

Communication Technology and the Television Industry in Malaysia

Juliana Abdul Wahab (Ph.D)
School of Communication
Universiti Sains Malaysia
11800, Penang
Malaysia

julia@usm.my

Tel: 604 6533888 ext:4066

Fax: 604 6577736

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Introduction:

Technology is often believed to be pervasive in our society today. The rapid development and use of technology began during the period termed as the Industrial Revolution (1780-1850) that had transformed our society from what was known as “agrarian society” to what is now known as “industrialized/post-industrialized” society (Bell:1973). To a certain extent, technology might have helped to transform the ‘old’ society to the ‘new’ society, but for many parts of the world particularly the third world countries, the pervasiveness of the technology in the society is somewhat questionable.

In Europe, after the Industrial Revolution, the rapid spread of printing as a form of communication during the initial period was further intensified with the birth of oral (radio) and visual (cinema) communication that subsequently gave birth to television – the most powerful medium of communication and information ever invented (Feather 2000:24-36). Television has gone through massive changes since the 1980s with aggressive development in communication technology namely cable, satellite computer and other combined communication technologies that transformed television’s function in many societies today.

It seems that our society today is deeply immersed in changing technological forms that have been with us for many centuries. This phenomenon cannot be taken for granted as natural or accidental. The economy is indeed a crucial factor in this technological development. Communication technology as commodity does not exist in a vacuum, but rather is carefully structured, implemented, invented and re-invented so that the technology can sustain and maintain itself in the marketplace.

It has been argued elsewhere (Golding and Murdock (1986), Hamelink (1994), Schiller (1999), Thussu (2000), Feather (2000)) that the existence of communication technology is not a natural phenomenon, nor a neutral development. Central to their argument is that capitalism plays a pivotal role in developing and diffusing communication technologies on both local and global scales. Globalization has been seen as a *de facto* that contributes to the development of communication technologies, with transnational corporations being an important market player that endorse communication technology products and services around the globe. Consequently, the use of communication technologies in our society today has cultivated and deepened consumerism, bringing further technology to a bigger marketplace and at the same time exacerbating social inequalities. Using television as a cornerstone for the discussion, this paper attempts to assess the benefits of advances in communication technology that has taken place and continues to take place in the Malaysian

television industry. By looking at the push and pull factors as regards this phenomenon, this paper evaluates the social and political implications for contemporary Malaysia.

Television Industry in Malaysia: the Past and the Present

Until 1963, radio was the only broadcasting medium in Malaysia. Television was officially introduced on 28 December 1963. It was a single network known as *Rangkaian Pertama (The First Channel)* and was broadcast in black and white. Due to a lack of local expertise, the Malaysian government at that time decided to seek assistance from Canada, given the multi-lingual situation of the country. Two Canadian experts were sent to Malaysia to supervise the new medium, which was mainly concerned with the day-to-day running of the station (Karthigesu:1990). The introduction of *Rangkaian Dua (The Second Channel)* took place six years later, in late 1969. According to the government mission statement, the two channels were to propagate government policies, promote Malaysian art and culture, and provide education, general information and entertainment (Ministry of Information Malaysia: 1997). In short, both state-run channels were used as a medium to support the dominant ideology and policies of the ruling elite and this remains till this very day. Both channels are now known as TV1 and TV2.

It was not until 1984 that a privately owned television station, TV3, was allowed to operate, which essentially broke more than twenty years of government monopoly of the broadcast medium. The Privatisation Policy that was introduced in 1984 brought about the establishment of TV3. When the decision was announced, the franchise to operate the first private television was awarded to a joint venture of five companies that were closely linked to the ruling political parties (Gomez, 1994).

On 1st of July 1995, a second private channel known as MetroVision was introduced. As with TV3, the two biggest shareholders in MetroVision were closely connected to the ruling party. However, after operating for a few years, MetroVision had to cease operation in 2000 due to serious financial conditions.

Not long after the establishment of MetroVision, the first subscription based television network, Mega TV was launched in late 1995. The Malaysian first cable television offered 9 channels such as CNN, Discovery, ESPN Cartoon Network etc. Mega TV was own by a consortium using the company name Cable View Sdn Bhd with 40% stake TV 3, 30% stake was owned by Ministry of Finance, while another 5% was owned by Sri Utara, the investment arm of Malaysian Indian Congress, yet another government ally (Zaharom and Wang, 2004:258). Unfortunately, Mega TV did not experience a long life span. Due to the unattractive package offered by Mega TV and poor transmission, Mega TV started to lose its clients. The economic downturn in 1998 caused Mega TV to experience serious financial problem and the station was struggling to maintain high quality service. This had also led to the number of subscribers declining from year to year. At peak of its achievement, Mega TV had 166,000 subscribers and the number declined to 7,557 towards the end of its

operation (*Utusan Malaysia*, 3 October 2001). After about six years in operation, Mega TV finally ceased transmission in 2001.

