

THE EVOLVING MEDIA CULTURE THAT IS TRANSFORMING AND BEING TRANSFORMED BY LOCAL IDENTITIES

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Abstract

With the advancement of Telecommunication technology, media users today are in constant transaction with various identities and cultural norms from around the globe. As such, geographical indexing is no longer absolute as ideologies and cultures are shared and exchanged – questioning the boundaries of cultural identities shaped by nation state. This occurrence of cultural diversity is gaining reality in response to our modern condition of media dominance. In such circumstances, western media is perceived to be a global hegemonic machine. This paper intends to seek if the local identity of Asian countries is at stake due to the aggression of western media. The investigation is put forth by an argument that media reception of each culture or country is varied. Thus, the western culture that is being swept across the world through media domination may not necessarily be hegemonic as claimed, as it demands localization due to political, cultural or regional constraints in order to increase the receptivity of that particular medium. Finally the paper attempts to illustrate that a fluid and fluctuating identities are being formed beneath this growing transaction of local identities and Western media. These new forms of identities serve as the necessary dissonance for the prevention of any cultural hegemony (be it local or global) in our current-modern conditions.

Keywords: Cultural Diversity, Media dominance, fluid identity, dissonance subject

Introduction

The various technological and telecommunication innovations in today's world has become a fuelling device to the multifaceted transformations along with revolutions that are taking shape in various aspects globally. In the last recent decades, the world has evolved rapidly within the communication paradigm; people are able to interact with one another across continents whereby 'time and space' are no longer barriers. Media users are able to share their interest,

knowledge and experience with others through posting of videos, articles, blogs, twitters and etc. The postings of these content does not only becomes accessible to anyone who is hooked-up to the internet, but also has become a platform for other media user on the receiving end to share their comment/thought/argument or feedback (visual image, audio-visual content, or multimedia interaction). This interaction which is mediated through computer, computer networks and technological devices has spurred the media globalization process that has become the undercurrent in producing and distributing information. This is such with the current availability of telecommunication technology (TV, World Wide Web, internet, podcast, interactive media and etc); whereby information exchange and knowledge sharing has been made feasible as well as easier for media users globally; resulting in the formation of a new media culture.

According to Hjarvard (n.d., p.71), the advance development of the electronic and audiovisual media contributes significantly to the globalization of social, cultural and economic aspects of the world. For instance, media users today are more active and participative compared to media users 10 - 20 years ago due to the lack of media and technological resources. Current media users not only receive and interpret messages (text or image or sound or a combination of any); nonetheless they are able to project their interpretation and understanding about their rejection or acceptance in various forms of the media. With the instantaneous communication and interaction of media users from various location across the globe, geographical boundaries are blurred as cultural practices, religious beliefs, political views, economic facts and social norms are shared, exchanged and developed in a particular way contributing to the culture of the zeitgeist of 'media users' globally.

Besides that, Fraser (2003) establishes that the media is also believed to have an impact on the economic globalization in two ways; (i) media channels the communication and information technology and, (ii) media as a content provider for various media users. Referring to the prior factor, with the presence of electronic commerce (www.ebay.com, www.amazon.com) and supporting telecommunication technology such as video conferencing and 3G services, it has increased the transparency of transactions and agreements due to the demand of traders as well as the public. Information, money and commodities are transacted across the world with ease, convenience and efficiency as individuals or involved parties are able to proceed with business operation without the haste and trouble of travelling and presenting themselves. Therefore, business transaction and entrepreneurship between countries has never been prompt and trouble free to this very day. Moving on to the latter impact - the growing need and use of the telecommunication technology; the media has become a vital content provider for the diversified media users of various background, culture, religious belief, socio-economic status and region. The World Wide Web, internet, radio, TV, computers,

tablet PCs' and smart phones have become media apparatus of data assembling; whereby media users are able to compare and contrast the various resources (products, services and information) that are available. Furthermore, media users have the option and freedom to contact any of the resource providers to suit their needs and interests. Thus, this indirectly creates a healthy competitive environment for the particular resource or service providers in sustaining their business as well as upholding the advancement of technological growth of developed nations.

On a further note, this widely open comprehensive communication among media user paves way for the creation of new culture together with the need to emphasize and defend one's cultural identity as media users become conscious of their cultures, values and beliefs. The transactions of communication expands with the ever growing media technology, media users and media content; that contributes to the formation of a complex global society based on worldwide surge of cultural products (D'Silva, 2000, p. 55). Therefore, with the continuous transformation in media content and media technology, the conception of 'media globalization' seems to be in a spiraling helix; and must not be seen as a completed cycle of one party dominating the others. Hence, the local cultural identity and global identity are neither in a static and stable condition, nor under certain hegemonic control as claimed. Instead, the cultural identity and global identity are in a constant flux that leads towards heterogenization of different cultural identities across the world.

