

Review of the Representation of History in the New Media

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Abstract

History is often taught through textbooks. This consideration is intended to ensure that people respect leader and community contribution to maintain and develop excellences of civilization. However, few historians have considered in depth impact on the ways that history is being represented and communicated in the public sphere as the new media has become increasingly pervasive in today's life. Students of history have generally held a dim opinion of the state of knowledge on the new media, pointing to many inaccuracies written by the amateurs. The emergence of the new media has transformed the nature of the public information which enables ordinary people a greater degree of participation in the public history making. The collection examined in this review paper focuses on the ideas and issues of the representation of Malaysia's history in the new media, as well as to point the possible future direction for research and reflection. The challenges associated with the representation of Malaysia's history and possible solutions are discussed, including a review of the literature related to media representation.

Keywords: *New Media, History, Media Representation*

1. The Concept of Representation

What we see, watch, hear and read from the media are the projection that was not just meant to coincidence to be happening. It all takes the form of representations of history, where they are all being created and constructed by people with a certain agenda. The agenda lies beneath probably wants to inform, to persuade, challenge – what should be in or out, what words or sentence should be used and to describe the issue. Books and museums are example part of media representation. Media is viewed as one of the most powerful institutional forces for shaping values and attitudes in modern civilization. Therefore, what has been depicted in the media deserves attention and attraction. The why and how the media represent and portray certain issues or people often shape people's views and perceptions. Whether we realize or not, most of all characters, perceptions, experiences that we have been inhabited from the media. The concept of creating meaning and ways media represent issues or affairs is what we address today as representation. Representation is important in the study of culture.

Hall (1997) argues that representation is an operation in which meaning is generated and exchanged between members of a culture. The process of making meaning process involves the usage of signs, images and language to represent things. Chandler (2001) as cited by Chris (2007) explains that representation as how the media constructs realities in terms of certain key markers of identity. While Connor (2001) as cited by Chris (2007) states that:

“... representation is not just about the way the world is presented to us, but also about how we engage with media texts... representation is, therefore, just as much about audience interpretation as it is about the portrayals that are offered to us by the media”.

Unfortunately, the media often bear out to be a strange parallel universe that excludes the reality. In fact, it does not inevitably signify that what we perceived as lacking

fairness and balance or involves bias- though it probably be. Stuart Hall (1997) contended that the notions of studying media representations as “false” or “misrepresentations” of the more or less reality of experience. The concept that applied under “misrepresentation” assumes that there is a “true” or “fixed” meaning to connect with external “reality” of media texts. Ironically, the connotation and denotation of that external “reality” is constructed by the media. The media texts are not just portraying the external “reality” to the audience, they actually consist of connotation and denotation of “reality”. In short, media are central to what we called as the representation of social realities.

The media also apply the regime of stereotyping by distorting the social reality of a certain social group by portraying desired image. The effect of exercising stereotyping cause tangible effects (Grossberg et al., 1998:224). Many studies conducted on media portrayal of minority groups revealed that most groups have been represent negatively and ignored by the majority (Wardell et al., 2014; Alagappar et al., 2010; Mahadeo & Mckinney, 2007; Harding, 2006; Rahim, 2005). Such portrayal indicates that the ‘other’ represents a ultimatum to the social order. According to Hall, (1997), “stereotyping reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics, which represented as fixed by nature” (p.257). Stereotyping makes people ignore the differences between individuals and tends to make generalizations. Since it creates a barrier between individuals of the other group, the labelling of ‘other’ has become a system of classification in maintaining social and symbolic order.

The media on the other hand play its role as ideological mechanism in creating a homogeneous perception of the ‘other’, which at the end may affect society as a whole (Avraham & First, 2010). This ideological mechanism to place, angle and re-angle the ‘facts’ to a certain point of objectives refer to media framing. According to (Griffin, 2003), framing is a “process of calling attention to some aspects of reality while obscuring others, which might lead to different reactions”. While for Entman (1993), he defined framing as:

“To select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, 1993, p. 52).

