

Creating A Media Literate Society

Institutions of higher learning are collaborating with SKMM to develop knowledge resources on the use of new media by Malaysians, Amarjit Singh elaborates on this initiative.



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We live in the media age where a large segment of our society experience a constant barrage of information in our every waking moment and where multimedia and communications are an integral part of our daily lives. There is a heightened sense of connectedness and of the global community due to the capabilities of today's communications network.

The increase in the availability of new media over the past decade or so has enabled members of the public to regularly turn to sources such as websites and weblogs for news and information and social networking sites for interaction. Not surprisingly, new media has increasingly become the primary distribution channel to the connected communities.

Although traditional media services such as print and broadcast services in Malaysia continue to thrive, they are

finding themselves increasingly in competition with new media for the consumer's attention. This has led to traditional media services and broadcasters to venture into new media availing services over mobile and the Internet in the form of online news and entertainment portals.

Personalisation of the Web

In recent years, the media landscape has been shaped by major developments which in turn started new trends in lifestyle and attitude of consumers towards media and its content. The rate that new media content is being consumed is astounding; fueled by the popularity of user-generated content and social media, these trends have profoundly changed the way content is shared and how information is organised and disseminated. Thanks to the dynamism presented by converging technologies and applications, user empowerment and personalisation of content have so transformed the media landscape, that Yahoo! acknowledged in 2007 that indeed personalisation (targeted content) of the

web experience is the future of the web and this was underscored by the fact that many web companies had shifted focus from search to personalisation.

Malaysians have clearly taken to new media. A study in 2007 revealed that 70% of Malaysian online users read blogs, 35% were bloggers and 80% watched video clips online.

According to a more recent research by O'Reilly Research, Malaysia had close to 1.3 million Facebook users (or 0.67% of the worldwide Facebook total) as of early May 2009 compared to 800,000 last December, and Malaysia was ranked fourth after Indonesia, Hong Kong and India in terms of Facebook users. As of May 2008, there were over three million unique visitors to Friendster from Malaysia, versus 758,000 to Facebook and 735,000 to MySpace, according to comScore.

Communications and Multimedia Connections in Malaysia

With these rapid and dynamic changes taking place in the communications landscape, Malaysia is becoming a more networked society. The public is able to access, interact with information services in new and innovative ways and will continue to be presented with new challenges and benefits as convergence takes its course. Furthermore, the consumer now has more personal control than ever over the media that they consume especially with the added convenience of mobility and converging services. Given this scenario, if consumers are to reap the benefits that the level of development communications has arrived at today, it is critical for the consumer to be able to manage the complexities as well as the often accompanying confusion and anxieties although in varying degrees.

Undoubtedly, the influence of new media is growing; its benefits and impact tremendous. This underscores the concerns of the Government, in particular the impact of negative aspects on society such as pornography, false information, online gambling and so on and its implications for regulation and the requirement to enhance consumer protection and promote localised content at the same time.

Media Literacy as a Sustainable Regulatory Function

Evidently, the patterns of consumption and the ways of engaging with communications services as are their preferences and attitudes, vary from one consumer group to another.

Going forward, it is vital that decision and policy makers have a clear understanding of markets and peoples' attitudes and how they – the market and people - are changing. For example, there is also growing concern on issues of public interest such as accuracy and reliability of information acquired through online means and also why the public increasingly seek information from such alternative online sources.

In acknowledgement of such concerns and more, SKMM has embarked on a research collaboration programme with local private and public higher institutions of learning to establish knowledge resources on the use of new media


outlets by Malaysians. The initiative is aimed at assisting SKMM and the Government to achieve national interest objectives such as promoting not just an online environment with quality content, but also adept and responsible users who are able to articulate the benefits of new media to their advantage. This is part of the regulatory strategy to encourage an industry that is self-regulated and to engage civil society to regulate content themselves through education and awareness so that they are empowered to manage their relationship to content.

In late 2008, four grants were awarded. Universiti Utara Malaysia received a grant to carry out research on the topic: 'Ascertaining the influences of Weblogs and their User Created Content in Blogosphere Community of Malaysia'. University Sains Malaysia was tasked to research on 'Young People and New Media – Social Uses, Social Shaping and Social Consequences'. Universiti Tunku Abdul Rahman received a grant for their topic titled: 'Social Impacts of blogging on young adults: how it shapes individual opinions' while Universiti Putra Malaysia will do research on 'Self-regulatory framework and mechanism in the Malaysian media environment'

It is envisaged that the programme will produce findings that could be used to develop sustainable practices and policies for managing both the positive and negative aspects of new media more effectively and for the long term. The findings would contribute towards the basis for developing strategies aimed at not only to promote greater levels of media literacy among the public but to generate awareness of the advantages and benefits of a media literate society.

The public will be able to have access to the findings of the studies through seminars and publications of the SKMM. In addition to this, the SKMM will conduct programmes designed to raise awareness and educate segments of the society beginning with schools within the Klang Valley.

Conclusion

Clearly, we will continue to face challenges and opportunities in media and communications in the future and we will have to be ready to face any emerging issues. The collaboration with research institutions is an initiative that will provide a means for SKMM not only to remain circumspect of the regulatory issues surrounding content on media of the times and to be forward-thinking in identifying future issues for policy and regulation. 

For more information about the Research Collaboration on New Media Content between SKMM and Institutions of Higher Learning, you may contact contentresearch@cmc.gov.my or visit www.skmm.gov.my.

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