In a broader view, Rekhari (2009, p. 175) proposes that current media users have greater control and liberty over their application of knowledge and interpretation of message from the media and its content. This scenario propagates the freedom of speech for some media users to voice out their satisfaction, or dissatisfaction or suggestion or even retaliation at a more extreme level. These inputs/ideas/suggestions or individual human rights in an optimistic sense; may be perceived as threats or 'extreme activities' by certain parties and individuals, calling for government intervention (rules and law) through restriction on media content and in some cases, censorship on the internet access. Proofs to this, there are rules, laws and punishments that are implemented to safeguard the socio-economic and political interests of certain organization under the disguise of racial harmony and social orders in some countries.

Cultural Hegemony Vs Globalization

There are times when media globalization is related to the Western/American cultural hegemony and is understood as a threat to local/third world cultures. Before elaborating any further, the definition of hegemony must be understood in order to conclude on the current global media phenomenon that is transforming the world. According to Gramsci's definition on hegemony; hegemony can be

described as a practice where a social group attains the philosophical, moral and political leadership with the active consent of other significant social groups (Fraser, 2003). Hence, it can be accomplished that hegemony is not merely about the 'perceived dominance' of a particular culture or organization of developed nation. In its true sense, hegemony reflects the total ideological acceptance and practice from a superior group which requires consent and recognition of the lesser group.

As viewed more pessimistically by some, media globalization may be seen as a static condition, whereby a superior global power/culture dominates the weaker and smaller local cultures in respect to their identity, beliefs and values. In reality, the 'perceived' global culture are adopted into the local culture due to local restriction, political interest and social practices as well social codes to suit the nature of local cultures. Local cultures have the power and freedom to accept or reject or adapt elements from global culture; and vice-versa. In situation where local products are intended to be marketed globally, certain amount of global trends or cultural elements are infused to increase its receptivity; while upholding its own local identity and culture. As such, Chuang (2000, p.6) notes that the globalization and localization of cultures are in a continuous flux, and further states:

"How a local culture adopts the global culture and becomes competitive in the global arena, while sustaining its own cultural identity and sovereignty, becomes a central part of the dialectical process" (p.6).

As telecommunication technology makes the world 'together' and brings people closer to one another, it has also heightened people's consciousness about their roots and identity (Wang, 2002, p. 83-84). It comes as no surprise that globalization takes places in our very home in one way or another with or without us realizing it. The reality of globalization may vary individually based on cultural and socio-economic background. In the case of Malaysia as an example, media users may be influenced or have varying attributes from different global cultures that forms their daily lives. It could be from a Nintendo game console (Japan) that forms the avid gaming culture within the younger generation; or to the designer culture based on purchase of stylish work machines such as the Macintosh and iPads (USA), or the variety of food from different countries that we consume after being exposed to different cultures from the media in order to experience the taste of an exquisite cuisine. Looking within the paradigm of entertainment, Malaysia mainstream TV stations broadcasts a variety of programmes that includes Japanese and Korean drama series for the younger generation who are upbeat with the changing global trends; Indonesian dramas to cater for specific media users who are inclined towards local beliefs and social norms, as well as the popular Bollywood dramas and movies that has captured and influenced a majority of Malaysians from the language that they speak to the costume that they wear.

Inextricably, these elements contribute to the structure of our lifestyle, which establishes our identity and culture in one way or another. However, this doesn't advocate the idea of cultural hegemony by certain country or society, as foreign elements from the media are not induced directly into the local culture and identity; instead are adapted and localized to suit the existing local cultural practices and belief system.

More importantly, the choices of goods, entertainment and lifestyle preferences; are choices and decision that they make as active media users and consumers based from the exposure, interpretation and application from the media and its content. It was highlighted by Wang (2002) that, "... they have great freedom to select the way of their lives" (p. 84). As the active and participative media user on the receiving end, they have the option and authority to question the media content that may challenge their identity, behavioral norms, religious beliefs, way of life or nationality before they adapt and/or adopt contents and messages from the media. Nevertheless, this may vary individually due to differences in education level, socio-economic status, gender, religion, race, language proficiency and even sexual orientation. Therefore, the notion of 'cultural hegemony' may be far from its truth as the formation and structure of media culture is in a continuous transition with the varying proportion of contributing factors depending on the individual characteristic of the media users parallel to the content and context of a particular media.