The framing of certain ‘facts’ or components that perceived as ‘reality’ by the news people construct peoples' perceptions of certain groups of people, by highlighting our perception of ‘us and ‘them’ (Kellner, 1995). Said (1979), in his work also mentions on ‘other’, the dominant Occident and the inferior Orient. In his book of Orientalism, Said (1979) displays the chauvinism of westerner scholars and the ‘us’ versus ‘them’ Orientals’ paradigm. As such, Orientalism has become a pertinent frame in presenting nationality of people, race and ethnicity.

Ironically, the repertoire of representations of other group of minorities likely related with past history for example slavery, colonial and orientalism (Fürsich, 2010). Previous studies conducted in Malaysia, highlighted national identity and nationalism include (Watson 1996; Shamsul, 1997; 1998; Milner 1998; 2005) looking back at the root of history to present the fact to present the event.

1.1 Representation of History in Malaysia

History textbooks often used as a key medium in the course of action of nation building. The grand narrative of the history textbooks were subjected with the government's policies and mythical ideas of what a nation should be, by undo and cutting injustice created by the past colonials (Manickam, 2003). In 1930s, the subject of history has long been taught and introduce as one of the curricular in Malaysian primary and secondary schools (Aini Hassan 1996, p5). Thus, making the subject of history as crucial in instilling national unity and national identity building. In fact, the museum is also an important source of history that help us to discover the origins of us, what we are and where we come to be. It displays and exhibits the material pertinent to the culture, social and political landscape and thus seeking to portray commonly shared experiences of the past. The purpose of establishment of museum operates in line with the purpose of history textbooks, but in the different angles of projection of nation building. Museum acts as a storage room that keep and preserve artifacts, historical legacy and as an apparatus for the future generations to refer and enhance their national identity.

Other forms of media representations include film, television, newspapers, magazines and radio. Film and television, for example, imply historical events as a narrative background. It constructs the representation of the national past and transforms into a storyline that could be digested by the audience by inserting appealing motion and sounds. Motion pictures may provide the best verification of what was happening in Japanese Occupation, what the British colonization was look like or how the life of people in the Malaya was like before. All of the phases of life in the past, could be staged and distorted in various ways of motions and sounds. Since the late twentieth century, films and television programs are gaining popularity as a historical reference (De Groot, 2009).

In Malaysia, the trend of adapting narrative background in a film is not new to the film industry. Tan Sri P. Ramlee is one of the popular film maker that produced films that look into the construction of Malaysian history during Japanese Occupation. "Matahari" (1958) and "Sergeant Hassan" (1958) were the first two movies that project the era of World World II (Amir Muhammad, 2010:16). To this day, the production of film that encompasses the narrative of history still relatively few and far between. "Bukit Kepong" (1981), "Darah Satria" (1983), "Leftenan Adnan" (2000), "Embun" (2002), "Paloh" (2003), "1957: Hati Malaya" (2007), and "Tanda Putera" (2013) were the films that features history and the spirit of patriotic- emotional attachment to the nation (Hidayah, 2008). Apparently, the role of repetition of these images from the film

are taken by television programme, where these films were played several times specifically during the independence month. Seemingly, television programmes has also play their part in promoting representation of Malaysia's history. Consequently, these media were considered as part of historical culture where they act as artefacts that hold and convey significant meaning to the audience (Thorp, 2014). Nowadays, people will tend to believe what been portrayed by the media especially sources from the Internet.

1.1.1 Present, Represented and Misrepresented

Malaysia is particularly interesting as there is abundant potential for both unity and division between the ethnic and national groups in this region. It has a pluralism society comprising three major ethnic communities, whereas the Malays made up about 50 per cent of the population; The Chinese comprises 37 per cent and the Indian 11 per cent. The total population in Malaysia in 2014 is 30 million (Department of Statistics, 2014)The Malays and some other indigenous ethnic groups are Muslims, while the other ethnic groups have their own religions; especially the non-Muslim indigenous groups in Sarawak and Sabah are Christians. Seemingly, the representatives from the three major ethnic in Malaysia are represented mostly throughout all media forms. Ironically, the "reality" of the multiracial community should portrayed all ethnic in Malaysia, including the aboriginal people (Orang Asli).

