orientation than ever before, coupled with a strong and nationalistic defence of the rights, interests and aspirations of developing countries and the advocacy of south-south co-operation. The branding of Malaysia as a proven model for development could be promoted to countries that have the potentials for harnessing their own resources towards fulfilling their national aspiration. In this branding exercise, the critical element to national progress such as the development of the human capital has been underscored. In this respect, Malaysia's institutions of higher learning already strategise themselves as a world-class centre of excellence as they compete with universities from other countries. Judging from current track records, Malaysia would reinvent itself in order to fulfil the national aspiration for Malaysia to be the centre of excellence. It is also branded as a beautiful country with cultural mosaic that is marked by many different cultures and tradition.

Meanwhile, the communication technology with real time coverage on 24 hours news channel has provided people all over the world the most up to date information on current issues and development. Internet news and information have become a staple diet of many investors, political pundits and armchair political analysts. In this context, media is the main medium to disseminate information and awareness. Lerner (1958), Schramm (1964) and Stevenson (1988) agreed with the statement saying the media has important role in national development process especially for developing countries.

Therefore, media ability to perform as the transformation tools by portraying a certain image can indirectly influenced the global acceptance due to the exposure given. Media can contribute something to the nation and it can help in building the nation image by means of producing and publishing news that are parallel with government mission and aspiration. The media played a huge role in public diplomacy activities by a country. Public diplomacy arouses interest, which is a key variable in shaping the political agent, generate resources and mobilise support. Thus, a rising level of public diplomacy gets more attention.

News, on the other hand is an extremely complex term and means different things to different people. It is information and today's media are in the information business. For an event to become news, it not only has to become known about or reported in the first instance, but it is then subjected to all sorts of editorial criteria concerning the prominence and emphasis which is to be given to it. Media is not a passive transmitter of information conveying information. The media are formulators of meaning in their own right. They are active agents that select, screen, interpret, emphasise, and possibly even distort the flow of information on the other side. (Jamieson and Campbell, 2001)

According to Mohd Rajib and Taylor (2006) Malaysia's relationship with the people, cultures and societies beyond its borders are no longer determined more by the traditional government – to – government diplomacy. The impact of the so-called "information age" – worldwide 24 hours satellite news coverage, cell phones, facsimile transmissions, the Internet, global video teleconferencing, wireless data delivery, electronic funds transfers etc. – along with the advent and proliferation of powerful and influential transnational non – state actors has changed the dynamic forever.

## II. BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Public diplomacy differs from traditional diplomacy in that public diplomacy deals not only with governments but also primarily with non-governmental individuals and organisations. According to USIA, traditional diplomacy actively engages one government with another government. In traditional diplomacy, U.S. Embassy officials represent the U.S. Government in a host country primarily by maintaining relations and conducting official USG business with the officials of the host government whereas public diplomacy primarily engages many diverse non-government elements of a society.

The basic tools used in public diplomacy activities and programs are generally classified under the rubrics of "Information" and "Cultural and Educational Exchange" programs. The above classifications are for convenience. The content of either is often more informational than cultural and vice versa. With the tremendous advances in communication technology in recent years, the above traditional designations have been greatly affected by today's instant global communications as well as numerous other technological advances. As a result, public diplomacy activities now include Web sites on the Internet, CD ROMs, e-mail, teleconference programs, and other marvels of the late Twentieth Century communications revolution.

The flow of information and ideas for public diplomacy usually took place during information activities such as education or cultural exchanges and information activities international radio and television programmes, books and Information Resource Centres, speakers and specialist and publications. Meanwhile, the public relies heavily on news media for information and news reporting. Be it electronic or print media, both plays integral part in disseminating information to the public. According to Stratford (1997), public opinion represents the thought of any given group of society at any given time toward a given object. Public opinion tends to be slow and reactionary and reluctant to accept new ideas although it can change dramatically following a major incident or outrage. Taking this into account, the media holds the monumental key in directing the public opinion on global issues.

Public diplomacy is the art of communicating a country's policies, values and culture to other people. It is an attempt to explain why we have decided on certain measures, and beyond that, to explain who we are. This is where local prime media plays an important role in projecting the right image and branding for Malaysia, hence engage in public diplomacy role.