Even though there are views that globalization has distorted cultural boundaries and destroyed local identities; Tomlinson (2003, p. 270) argues that globalization has significantly propagated and created cultural identity within developing countries in particular. Moreover, Hjarvard (n.d., p. 71) summarizes the vital role of global media in generating or initiating various new culture and identity among media users into two categories: (i) media's technology and availability that offers multiple channels for the transmission of cultural products; and (ii) the interaction process which becomes the base of the communication network of different cultures and formation of social structure based on the media user's interest.

Within the perspective of the first category on the movement and development of cultural products, it can be noted that TV is no longer the major source of content provider in today's world. The internet and World Wide Web has taken over the role of information and resource reservoir as current media users are able to view, download and upload media content of various cultures from different countries. This is such as the latest news (natural disaster, political turmoil, etc) are available on the internet and World Wide Web almost instantaneously, even before it is published or broadcasted. In the current day scenario, media users do not have to wait any longer for movie releases at their local cinema, or songs and album debuts at the local music store; instead media

users are given access and freedom to download from certain website to their convenience. TV programs (news, dramas, sitcoms, and documentaries) are not only aired during specific timeframe of the broadcasting station but also made available online whereby; it can be accessed through personal computers, mobile phones and other telecommunication devices by the media users. Consequently, this changes the nature of media users based on the consumption and interpretation of the media and its content. With the variety of content and unlimited access of the cultural products, media users have a large depository of data on references and samples to suit their specific interest. This creates an encouraging culture among media users as information and knowledge is shared, exchanged and developed in a continuous process; while at the same time, creating a competitive edge for other content providers who are planning to advertise and sell their product.

The interaction and exchange of cultural content and message through the telecommunication technology has made way for the representation of foreign - Western culture in particular, into the atmosphere of local media content. This is strongly evident in the art and music scene; where by the latest trend, findings, release, concert, exhibition is made accessible for the media users via the telecommunication technology. Thus, individuals are able to update themselves and indirectly expose and seek references that shape the local art and music landscape. In conclusion, Chan (2005, p. 24 – 26) states that the idea of local and global seems to co-exist; as one can't be defined without the reference to the other. As some may refer to the growing culture of *rap* and *hip-hop* music (US) around the world ; the outcome of other numerous *rap* and *hip-hop* music from different countries (Indonesia, China, Korea) in their own version – with their own identity, cultural elements and essence being infused to localize their music must be acknowledged.

The phenomenon of injecting local content into foreign medium to increase its receptivity comes as no surprise. Proof to this, the pop music which originated from US, has been adapted, localized and revolutionized; and can be traced in Asian countries such as China, Japan, Korea and Malaysia. Taking into account the infamous US pop icon back in 1990s'- Madonna, to the latest pop queen – Lady Gaga; other female pop idols have emerged and created their very own signature and identity within the Asian region. Thus far, Malaysia with its very talented Ziana Zain, Faye Wong from China with an exquisite voice, quirky Japanese Ayumi Hamasaki and the eccentric Son DamBi from Korea nonetheless. Albeit the similarities in their genre of music, sturdy differences between pop music of the US and Asian countries can be identified and distinguished based on the language, song rhythm, artist's personal image, video content and cultural identity elements in it. Conversely, local content and identity can also be globalized, such as the story of *Monsoon Wedding* by Mira Nair; based on a typical arranged marriage in a Pujabi

family of their daughter. Besides that, this movie which also portrays of real-life montages of Delhi was distributed globally and it earned 30 Million USD in total revenue with 13.9 Million from the US only (Pillania, 2008, p. 121).

Moving on to the second category as noted by Hjarvard (n.d., p. 71), the global media pedestals communicative network and social structures that can be further discussed into two subcategories. For instance, in today's unlimited online sources, the internet and World Wide Web has become a common referencing point for many individuals today. Together with the expansion of internet, certain application such as www.facebook.com and www.youtube.com has become a provider of entertainment, ideas, culture and lifestyle. Hereby, it paves way for the stratification of the new media user and their culture. New talents and creative ideas are uploaded to the net, establishing a 'resource center' with its own users and content provider. Upcoming young and fresh talents initiate their own web to present the ideas in the form of video, pictures, along with their personal information to publicize themselves and source-out business opportunity. This is a departure from the traditional way of promoting an individual's talent or ideas with minimal cost and a vast reach of audience. Apart from that, the establishment of hybrid cultures or mixture of two different cultures has become the consequence of some of these cultural interactions and sharing. This is notable especially among the younger generation, whereby they are being exposed to a variety of different cultural elements locally and globally. The exposures and experiences that they gain from the cultural elements contours their ideology and beliefs, and forms a generation with a different mind-set of local and cultural identity. Lastly, with the ongoing cultural product and information exchange, sharing and interaction; the formation of new cultures, identities and communities; the interaction between media users have become more intensified, varied and complex as a particular media content is projected into various medium. Thus, the phrases such as 'media hegemony' or 'cultural hegemony/imperialism' may not reflect the scenario of the global media and the transformation that is taking place from various aspects.