However, these minorities were negatively presented or sometimes been isolated by certain groups of people (Alagappan et al., 2010; Mustafa, 1994). As such, mainstream newspapers only reports news about minority groups prominence with political elite (Mustafa, 1994). At times, the inter-ethnic tensions in Malaysia are still prevail and tend to surface. Ever since Malaysia gained independence in 1957, the inter-ethnic relations in Malaysia been viewed as a challenge in demonstrating national unity and social stability (Yang & Ishak Ahmad, 2012; Yang & Ishak Ahmad, 2010; Baharuddin, 2005; Abdul Rahman, 2000). Although we as the citizens of Malaysia always being exhorted to handle issues of multiculturalism delicately and not to pose a threat to racial harmony, but there always underlying issues that need to be confronted.

1.2 Historical Consciousness

The knowledge of the past is crucial for understanding the present. In order to be conscious of history, one person need not just to aware of the past event, but also to think critically about history. The concept of historical consciousness or historical awareness was commonly recognized as fuzzy concept established by the European and was not unfamiliar in North America in olden days (Thorp, 2014). Various scholars and historians coincide that historical consciousness or historical awareness can be understand as a nexus of relationships of the interpretations of the past, present and the future. It helps people to comprehend the past experience to the present change in narrative sturcture (Seixas, 2012; Thorp, 2015; Rösen, 2006). This concept deduce that

people not only appreciate their history but consciously allow it to influence their actions as well as their future.

Various studies have conducted and took into more direct approach to the rising issue of historical consciousness, where people engage the past events to their daily routines. (Liew et al., 2015; Sheehy, 2008; Ho, 2008; Cohen & Rosenzweig, 2005; Ho, 2008; Rosenzweig, 2006). Most of these studies revealed that the new media sparks and engage public opinion of history. Roy Rosenzweig's 2006 article 'Can History Be Open Source? Wikipedia and the Future of the Past' argued that the the new media have challenged historians to rethink the ways that they research, write, present and teach the past (Rosenzweig, 2006). They envisage the value and the impact of amateur history on Wikipedia.

On the other hand, Ho's article "Blogging as Popular History Making, Blogs as Public History: A Singapore Case Study" was focusing on how blogging enable personal engagement with public history-making processess in Singapore (Ho, 2007). The blogging phenomenon which currently happened in Singapore is similar to Malaysia. However, the bloggers in Singapore have not used the medium to challenge the mainstream history as what currently a rise in Malaysia. Yet, Singapore has the monopoly over the construction of Singapore's political past. In Malaysia, study that focused on 'Digital History' was looking into the receptivity of history teacher subsumed the new media in teaching pedagogy (Yacob et al., 2014), rather than the usage of new media in engaging public history. It draws from Rosenzweig's definition of Digital History and also current debates on teaching and learning history in Malaysia.

Today, the concept of historical awareness or historical consciousness is globally accepted with the emergence of the Internet. People in the world are sharing and connecting their culture together and this phenomenon is what the Marshall McLuhan's concept of 'global village'.

1.3 The Participatory History in Malaysia

The euphoria of the Internet has the potential to redistribute among a wider range of entrants and to a decentralized debate. It has become an ubiquitous communication network in Malaysia. However, the advancement of the Internet technology has increase not just for communication, but also acts as an extension of the public sphere. In Malaysia, the rise of historical consciousness was started during the sanction of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. The Reformation movement in 1998 or known as 'political tsunami' has changed the political landscape of Malaysia. At this point, the Internet has bred the alternative media albeit the role of mainstream media. Blogs for example has become an influential medium of a news reporting after people rejected the mainstream media (Tew Abdullah et al., 2014). It shows significance shift of sources of information and towards democratic culture of sharing and getting information. In fact, the online media has been labelled as the culprit upon the incident (Kit, Lee, & Loong, 2012).