### III. STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

Through the years, the mass media is basically accounted as the information conveyor or even educator to the public. The media can also influence the mind of the people; hence it is a powerful tool for information dissemination. The media has a strong social and cultural impact upon society. This is predicated upon its ability to reach a wide audience that often sends a strong and influential message. Marshall McLuhan uses the term "the medium is the message" as a means of explaining how the distribution of the message can often be more important than the message itself. It is through the persuasiveness of medium, such as television, radio and print media that reach the target audience.

There are two sides to this public diplomacy coin: One is short-term, the immediate, 24/7 media side where we engage through TV, Internet, and radio. The other is long-term relationship building engaged through cultural diplomacy, sports diplomacy, student exchanges, pop cultures and such. Report by local prime media can have a positive impact on world opinion on Malaysia and play an influential role in bridging the gap of misunderstanding about Malaysia.

Many third world leaders complained that the western news agencies are disrupting the free flow of news, distorting the realities of the developing nations, and are presenting negative images of the Third World. News from the Third World is too biased and too heavy on items on war, poverty, illiteracy, riots, revolutions, antics of national leaders, social disruption, natural calamity and the likes (Faridah Ibrahim, 2008). Various study on the coverage of international news by these international news agencies found that majority of the news about foreign countries highlighted were of negative directions while the agencies' countries were more positive (Faridah Ibrahim and Mohd Safar, 2005).

Unfortunately, Malaysia too is always under the spotlight for all the wrong reason. Foreigners, especially from the Western Countries perceived Malaysia as a small, underdeveloped country or terrorist country. In view of this supremacy of the media, the researcher is determine to study how local prime media fits into their role as one of the Public Diplomacy medium and whether they perform their role effectively in pulling foreign country to love Malaysia.

### IV. OBJECTIVE OF STUDY

With regards to the problem statement mentioned above, the purpose of this study is to gain greater understanding on whether local prime media fulfil its function as an agent of Public Diplomacy for the country.

The main objectives for this research are;

- 1) To study how much priority is being given to the news that portray good image of the country
- 2) To find out to what extend has BERNAMA fulfil its responsibility to protect the national interest.

## V. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following are the research questions formulated to examine the essence in this study

- 1) How much priority is being given to the news that portray good image of the country?
- 2) To what extend has local prime media fulfil its responsibility to protect the national interest?

## VI. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

Global public opinion is increasingly a strategic concern for states acting on the world stage. With recent advances in technology, the traditional spheres of international state activity – political, economic and military – have been joined by a fourth: information. The spread of democracy and the expanding technological reach of mass communication networks increasingly provide governments with the ability to bypass heads of foreign states to pursue their foreign policy agendas. Whether it is putting together - or maintaining - international coalitions on political or military issues, or trying to compete for a share of global trade, tourism or investments, governments must learn to communicate and extract a premium for their national reputation. They can no longer afford to ignore the value of 'public diplomacy' as a strategic tool.

This study will display how the media play its role in assisting the government aspiration by disseminating news that can elevate the understanding and awareness of foreign readers on Malaysia. Based on this fact, the researcher feel the need to have an evaluation of what had been done so far. Through this research, the theme and dimensions that was highlighted by local prime media can also be identified. Under the globalisation concept, there is a need for a country to brand itself on four different dimensions (public diplomacy, tourism, exports, and foreign investment dimension) (Vicente, 2004). State branding is important because consumers rely heavily on country or state images to make their economic decisions.

Public Diplomacy is not a new issue and some undermined its magnitude and effectiveness in image building of a country. The outcome of this study may be used as a guidance by local prime media in beefing up its reporting for Public Diplomacy and also shed some idea how media can be one of the effective tool for Public Diplomacy purposes. The study is a continuity and revitalisation of research on media role in country's development. The result of this research will hopefully contribute in reflecting a clear current situation and planning for the next step and progression as well as suitable adjustment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

As a relatively small country, Malaysia must make itself heard around the world so that it would not get 'swallowed' by globalisation. After gaining independence, the Malaysian government was very active in participating in the international political arena, as it was realised that the country must be prosperous and developed as a panacea to all its economic ills, and to sustain growth and ensure social stability. Malaysia has a fairly good relationship with most democratic countries and with the superpowers. This is partly due to Malaysia's adherence to democratic principles and to a "love and peace with thy neighbour policy".