Media Reception

With the unlimited access of various media content on different medium, media users globally are able to stay connected with one another while sharing and exchanging knowledge and information. It may be apparent to some that the world now seems more united than before, nonetheless it must be recapitulated that individual differences continue to exist within the understanding and interpretation of the media users of diversified culture, religion and regional constraints. Variation in interpretation and understanding exist in any message or media product that is being projected/aired/broadcasted/ or made available online. Intention(s) of the sender or encoder (self-promo, creating resources, knowledge

sharing or entertainment) of the media content may be different compared to the understanding, interpretation of the media user or decoder (references, entertainment, education or gratification) who uses the media and its content. The variation of perception between the sender and the receiver of particular media content was summated by Hall; that the encoding (transmission) and decoding (reception) were two distinct processes which were independent of each other (D'Silva, 2000, p. 58).

Congruent to this, particular media content may generate various interpretation and understanding among its users, which are diversified socio-economically and culturally. In regards to media users in Asian countries, which are known to have varied cultural backgrounds and religious beliefs; interpretations and understandings may vary greatly. This is often in East and Southeast countries that are profoundly influenced by the '*Asian values*' which are shared and practiced by different nationalities and ethnicities (Milner, 1999). '*Asian values*' are related to the idea of 'sense of togetherness' among its community member; guidelines of religious beliefs in lifestyle, and emphasizing on harmony and society order to establish stability and peace within its citizens who differ in race, ethnicity, religion, culture and socio-economic background. In contrast, as noted by Milner (1999), the '*Western values*' accentuates on individuality, freedom of speech; therefore resulting low intolerance for eccentric individuals together with their codes and practices. Taking the '*Monsoon Wedding*' movie as an example; the interpretation, understanding and level of involvement may differ greatly between the Western and Eastern media users due to their diversity in socio-economic and cultural background. The story depicts a culturally traditional family arranged Punjabi wedding in Delhi that features romance, conflicts and drama of the bride's family. However, within the Eastern culture a wedding is a major family affair whereby relatives play a vital role in the wedding event and is celebrated extravagantly for a few days. Thus, the eastern media users may be able to comprehend the family values and cultural practices that were portrayed in this particular movie as they share similar values and beliefs (family honour, cultural codes and social norms). Conversely, the Western media users may perceive the messages differently as family arranged marriage are seldom practiced in the Western region. Following that, western wedding ceremony is more of a private affair which mostly involves close family members and associates that is carried out exclusively and briefly. In conclusion, in summing the difference between the '*Asian values*' and '*Western values*', it can be noted that the Southeast Asia countries in particular have their distinctive norms, cultures, language, regulation and business environment that governs their daily lives and experiences (Waller & Kim, 2000, p. 3). It is these daily experiences in general that forms the understanding of codes and symbols that media users relate to in the message and the content of the media.

To further discuss the reception of media among its users, this paper will look into two theoretical frameworks; (i) the use of media and its gratifications – Uses and Gratifications (U&G) and, (ii) the interpretation of media and its content – Interpretive Media Studies. According to Baran and Davis, (2003, p. 264), the Uses and Gratification (U&G) approach is concerned with ‘what people do with the media’, that conceives the media user as active and studies the different functions of media. It was also stated that, with the U&G approach, researchers emphasized on the role of media, such as entertainment, passing time and gathering social information; and found a relationship between the segmentation of the society with the various functions of media in relation to different programme and content (Alasuutari, 2007). Alasuutari (2007) describes:

“... gratifications can be obtained from a medium’s content, from familiarity with a genre, from general exposure to the medium, and from the social content in which it is used” (par.8).

Therefore, media users seek gratification from the media and its content based on the purpose of their consumption. For instance, the Facebook application has become part of an everyday routine for many internet users. Nevertheless, the gratification that a researcher seeks from the Facebook application (networking with other researchers, updating with the latest innovation and technology, and knowledge seeking); may be different from the gratification that a high school student seeks from the very same application (uploading photos on current events, staying connected with peers and search of new acquaintances). Hence, it is people’s needs and personality type that influences how they use and respond to a medium, was suggested by the U&G theorists.

