

**THE FOUR ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF MASS MEDIA ACCORDING TO HAROLD
LASWELL AND THE CURRENT MEDIA ENVIRONMENT IN MALAYSIA**

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1.0 ABSTRACT

This term paper aims to study the relation between the current media environment in Malaysia and the roles and functions of mass media. Therefore, in order to understand the terms and functions in more depth, the main objective of this study is to identify based on the four roles of mass media introduced by Harold Lasswell. According to Laswell (1948), the roles and functions include the surveillance of the environment, the correlation of components of society, cultural transmission and entertainment. Individuals today rely on mass media as it serves as a significant source of information to them. Based on this term paper, we were able to study and identify that the four functions of mass communication are still relevant and transferable to mass media today. Mass media involves both traditional and new media. The traditional media focus on one-to-many communication whereby the new media act as many-to-many communication. The outcome of this study revolves around understanding how the media gets our attention, gathers information, the impact on Malaysian society, and how traditions are passed through generations.

Keywords: Harold Lasswell, Mass Media, Roles, Functions, Malaysia

2.0 INTRODUCTION

The mass media has been the key communication tool to transmit information to people since centuries ago. It is also a crucial aspect of someone's life. According to Luedecke & Boykoff (2017), the extent of mass media ranges from news to entertainment and stretches conventional media such as television, newspapers, radio, magazines, books, flyers along with new media that is social media and the Internet. A communication theorist and political scientist, Harold Lasswell, mentioned that there are four roles and functions of mass media in human society. As function can be defined as how the object works and what it does, the terms initiated by Lasswell were four clearly distinguished functions carried out by the media, as discussed further below.

This term paper discusses whether Malaysian citizens fully utilise the roles and functions of mass media for society and their country. Evidently, mass media and society are bound together, shaping one another. In this term paper, it is shown that Malaysian society connects with each other through mass media. The role of media in society is to observe and report what occurs in the environment around us as it also has the responsibility to pass down notions such as social norms and traditions. The media messages hold power and influence in society's ideologies, experiences and perspectives (Luedecke & Boykoff, 2017). Though, there is no doubt that communication works differently within different societies. Moreover, people who directly own or control mass media or use them as channels for messages hold a social power of mass media to society (McQuail, 2014).

3.0 THE FOUR ROLES AND FUNCTIONS OF MASS MEDIA ACCORDING TO HAROLD LASSWELL

3.1 SURVEILLANCE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

According to Lasswell (1948), the surveillance of the environment indicates that mass communication prevails to inform and observe the public. Up until today, many people rely solely upon mass media as it functions as our eyes and ears to obtain information. Mass media plays an important role to the citizens. According to Anwar et al. (2020), mass media is significant and crucial in any time of a crisis. Although Malaysia is free from major natural disasters, the country is exposed to the occurrence of man-made disasters (Chan, 2012). The disasters include heavy floods, landslides and severe haze. Based on the flood incident in 2021, many people from the Klang Valley were affected badly.

The news which circulated within the mass media was a big help to update people across Malaysia. Though it was trying times for Malaysians, the people who were not affected lent a helping hand, physically and virtually, through the use of social media and provided information involving the incident. Moreover, with the help of news channels and social media, many of the citizens were able to initiate and collect funds as much as they could through their social media platforms. Based on this incident, the Malaysian society has proven that this function is vital for both volunteers and the needy to access announcements on shelters, affected areas, NGOs involved, basic necessities, donations and funding.

3.2 CORRELATION OF COMPONENTS OF SOCIETY

The second function and role of mass media is the correlation of components of society as it corresponds to the surveillance of the environment (Lasswell, 1948). The correlation of components simply means a relation or a connection of mass media. To all intents and purposes, humans analyse and interpret any information given to them. Therefore, it is a norm for people to have different perspectives and opinions on each issue accumulated. Mass media are responsible for developing truthful positive or negative news to the world. It acts to inform and educate the public. According to Giacchino & Verashchagina (2020), although media bias is common in our

era, individuals are encouraged to utilise a second or more media outlets to minimise the probability of media bias from other sources.

Nonetheless, it is reasonable for people to have doubts relating to the information they perceive. According to Emma (2019), individuals have different perspectives as to what the information is about and where did the information come from. Modern technology plays an important role due to the fact that people use social media and the Internet for precisely everything. Hence, it leads to the fact that there are countless amounts of irresponsible fake news spread on social media, specifically on uncertified news platforms. Despite that, people or users of the Internet have stepped in to identify the credibility of the information.

In the midst of the pandemic in Malaysia, a user on Twitter, (@khalids), tweeted a 31-second clip showing a number of school teachers who died due to the vaccines. According to Bernama (2021), it went viral, causing an impact and chaos among our Malaysian society and their views towards the Covid-19 vaccine. In regard to this, the Malaysian Health Minister, Khairy Jamaluddin, had taken serious measures by filing a report against the user responsible to the police and Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission (MCMC). The purpose of this is to help tighten the law and educate the public. Therefore, it is a lesson learned for our Malaysian society to practice good and responsible correlation of information on media platforms in order to prevent the dissemination of fake news online.