To ensure that the country's social, economic and political environment is in a stable state and constantly growing, Malaysia has to sustain her effort in propagating good images and selling herself to the world market. Many Malaysian policymakers now recognise the importance of how the country and its policies are perceived abroad. However, the September 11 incident has put Malaysia into the most unfavourable position, being associated with terrorist international links and pinpointed as "we must be cautious" by countries such as the U.S. Malaysia must work hard in changing this perception, and clearing the air through the media and formal diplomatic approaches are simply not enough.

Considering its size and limited resources, the communication techniques that Malaysia should work on is to improve its image abroad by beefing up its public diplomacy. Through public diplomacy, the foreign populace receives a more accurate and positive perception of Malaysia, its people and values, enabling them to see the best of Malaysian society and culture. Likewise, public diplomacy can also help Malaysian to better understand foreign culture and the people of the world, in pursuit of its national interests.

According to Leonard et al. (2002), there is a hierarchy of impacts that public diplomacy can achieve;

- 1) Increasing people's familiarity with one's country (making them think about it, updating their images, and turning around unfavourable opinions)
- 2) Increasing people's appreciation of one's country (creating positive perceptions, getting others to see issues of global importance from the same perspective)
- 3) Engaging people with one's country (strengthening ties – from education reform to scientific co-operation, encouraging people to see us as an attractive destination for tourism, study, distance learning, getting them to buy our products, getting to understand and subscribe to our values).

All these impacts are exactly what Malaysia should achieve. Even the U.S came out with The Hughes Agenda, masterminded by Karen Hughes, its Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, to improve its image abroad using public diplomacy techniques. Another reason why public diplomacy is the most suitable technique is because dealing with a more informed public, a more informative, subtle and mature approach to foreign publics is needed.

The term 'public diplomacy' was coined in 1965 by Edmund Gullion, the dean of the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University and a distinguished retired foreign service officer, who later established an Edward R. Murrow Center of Public Diplomacy (Malone, 1988). Subsequently the study of Public Diplomacy commenced. After receiving heightened attention during the Cold War, the literature on Public Diplomacy declined. However, it took the aftermath of the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 attacks for the United States to gain a renewed interest in Public Diplomacy (Glassgold, 2004).

Nicholas J. Cull said in his article "*Public diplomacy*" before Gullion: *The evolution of a Phrase* published by USC Center on Public Diplomacy (2006), an early Murrow Center brochure provided a convenient summary of Gullion's concept:

*"Public diplomacy...deals with the influence of public attitudes on the formation and execution of foreign policies. It encompasses dimensions of international relations beyond traditional diplomacy; the cultivation by governments of public opinion in other countries; the interaction of private group and interests in one country with another; the reporting of foreign affairs and its impact on policy; communication between those whose job is communication, as diplomats and foreign correspondents; and the process of intercultural communications".*

Public diplomacy thus emerged as a response to enduring transformations of the world in which diplomacy operates, such as the greater mobility (physical and intellectual) of individuals caused by the evolution of transport and communication technologies; more access to education, which helped to create a critical mass of individuals that no longer passively accepts decisions that are taken by governments (at home and abroad) (Fisher, 1972; Ross, 2002); and the multitude of media channels and their growing interest in reporting issues related to international affairs (Cohen, 1986; Gilboa, 2004).

Central to the concept of public diplomacy is the idea that power, understood as the ability of a state to control the behaviour of others in order to obtain particular desired outcomes (Nye, 2004), is not any more solely a matter of military force, economic prosperity or social stability. It transcends this notion and incorporates questions such as legitimacy, attractiveness and moral authority, which are present in Nye's concept of 'soft power'. Accordingly, whereas in the past 'strength for war' and how to manage armed conflicts would be crucial in determining the level of power of a state, modern world affairs demand additional sources of power as well as different ways to develop and exert them.

Meanwhile, Taylor (2008) said public diplomacy is the process by which government explains itself to the people of other countries. It is supposed to be a lubricant to foreign policy, not a hindrance to it. It has to compete with negative media images and bad news with positive, constructive communication. It consists of international broadcasting, cultural diplomacy (explaining what is best about a nation's culture and values) and educational exchanges. It is not one-way propaganda; it is two-way communication – speaking/explaining and listening/sympathy. It requires empathy and is motivated by peaceful intentions based on a desire to generate mutual understanding. Public diplomacy is a long-term process and requires tact and a lot of face-to-face communication. It

is not counter-propaganda, although short-term international broadcasting that is essentially news-based does partly serve this function.