Based on the U&G model, Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch underlined five basic conjectures that can be related to the media user (Baran & Davis, 2003, p. 265-266). It can be noted that the media users are goal oriented as they are selective and/or rational with the choice of media and the results they achieve from using that particular media. Following this, it points towards the gratifications of using a particular media – personal satisfaction of media user, e.g. the use of iPod by different age group. Teenagers purchase iPod to portray their ‘coolness’ or their socio-economic status, where as older working adults may purchase iPod based on its function. Thirdly, with the multiple choices of media that is available, media users have the freedom to seek a particular media accordingly to suit their needs and convenience. Media users may opt to use a different media at a different time of the day; computer at work, watching TV at home with family, or using the internet and smart phone for personal use. Next, media users select a particular media and its content due to their motives and interest. E.g. watching satellite TV to watch live games, or using the computer to search for resources, communication or entertainment, or using mobile technology for communication or entertainment during spare time. Finally, with the various choices of media and different

intentions and interests of the media users, the interpretation of media and its content is diversified and ever changing.

In further examining the interpretation of media content, the Interpretive Media Studies (IMS) as proposed by Stanley Fish would be applied to the diversified cultural, religious and social background of current media users. As proposed by Littlejohn, (2002, p. 201-202), based on the IMS, media can be used as a channel to transmit information to the audience; and the interpretation of the media content will be influenced by the degree of consumption of the media, cultural background and the understanding of media content by the media user. Therefore, the active and selective media users are seen as interpretive communities as the same media content may generate multiple understandings and interpretations by its varied media users. Lindlof (1988, as cited in Littlejohn, 2002, p. 201) identified three genres of the interpretive community, as: (i) content, (ii) interpretation, and (iii) social action.

Content refers to the type of programme or media content, e.g. sports, or education, or entertainment, or information. That is why a locally produced horror movie in Malaysia – ‘*Congkak*’ for instance, may appeal differently to its media users. The middle aged parents may relate and find this movie interesting based on their superstitions or religious beliefs. But the teenage daughter or son may find the content irrelevant in today’s modern day of living, while the young child may find the movie extremely scary that may influence his/her character. The second genre – interpretation; reflects on the manner and approach that a community shares in the meaning and understanding in interpreting the media’s content. This was evident in the interpretation and/or perception of a cultural advertisement during the festive season - TV3’s 2010 *Hari Raya* TV commercial which sparked controversy amongst its local audience as they interpreted and associated the red and white symbols in that advertisement to another religious celebration. Lastly, social action which is the net result of the first two genres; conveys how the media and its content influence the behavior/social interaction of a community in a given social setting.

This was precisely what happened within the social-political terrain in Malaysia. In the case of the 2007 ‘BERSIH’ Rally which was carried out in Kuala Lumpur in call for a clean and free electoral reform; that resulted different news coverage from the local and international media. Local mainstream media slanted the news due to the political interest of certain individuals and organizations; and it was the international media, such as CNN, BBC and Al-Jazeera that reported on the magnitude and details of the rally that consisted approximately of 100 000 protesters. The local police was criticized to have acted harshly (firing water cannons and tear gas) at the peaceful protesters who were marching to the Istana Negara to hand in their memorandum to the King. Thus, this portrays the various interpretation of the ‘BERSIH’ rally which was initiated through online media and

blogs; which resulted in diversified social actions (news report, protesters' participation) from different cluster of society (police, media agencies, citizens who supported the opposition). Communities in a country can be segregated due to the content - 'BERSIH' Rally, and the interpretation - perception and understanding on the purpose of the particular event; and finally the social action - how various communities choose to respond. Within this particular case, the social action of the protesters transcended religious beliefs, race, and ethnicities that churned a social action based on social values, norms and freedom of speech.

As media users become heterogeneous in the context of media's function and the interpretation of the media content, nevertheless this also creates certain amount of resistance in the meaning enforced by the dominant media, as posited by Fiske (D'Silva, 2000, p. 58) Media users are active and have freedom in choosing the type of media they want to interact with, the purpose of the interaction and the interpretation of the media's content. Current media users are knowledgeable based on their social and cultural experiences; which has become a profound factor in the interpretation of media content. In addition, other social variables like attitude, behaviour, and value of the media user should be considered in order to understand the characteristics and nature of the audience. Hence, if particular media content was dominant, media users may opt to resist or create a different form of output to illustrate their personal thoughts. Other than that, with the current advancement of the telecommunication technology, media users are in constant connection with the media in various ways – online shopping, chatroom and messengers, web surfing, responding to emails, uploading and downloading materials as well as information (Livingstone, 2003, p. 25). As concluded by Livingstone (2003, p. 25), with the exposure, knowledge and experience gained by the media user from the media and its content in their interaction process; it indirectly shapes the culture and identity of the media users. Thus, the media and media users are shaping and developing one another.