In 1996, Malaysia introduced its first satellite television, ASTRO (All Asia Television and Radio Company). This was made possible through the launch of MEASAT (Malaysian East Satellite System) I and II. ASTRO is owned by Binariang Sdn. Bhd. with 85% share and the remaining 15% is owned by Khazanah Berhad, which is the investment arm of the Ministry of Finance (*New Straits Times*, 15 May 1997). Binariang is owned by one of the most successful businessmen in Malaysia, Ananda Krishnan a close associate of the previous Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamed (Zaharom and Mustafa, 2000:169). The service is subscription based, offering more than 50 channels inclusive of five Fm radio stations in digital (<http://www.astro.com.my/v5/footer/about/default.asp>).

The next stage of the development of Malaysian television industry saw the introduction of ntv7, which was launched on 7th April 1998. This second Malaysian private television station was initially owned by a former Minister of Agriculture and also a business entrepreneur, Dato' Affendi Norwawi, whose mission was to provide 'a happier and more enlightened Malaysia' as well as to promote nation building and to close the gap between West and East Malaysians. However, the ideal is far from being achieved. Indeed on the very day of its launch, only 20% of local programs were aired and the rest were all imported programmes. This certainly did not reflect the station's mission statement (Hartati, 1998).

The development of the Malaysian television industry was intensified with the advent of the third private television station known as Channel 9, which commenced telecast on 9 September 2003. Its target audience is the young generation, specifically the 15–30 years age group. (*Utusan Malaysia*, 16 August 2003). Channel 9 was owned by Tan Sri Rashid Manaf through Anaza Sdn.Bhd with 51% share and the remaining 49% being owned by Datuk Muhammad Mustafa, the former chairman of Ch-9 Media Sdn.Bhd or formerly known as Medan Mas Sdn. Bhd. which in turn is the broadcast license holder of MetroVision (*Utusan Malaysia*, 13 Jun 2004). In early 2005, Channel 9 ceased its operation and was re-launched on 22 April 2006.

Although there were already four terrestrial television stations in Malaysia, and the existence of Channel 9 had not yet been properly justified, in early 2004, the government nonetheless decided to approve yet another private television station known as 8TV. According to then Deputy Minister of the Ministry of Information, Datuk Zainuddin Maidin, the decision to authorize the operation of 8TV was done on the basis of free market competition (*Ekonomi*, 25 Oktober 2003). But what is more alarming is that the owner of the fourth private channel was again closely aligned to the ruling elite.

By 2005, all local terrestrial television are owned by Media Prima Sdn. Bhd, which was established in August 2003. Media Prima was created out of the de-merger of Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad (MRCB) media assets, namely TV3 and

New Straits Time Press Berhad. When 8TV was launched, the license to operate the TV station was given to Media Prima. In June 2005, Media Prima bought over Channel 9 and by October 2005, the company acquired 100% of the shares in Ntv7. Presently, the media giant conglomerate owns all free-to-air television stations (4) and the biggest newspaper publishing house, The New Straits Time Press (6). Consistent with other media operator in this country, Media Prima is highly connected to the status quo (<http://www.answers.com/topic/media-prima-berhad>).

The development of Malaysian television industry is further intensified with the establishment of two subscription based television station, namely Mitv and FineTV. Mitv, owned by Vincent Tan, was launched on 5 September 2005. As far as the ownership of the pay television is concerned, historically Vincent Tan, as with the other pay television owner (Ananda Krishnan), has close connection with the ruling elite. According to Gomez (1994:17), The Privatisation Policy that was introduced in 1984, has benefited two parties; political leaders and politically-connected businessmen to gain priority. He further added "*since Privatization in most cases did not even involve the formality of an open tender system, many beneficiaries were chosen solely on the basis of political and personal connections*". Using Internet Protocol IP over UHF and with the upfront cost of RM 799 and monthly subscription of RM 30, Mitv, offers 41 channels mainly made of imported programmes from America, Hong Kong, India etc. (*Utusan Malaysia*, 28 December 2005). Generally, most of the programmes available on Mitv are similar to what is currently being offered by ASTRO.