## VII. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

### VIII.

This study is exploratory in nature, and thus a qualitative research methodology was chosen. The purpose of this study is to gain better insights of how local prime media play its role in Public Diplomacy. Indeed news reporting can serve and direct the public opinion on the subject matter being presented especially the ones relating to a country's image. Thus, this study encompass on how local prime media disseminate news that have Public Diplomacy element in it. The researcher also intends to study whether local prime media is effective in performing its obligation of Public Diplomacy. This study goes on the basis of how the Public Diplomacy is being performed in a news agency in Malaysia. It tries to observe the accessibility and the designing of the news that can effect how people view Malaysia.

A qualitative research method is selected for this study because qualitative research assumes that meaning is socially constructed through humans' interaction with their societies, experiences and lives (Creswell, 2003). A qualitative research design enables a researcher to record detailed descriptions of situations, events, people and direct quotations from people about their experiences, beliefs, attitudes, and thoughts (Patton, 2002). So information that is considered relevant to the topic studied are gathered and recorded. The raw data are then described and interpreted to provide the readers better perspective on the topic. According to Patton (2002), qualitative research design enables a researcher to record detailed descriptions of situations, events, people and direct quotations from people about their experiences, beliefs, attitudes and thoughts. David M. and Sutton C.D (2004) stated that qualitative content analysis is described as a point of interest of the researchers is the meaning associated with the messages rather than the number of times message variable occur.

The researcher choose in-depth interview, as it is a qualitative research technique that allows person-to-person discussion. It can lead to increased insight into people's thoughts, feelings, and behaviour on important issues. This type of interview is often unstructured and therefore permits the interviewer to encourage an informant (respondent) to talk at length about the topic of interest. The in-depth interview also uses a flexible interview approach. It aims to ask questions to explain the reasons underlying a problem or practice in a target group. The researcher can use the technique to gather ideas, to gather information, and to develop materials for drug use interventions.

## IX. FINDINGS

How Much Priority is being given to the news that portray good image of the country?

All informants said local prime media gives full priority in portraying good image of the country. local prime media is looked upon and is expected to be a conduit for the dissemination of information, which is biased for Malaysia's good image. This it does by being perennially credible, balanced and by practising good journalism. local prime media also assume vital position role in promoting tourism, culture, education and sports in Malaysia via extensive coverage. local prime media plays a very active role in international diplomacy to highlight Malaysia's position in international diplomacy and for that, Malaysia has gain a lot of respect from other countries and Malaysia stature in the international level is very high because of this especially in terms of preserving good image as one of the develop Muslim countries among its peers.

Informant A –

*“Because we are the sole source of credible information. Many people, you know, look up for local prime media news for confirmation, for verification. So we have a role to play there in pacifying curiosity, uncertainties. So we are clarifying certain matters so people in Malaysia will rely on local prime media, so we have to serve that particular or to accommodate that request, you see”.*

Informant B –

*“It is looked upon and is expected of it to be a conduit for the dissemination of information, which is biased for Malaysia's good image. This it does by being perennially credible, balanced and by practising good journalism”.*

Informant C –

*“By making the most of its power of publicity through its local and international print, TV and radio networks to portray Malaysia as a preferred destination for leisure, learning and as a sporting nation to be reckoned with. By giving extensive coverage of events related to those fields and by having specialist-journalists and marketers”.*

At what extend, has local prime media fulfil its responsibility to protect the national interest.

All informants agrees that local prime media always gives priority in protecting the national interest and fulfil its responsibility to protect national interest. For example, during the Asian financial crisis 1997/1998, local print media played a role in informing the public about government's action in tackling the financial crisis. During the Asian financial crisis, local prime media also came out with positive news on the Malaysian economy to instil confidence into the market. Bernama also played a role in integrating Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. local prime media news always supports the national aspiration and nation's building. Besides that, local prime media assist the government in protecting national interest in terms of bilateral and diplomatic relationship. In a case where sensitive case involving Malaysia and other countries, in terms of reporting, local prime media will make sure that the relationship doesn't deteriorate by using public diplomacy elements in the story however, in the case of overlapping territorial claims, the story will be based on Malaysian interest.