Government Control and Emergence of new identities

The notion of media hegemony and cultural imperialism has been both criticized and acclaimed globally. To understand the current state of the global media which connects millions of media users around the globe, the role of the developing countries' governments/policy makers must be given scrutinization as they act as 'gate-keepers' who control the flow of interaction/communication that reaches or that is projected by the end users. In an article on 'Journalism and Democracy in Asia', Haryanto (2006) noted that the diversified struggle for media freedom continues to exist within the Asian region. This was evident respective to different countries and ruling powers, whereby the media people (journalist, bloggers, activist) were being restricted and oppressed by powerful authorities who

controlled the flow of information in order to sustain their image as well as their political and personal interests (Haryanto, 2006).

Besides the online and satellite media, Compaine (2002) highlights in an article on 'Global Media', that traditional media such as TV, radio and newspaper are hugely state-owned and controlled by certain institution; which are subjected to government censorship. On a further note, Compaine (2002) describes that 29% of the world's largest newspapers are owned by state, while 57% are family owned; another 72% and 24% of radio stations are state owned and family owned respectively. Finally, 60% of the world's TV stations are state owned and remaining 34% are family owned (Compaine, 2002). This scenario portrays the control and scrutinization over the public media by certain parties and individuals in order to slant the news and information to their favour. As public become more aware of political and economic situation in their country and around the world, they turn to alternative media that are available through satellite and cable networks.

In Malaysia for instance, Netto (2007) in an article 'Malaysian media giant grasps for Internet', summates that the largest private media conglomerate – Media Prima owns four free to air TV networks. Despite being a private broadcasting company, Media Prima is allied to UMNO (United Malays National Organisation), which is a dominant political party in Barisan Nasional; the National Front of the ruling coalition. Other than Astro - which is paid satellite TV network; RTM 1 and RTM 2 stations are state owned which are available to the public (Netto, 2007). During the last Malaysia's General Election in March, 2008; Nain noted the opposition candidates and some of the media users chose the alternative media such as; mobile, blogs, email, YouTube and SMS to raise awareness and consciousness on the current socio-political issues due to the lack of credibility in both the mainstream and print media (Shah, 2008). Even though, it may appear that internet censorship does not apply in Malaysia, as yet; the draconian Internal Security Act may be imposed by the Home Minister to any individual who are believed to create or instigate instability in racial harmony or national security in Malaysia. This notion was further supported by Shao and Waller (1993, as cited in Waller & Kim, 2000, p. 4), that legal restrictions such as the Internal Security Act - 1960 and the Printing Presses and Publication Act – 1984, in Malaysia for instance; are implemented to protect the cultural identity and keep a tight rein on any offence(s) that may be intentionally/unintentionally instigated to other cultural group(s). With Malaysia being a country of diversified race, ethnicity and culture; the authority in power's intention to protect its local interest, social harmony and political stability has escalated to a situation where democracy and freedom of speech is no longer practiced in its true volume.

Singapore, together with Malaysia are considered as countries that practice the authoritarian system in their media freedom; whereby countries like India, Philippines and Thailand have lively media systems; while countries such as

Pakistan, Indonesia and Cambodia are paving way for better media democracy (Adhikari, 2000). As Haryanto (2006) establishes Singapore to be considered a developed nation among the ASEAN countries in particular; conversely, it still remains under the conservative control by its government. Despite the wide coverage of internet (99% among household and offices), Singapore citizens continue to fear to raise factual information and critical issues in regards to their government policy due to stringent law enforcements by the authority. The same scenario is reflected in Indonesia; whereby media freedom and rights to express one's thought or voice remains elusive and risky (Haryanto, 2006). As the authority defines media freedom and sets a limit with laws and regulations, the citizen and media users are framed into a situation where their freedom of expression and human rights may be used against them. This was the case with one of the well known Malaysian blogger who was perceived as a threat to the country's unity and harmony; and, thus he was issued ISA detention as a result of raising his concern and thoughts in regards to the socio-political climate that was taking shape within the country.

