

PROPAGANDA TOOL

# MEDIA'S POWER OVER US



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The media does not tell people what to think, but what to think about, and the message conveyed can be understood in many ways

I AM constantly amazed at how expressive Malaysians are, especially on the Internet, when voicing their opinions. From social to political and economic issues, social media has been used as a tool for a lot of people to be heard.

In fact, it was through a friend's status update on Facebook that I first came across the front page of a local paper that published a picture of a congregation performing tarawih prayers, and above it, an article about a terrorist leader. Like many Malaysians, my friend felt quite affected by the issue, and voiced his concern through his social media account.

On Twitter, however, I spotted a few people questioning why some were upset over what they felt was a non-issue, because apparently, other local papers also published a similar photograph on their front page, and the terrorism story.

You see, there is a difference and it all boils down to how the page and the story were framed. Framing refers to how news is positioned by journalists, editors and media gatekeepers. The use of words and pictures in a news article, for instance, has the potential to create stereotypes and a biased perception for readers. These abstract notions serve to create and organise social meaning.

How do we create meanings from media texts? In communication studies, I was taught that media texts, such as television programmes, radio shows, Instagram updates and newspaper articles, are polysemic and can be understood in various ways. For instance, if a magazine publishes a picture of a cup, half filled with water, it can be interpreted in many ways. One could argue and see it as half empty, while others can see it as half full.

If the same cup is framed in a certain way, for instance on a page with dreary colours, under a



The use of words and pictures in a news article can create stereotypes and a biased perception for readers. FILE PIC

story about the war in Syria, it may connote the feeling of despair and hopelessness.

If it is placed on a cheerfully coloured page, under an article about bubbly children, it may connote hope and possibility. Because of the way how the page was framed, the different portrayals, enable readers to construct different perceptions on the same object — the cup.

Now, you may wonder, why should one bother with how views and perceptions are constructed from the media? Malaysians, after all, are a media-savvy society. Most of us have access to media, use it for our benefit and can create content.

But, throughout the lectures I have attended and the many articles I pored over, I learnt that, one can never underestimate the power of media.

As aptly said by scholar Teun A. van Dijk, "media primarily has the potential to control, to some extent, the minds of readers and viewers, but not directly their actions."

In other words, the media has an agenda setting function, whereby it doesn't tell people what to think, but instead, what to think about.

That is the reason why media was, and probably still is, an important propaganda tool.

Thus, the layout of a newspaper's page, at first glance, may look harmless. But, if we look beyond the surface, the embedded meaning has the potential to give people serious issues to think about.

I believe this is because the way we create meanings is also influenced by our experiences and cultural background.

In light of this matter, it is vital that society be more media literate. As it is, most Malaysians are active consumers of the media. Almost everybody owns a device that gives them access to the media and uses the media for his or her gratification.

However, how analytical and critical are we when creating and accessing media texts?

It is important to remember

that we live in a multicultural society.

Therefore, it is only ethical if we are sensitive towards various religions and cultures, when we publish anything on digital, electronic or printed media.

Tolerance is vital to create unity in a multicultural society like Malaysia.

As said by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak in his speech to celebrate his 100th day in office: "Malaysians are like a *keluarga besar* (big family), consisting of people from various races, cultures and beliefs. The familial concept of togetherness is an important component in determining the successful future of the country."

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