3.3 CULTURAL TRANSMISSION

According to Lasswell (1948), the role and function of cultural transmission acts based on how the media reflects our own beliefs, values and norms. Cultural transmission acts as transmitters of cultural messages, shaping and influencing generations, letting the masses understand what are considered acceptable forms of behaviour (Emma, 2019). As mass media provides common information in order to educate and cultivate the minds of the public, there is a great variety in what cultural messages are accepted by different consumers, how they interpret it, and ultimately, how they are employed, or not (Dane, 2020).

In Malaysia, it is believed that the mass media are shaped and influenced by social groups. The products by our mass media transcend social structures to influence the cultures of society. Mass media content, mainly broadcasted content, by all counts reflects society in which they promote an understanding of society's cultural heritage. For instance, programmes on television such as Upin and Ipin, The Amazing Awang Khenit, Satria 7 Pahlawan and Alif & Sofia are designed to showcase culture, history, good behaviours and moral standards which aims to nurture the minds of children watching.

“To exist in transmission, in communication”, relates to how different forms of communication give shape and structure to the culture of society. Mass media forms a standing based on the impact and reactions of society towards topics such as human rights, the LGBTQ+ community, racism, child marriage, addiction, abortion, mental and sexual abuse, suicidal ideation, mental illness and many more. However, there have been occasions where products in the mass media do not last long as they have failed to resonate with the culture, trends and taste of our society today.

The unplanned development of content has led to undertones of unrealistic beauty standards, objectifying women, colourism or racism, and glorifying certain issues. This generates information and materials that are pleasurable for consumption, influencing values, society's living norms and lifestyles, but not culturally purposeful. According to Thompson (1997), the production and consumption of cultural representations affect the construction of cultural identities; national, ethnic, religious, occupational, family, sex and gender. The media environment in Malaysia needs to understand that local content can be inferred as media content, portraying true Malaysian characteristics, evoke Malaysian identity through values, norms and lifestyles of diverse ethnicities in order to motivate and achieve aspirations of our society (Rahim & Pawanteh, 2010).

3.4 ENTERTAINMENT

This role and function of entertainment refers to the ability of the media to help people relax and create a means of escape from the stress of everyday life (Lasswell, 1948). According to Emma (2019), the mass media serves to educate and entertain, proven through how the media dominates in development and producing. For instance, forms of entertainment can be found in sports, games,

music, live events, variety or reality shows, movies and drama. Entertainment showcased by the media provides peace in hectic situations or harsh realities (Dane, 2020).

The media environment in Malaysia values entertainment to its finest with the ability to be widespread of sensation and interest. However, low quality of content is often criticised due to certain portrayals and ideas that lack in value. Though, benefits that help people experience new events, pass their leisure time or stimulate emotions shows how important this function is (Communication Theory, 2015). For instance, a majority of society does not solely rely on broadcast radio or producers as Tik Tok, Instagram and Twitter are continuously evolving in providing entertainment and knowledge. According to Tang & Chan (2020), entertainment of mass media does shape users' culture, influencing patterns of relationships and education.

Entertainment on Malaysian television is typically infused or curates content that features excessive amounts of drama. Censorship, which to an extent is a proactive conduct, has potentially worsen the subject on educating taboo topics such as sex, drugs and many more social issues. Though, *i-Tanggung*, a TV programme by Astro Originals, is a paragon to how TV programmes that aim for entertainment value and experience can raise awareness on mental health and issues that are increasingly prevalent. The series was curated to educate society and initiate discussions on topics, namely, Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, Narcissistic Personality Disorder, statutory rape, teen pregnancy, mental and physical abuse, family planning and the use of religion to manipulate (Gempak, 2021).

The powerful tools of broadcasted content and social media have both allowed our society today to behave and think a certain way. Educationally, mass media has a distinctive ability to rapidly spread cultural messages to a broad audience based on their exposure of inclusive content and actions (Wiest, 2016). Regardless of the contradicting view that people lose their sense of culture, mass media most definitely contributes towards integration, harmony and cohesion through information, entertainment and education (Fourie, 2007).

4.0 DISCUSSION

4.1 SUMMARY

Based on the four roles and functions by Harold Lasswell, Malaysia's media environment plays a significant role in social modernization and should engage in the path of understanding how important it is to raise subjects, topics and information within their content. The process of identifying the relationship between media, the roles and functions, and society proves that the potential growth of mass media in Malaysia cannot be denied.

4.2 CONCLUSION

Harold Laswell's interpretation of the roles and functions of mass media on a macrosociological level explains social practises, institutions and the needs of society. Based on this, the media serves as a catalyst to accelerate issues onto the public agenda. In order for the media environment in Malaysia to progressively move forward, efforts must be made towards understanding Lasswell's initiatives in more depth. The mass media environment in Malaysia does have the potential of creating various forms of a symbolic reality and represent social ideals.

As society has evolved to be more personalised and participative with the advancements of technology today, would Malaysia's media environment be prepared to make those improvements and reach its potentials? Effectively, it is important to take note that the mass media which performs and constructs functionality, would responsibly form a system of values which would then be adopted by society at appropriate developmental stages. Hence, it is vital to enhance the potential of our mass media environment in Malaysia to establish communication that determines the level of civilization and culture.

(Word count: 2095 words)

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