The oppression of media freedom is also evident in China, as the print and broadcast media is under rigorous government control, that there's even restriction on the internet access (Compaine, 2002). Furthermore, Haryanto (2006) noted that the Chinese government took extra measure in filtering and deleting information and messages from online that were not 'favourable' to them, or news that were thought to cause 'unnecessary' panic among its public. As a consequence, the media users opted to utilize the SMS (Short Message Services) through their mobile to communicate and spread information and news; such as during the early stage of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2003 in China. Moving on to India, Doordarshan was the broadcasting network which was solely state owned that broadcasted local programs and international programs such as CNN and BBC based on little foreign investment (Haryanto, 2006). As Doordarshan was the solitary network that was state controlled; private broadcasters who wanted to bring in other international programmes were denied permits by the Indian government, hence forcing them to transmit these programmes from outside India with a higher cost. Scrutinization and media oppression by the government is apparent in the case of India and China in order to restrict information and knowledge sharing among its citizen. With unlimited access of information on the Internet and foreign cultural products that are aired in their local TV, the local governments in China and India respectively ensured that their citizen would not retaliate towards the government and cause unnecessary panic that could disrupt the socio-political as well as the economic landscape within their country.

In a survey of press freedom on the broadcast and print media which was carried out by 'Freedom House' in 1998, Gunaratne (2000) accomplished that the survey proved that none of the Asian countries scored 15 or less on a scale of 1-100;

which was the first-tier of free-press countries. Japan with a score of 19 was established as the freest country in the Asia region in regards to the press freedom. The development of media freedom in Asia can be categorised into three criteria, such as: (i) free/vibrant (with score of 1-30), (ii) partly free (with score of 31-60), and (iii) not free/authoritarian system (with score of 61-100). Japan, Thailand, South Korea, Mongolia and Philippines were declared as “free”. India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh fell into the “partly free” category. In the authoritarian/not free category were countries such as Malaysia, Singapore, Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam, China, Myanmar and North Korea. Despite the differences in press freedom and the socio-political background of these countries, Gunaratne (2000) summarized on issues that are suppressing the free press at varies degree and level within the Asian region as: (i) stringent laws and regulations that affected the media content, e.g – Internal Security Act, Printing Presses and Publication Act, and Official Secret Act; (ii) strong political pressure and control of the media content in all the countries, except the press in India, e.g. – influence of Barisan Nasional on Media Prima; (iii) influence of economic in framing media content, e.g. – China’s censorship of the internet; and (iv) repressive action of the press, e.g. – self censorship by editors.

As the concentrated industry of the broadcast and print media in most Asian countries are being safeguarded by constrictive laws and regulations, nonetheless, it has created a revolutionary age for freedom of speech and human rights among the new media users. Citizen or public who are unhappy or subjugated or discriminated by certain authority or organization are able to use the new telecommunication technology (blog, SMS, twitter, www.youtube.com, or www.facebook.com) to raise their thoughts and voice in their respective country and around the world. Shifting from the traditional media (print and broadcast), Babran (2008, p. 215 - 220) states that public in the current era are given access to internet and other forms of telecommunication technology; such as SMS, twitter, YouTube, blogs, and so on, that enables them to participate actively in the public sphere. Therefore, the media users are using these alternative media to express and to update themselves with the current socio-economic and political situation around the globe. This is due to the lack of credibility in the mainstream media which is mostly controlled by the government or suppressed by authoritarian laws and regulations. As an example, the news coverage on BERSIH Rally by the local media was insufficient, that caused the media users to choose alternative media to update themselves on the current events. Congruent to this, the local media was controlled by the ruling government to promote national sentiment; racial harmony and unity in order to safe-guard the socio-political as well as the economic landscape in Malaysia.

In Malaysia as a case, the alternative media such as websites, blogs, and online newspaper – *Malaysia Kini* and *Malaysia Today* have become popular sources

for more reliable and accurate news on issues pertaining to the country (Netto, 2007). On further establishing the uprising role of the alternative media, Netto (2007) noted that the news concerning two major demonstrations and retaliatory government that were carried out in the Kuala Lumpur in 2007 were slanted and framed by the mainstream media to correspond with the political interest of the ruling parties. The government's conduct to cultivate nationalist sentiment – sustaining peace, harmony, political and economic stability through the distortion and selection of news was suggested by Compaine (2002) as to 'fanning the flames' in a particular situation within a country. The net result of this, however, was the weight shift from the mainstream media to the alternative media; that resulted healthy public debate which provided channels for the public to raise their uncertainties, doubts, frustration or even ideas to solve certain issues. With the current media landscape that transcends geographical boundaries, cultures, social-economic backgrounds, languages, and restrictions of the traditional media; the online media specifically has given access to the creation of new identities as a source of presenting or experiencing socio-economic and/or political movements in countries around the world (Kellner & Pierce, 2007).