Informant A –

*“I can remember the 1997 and 1998 crisis when the government formed the MTR. As one unit called this media punya committee. And this media committee will advise the media, the whole media including bernama to set the matter straight about the financial crisis and what the government is doing at that time to counter this crisis. We are in that context doing a national service and at this particular context communication messages to the rakyat”.*

Informant B-

*Sometimes, disease like bird flu can cause public alarm. In my own experience, we have to make sure, by not reporting a particular event, it is clearly in the best interest of the country and we must be convinced that at that point of time, Bernama is the only agency that has the news.*

Informant C –

*“Depending on issues being highlighted in the news stories...for example a classic case refers to overlapping territorial claims involving Malaysia and a few other countries. The Bernama version should present Malaysia's case in the issue as a backgrounder by saying that such territory belongs to Malaysia but is claimed by another party”.*

## DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

The aim of this study is to gain greater understanding on whether local prime media fulfil its function as an agent of Public Diplomacy for the country. Based on the findings of the study, all informants agreed that local prime media plays a role in Public Diplomacy and which is included in reporting by local prime media. It is an organic process due to local prime media function as the distribution channel for government information and part of government's mechanism of projecting Malaysian image abroad. local prime media disseminate news that can outreach people worldwide to listen, know and engaged with Malaysia's policies. local prime media active participation in news sharing and exchange programmes also promotes better understanding of Malaysia. This finding is supported by Leonard et al (2002) who highlighted public diplomacy is based on the premise that the image and reputation of a country which can create either an enabling or a disabling environment. He said there is a hierarchy of impacts that public diplomacy can achieve; increasing people's familiarity with one's country, increasing people's appreciation of one's country and engaging people with one's country.

All informants said local prime media gives full priority in portraying good image of the country which answered the third objective of the study - to study how much priority is being given to the news that portray good image of the country. local prime media is looked upon and is expected to be a conduit for the dissemination of information, which is biased for Malaysia's good image. This it does by being perennially credible, balanced and by practising good journalism. local prime media also assume vital position role in promoting tourism, culture, education and sports in Malaysia via extensive coverage. local prime media plays a very active role in international diplomacy to highlight Malaysia's position in international diplomacy and for that, Malaysia has gain a lot of respect from other

countries and Malaysia stature in the international level is very high because of this especially in terms of preserving good image as one of the develop Muslim countries among its peers.

All informants agrees that local prime media always gives priority in protecting the national interest and fulfil its responsibility to protect national interest which answered objective number four - to find out to what extend has local prime media fulfil its responsibility to protect the national interest For example, during the Asian financial crisis 1997/1998, local prime media played a role in informing the public about government's action in tackling the financial crisis. During the Asian financial crisis, local prime media also came out with positive news on the Malaysian economy to instil confidence into the market. local prime media also played a role in integrating Peninsular Malaysia, Sabah and Sarawak. local prime media news always supports the national aspiration and nation's building. Besides that, local prime media assist the government in protecting national interest in terms of bilateral and diplomatic relationship. In a case where sensitive case involving Malaysia and other countries, in terms of reporting, local prime media will make sure that the relationship doesn't deteriorate by using public diplomacy elements in the story however, in the case of overlapping territorial claims, the story will be based on Malaysian interest.

Interpreting the evidence from this study we can see that generally journalists and gatekeepers understands BERNAMA role in advocating public diplomacy. The research indicated that mass media influence seems more plausible than alternative explanations. As McCombs (1981) explains "The idea of agenda setting influence by the mass media is a relational concept specifying a positive-indeed causal-relationship between the emphases of mass communication and what members of the audience come to regard as important."

## CONCLUSION

Media sources, channel and content persuade the public by creating knowledge about products and people and their places in our culture. We purchase cars, toasters, cereal and other consumer goods and services based on the words and images selected for us by professionals. We select political leaders based on the impression we get through various media channels. We learn what is important in our culture from media content. The pictures we have in our heads of the world, of people, and corporations are not usually based on our real experience with them (Nimmo and Combs, 1990). Instead these pictures are formed through interactions with media images. Media are very powerful in shaping our responses to images of people, place, things and countries. This research has merely touched on the reserve of accumulated wisdom and experienced locked in informants' experience. Sharing this accumulated experience would be an effective way of empowering those target countries whose public diplomacy could enhance the global conversation.