Consequently, the democratic culture of sharing information not just limit to political issues, it also has open up another window of sharing historical experience, which led to participatory history. At present, all ethnics in Malaysia have their own history and their history contains ample opportunity for different groups to elaborate different versions of history to justify their current political aspirations. As for that, the new media has open up a medium for all ethnic to share and participate in making history based on their ethnic's history. To date, what has been known by us the nation's history, that been transmitted over the generation to generation has now grown and evolved transcending sites and critical junctures over space and time.

The representation of historical event, ideas and personalities by the discourse produced by historians, colonial administrator-scholars, as well as court scribes were seem to be stable until the certain new ideas shake mainstream history in 1990s (Hussin, 2008).

History textbooks for example, is one of the medium that tries to remain a key to nation-building. However, the national history, as represented in school history textbooks and historiographical writings were accused as bias. Criticism were made and the content of history textbooks were questioned. Ting (2014), contemplates that the content of school history textbooks portrayed the Malay history as the main dominant and neglecting the the non-Malays to the periphery. As such, the representations of national narrative imparted to students were favored to one race and one religious civilization. At the same time, the manifestation of such perspectives such as the Chinese Dilemma (2003) and Tragic Orphans - Indians in Malaysia (2015) appeared in the market.

Due to that, issues such as social contract began to reappear and create tension and consciousness among the public. It is obviously seen there is a struggle in the claims on Malaysia's history as the emergence of the Internet has broadened up the horizons for the public to express their thoughts and opinions. Debates and responds among public on issues of 'History must-pass subject for the Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia in 2013' (The Star, 2010) and 'Narration of the history by nations' by Arof Ishak (The Star, 2015) created a national consciousness on what is Malaysia's history. In the olden days, histories were not recorded, instead people rely on oral histories. Malays for example, do not preserve records of their history or ancestors like other European countries (Merican, 2015). Hence, making more trajectories of various version of history based on the oral histories gained from ancestors. At this level, different communities would see its representation, misrepresentation or under-representation of Malaysia's history, making claims of ethnic or ancestor version of history.

Each of these influences has caused new inquiries into the nature of public history, new debates about how Malaysia's past is and should be interpreted and has thrown many historians into heated debates in the public sphere.

1.4 Conclusion

To summarize, the public awareness of history, especially in the new media has become ubiquitous. The new media provide the opportunities for public to participate in making

history and instill the need to address of how important the history to a person and group of society. Although many studies examined the representation of Malaysia's history in school textbook (Ting, 2014; Hussin, 2008; Rajandran, 2012), the solution of misrepresentation of a certain group was still not resolved until today. The quantum of information on historical debate is in circulation, which were unfiltered and constantly develops to this day. Hence, the perspective of history also grows richer as it contains more and more voices.

The new media on the other hand is uncontrollable medium and this creative space may could simply entrench the existing patterns of national unity in the future. The practice of democratic culture which was evolved since 2008 somewhat linked to historical consciousness. The mainstream history that's been presented in the history textbook, especially is now being challenged by the new media. Even though the new media had broadened a conversation about Malaysia's history, which was previously restricted to historians and through national history textbooks, it has led various group of ethnic to participate in giving their views and thoughts into a rigorous exploration of the nation's history, with critical assessments between national identity and nation's history. However, the presentation and facts by these groups of people present several dangers in the country. As such, it further entrenches widely assumptions based on doubtful facts given by them. In turn, this will function as important in forming state policy.

Although teaching and learning history remains a key site for nation-building, a written history needs to reflect shared ownership. In the future, it will be necessary to study the volume of participatory history in this age of new media and the challenge of validity of these sources. After all, the main objective of studying history is a key tool for endeavor nation-building.

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