Conclusion

With the media user being able to interact with one another through chat, twitter, blog, Facebook, SMS, MMS, video, images, so on and so forth; this has propagated the formation of online communities with a new pattern of social interaction transcending geographical barriers and government intervention in particular (Movius, 2010). This pattern of interaction may vary based on the age, gender, culture, current issue, media preference, individual interest, socio-economic status, and the political terrain of media users' respective country. As internet and computer becomes a necessity in every other household; online communication has become a provider of information, knowledge, entertainment and social networking. Nevertheless, the online communication grants access for public to raise their issues and form a network community with other media user from different locations; and further, stimulating positive transformations or criticizing negative setbacks that concerns them. Movius (2010) summates:

"With new technology, individuals are recognizing patterns of social interaction to create a new form of society, which is conceived as the network society. Online community sheds light on the emergence of new forms of sociability enabled by technology, a departure from previously spatially bounded social interaction". (Globalisation and Communication Section, par. 4).

The online communities or network societies as recognized by Castells are resulted from the revolutionized media system that allowed for the combination of global trends with the local identity of the media users (Babran, 2008, p. 215 - 220).

The media users' identity would then be shaped by their historical roots with the adaptation of current events/trends from the world. Babran (2008) summates:

"The individual constantly receives input from the environment and at the same time possesses his/her unique characteristics which differentiate his/her independence from social" (p.215).

This can be further explained with the diversified media user of different age, gender, socio-economic status, political background, culture, ethnicity and nationality; who are experiencing different media content (songs, movies, SMS, information or knowledge) based on varied intention of the particular media usage (entertainment, education, research, business, or to occupy free time); who then interprets, understands and adapts the message differently based on their interests, needs, values and beliefs of their culture. With this phenomenon, the media users around the globe become pluralistic and heterogeneous while strengthening their cultural identity. In conclusion, it can be noted that the interaction of media users of different cultures on a global scale has an impact on the formation of their identity; as cultural distinctiveness of a particular media user is strengthened (Babran, 2008, p. 215 - 220).

Moving on to the younger generation who are being exposed to various media technologies at a prime age, they seem to experience difference cultures and identities from the media at varying degrees. This exposure and observation process from the media technology may dorm their local identity over a long period of time, as it becomes part of their daily routine, which may form their culture unintentionally. Thus, the context of local and global may vary individually based on their exposure to media content, socio-cultural background, economic status, educational level, and the availability of media. Hermans and Dimaggio (2007, p. 36) postulated that this assimilation process lead towards the development of bicultural or hybrid identity especially among the adolescent. The bicultural identity is associated with individuals who portray the local identity and their roots as part of them, while another part of their identity reflecting the global scenario. However, the hybrid identity is a combination of both the local and global identity attributes, which creates a new form of identity.

So, how and when does the 'global hegemony' or 'cultural hegemony' penetrates and takes over the local cultural identity, culture and value? Ironically, in most Asian countries the media (mainstream in particular) is being controlled by those in power to suit their political interest, collectively with rules and regulations that promote self censorship among journalists and editors. The media landscapes in these countries are further oppressed by rigorous law enforcement that advocates harsh and rigid punishments to those who practice freedom of speech as they are seen as a threat to ruling power. Thus, the hegemonic claim may be far from its truth, as the media freedom and practices of democracy is restrained by

political powers and kept in check under the notion of national unity and racial harmony to wade-off socio-economic crisis and political turmoil.

With media being the scrutinizing agent between the public and the government, media holds a vital responsibility to ensure that democracy is well established and practiced. According to Ferguson (1999, p. 175 – 188) among the crucial tasks of media are: (i) to report on controversial issues, (ii) chase down on resource wastage or power abuse by the government, (iii) assist the government in administration for nation building and development, (iv) emphasizing on scandal within private business, and lastly, more importantly to inspect, analyze and report on the government's leadership. Unfortunately, most of the media within the Asian region would need to reform themselves on their responsibility and task, as noted by Bhattachary due to media commercialization and concentration, politicizing of media by those in power, hostility towards reformation, and the everlasting struggle of sustaining peace and harmony while informing the public on sensitive and important issues to a culturally and religiously diversified country (Adhikari, 2000). The reformation of media is crucial as the media is the gateway for the public, organization and government to communicate and establish understandings among one another. More importantly, we as media user need to ponder upon our very own social and cultural responsibility in respect to the globalisation process that is transforming the globe at every possible aspect. It is in our jurisdiction as media user to practice human right and freedom of speech; in order to bring positive changes to country while upholding our tradition, identity and belief at the same time. Be it the new media or traditional media; it is us who needs to decide rationally and wisely on the function and purpose of the media.

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