FineTV, launched on 28 December 2005, is owned by Eurofine (M) Sdn. Bhd through its subsidiary company Network Guidance Sdn. Bhd. This company operates under Perbadanan Nasional Berhad, which in turn is under the control of the Ministry of Finance (http://www.eurofine.com.my/company_profile.htm). Using 512 mbps and over internet broadband, Fine TV introduces interactive subscription based TV that offers 18 channels and uses 'on demand concept' that requires the audience to order the kind of television programme they would like to watch at their convenience (<http://www.finetv.com.my>). Due to stiff competition from both newly launched subscription based television that have broken the 9 years of ASTRO monopoly as a sole provider of pay television in Malaysia, it is reported that ASTRO will add yet another 50 channels after the launch of MEASAT III (*Utusan Malaysia*, 19 November 2005)

For more than four decades since television was first introduced in this country, television in Malaysia has gone through a lot of changes and development. With 169 channels currently available it certainly gives the impression that there is a variety of information and entertainment currently available for the Malaysian audience. However, the latest trend and development in the television industry should not be misunderstood as providing varieties to the audience. As Hall has rightly argued: "*...as the conditions of competition become more monopolistic, each alternatives tends more closely to resemble than to differ from the other. Under modern forms of monopolistic competition, more means more of the same*" (1986:8).

Communication Technology in the Television Industry

The revolution in technology gave birth to two most essential terms that are widely used to describe the development and trends in communication technology. The two terms are *convergence* and *divergence*. The term *convergence* refers to the blurring of boundaries between different telecommunication media. Telephone, radio, television, computer are combined to produce text, pictures, video and sound in a single form. In this sense, at least two types of different media are used to deliver television content (feature) to the audience. *Divergence* on the other hand, involves the multiplying of form or communication medium in delivery television signals using various devices such as terrestrial, cable, satellite and computer system (Stewart et al. 2001).

In Malaysia, the development of technology received considerable attention during the Mahathir Era (1982-2003). Fully industrialized country status was at the forefront of his agenda. Vision 2020 that was formulated (1991) aimed to transform Malaysia into a fully developed country by early 2020. As a result a mega project known as the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) was launched in 1996. It has since grown into a dynamic Information and Communication Technology (ICT) hub that host more than 900 multinational, foreign-owned and homegrown companies. The focus is largely on multimedia and communication products (<http://www.msc.com.my/msc/msc.asp>). The introduction of Malaysia's satellite television in late 1996 was in conjunction with this mega project. Subsequent developments in the television industry in Malaysia were mainly in support of the MSC project.

Prior to 1995, the terrestrial television system was the only system available for delivering television signals. More than three decades after television was introduced in this country, Malaysia's first pay television using cable optic technology was established in 1995. However, due to the unattractive package offered by MegaTV, and poor technical maintenance and the having to compete with ASTRO, and serious financial problems, Mega TV was shut down in 2001.

As stated earlier, the significant technological shift that took place in the television industry in Malaysia was with the introduction of the first Malaysian satellite television, ASTRO in the 1996. ASTRO used a Direct to User Service (D.T.U) and is broadcast as high powered KU Band transmission utilizing the transponder of the MEASAT. The subscription based service is currently operating from Bukit Jalil, Kuala Lumpur. The service can be received using a fixed 60 cm diameter dish antenna and a decoder. The signals are encoded and encrypted prior to transmission forming a conditional access subscriber service, allowing access only to subscribers with a decoder and authorized smartcard (http://wikipedia.org/wiki/Astro_satellite_TV).

Undoubtedly, the new technology revolution in communication technology has allowed ASTRO to introduce a more 'sophisticated' viewing experience for its audience. Known as interactive and multimedia services which was made possible through the *convergence* and *divergence* of existing 'old' and 'new' media technologies, ASTRO currently offers various interactive TV and multimedia services ranging from video on demand (pay per view), games, stock link, chatting, SMS, icon download, internet banking which were not available in the 'television market' previously.

One of the most successful interactive technologies that were achieved thus far in the television industry is the use of Short Messages System through television programmes. Short Messages System widely known as SMS, is a text service that enables short messages to be sent from a mobile phone. SMS was introduced in the Global System for Mobile (GSM) and later supported by all other digital based mobile communication systems.

In the Malaysian television industry SMS technology was popularized by ASTRO in 2003 after the introduction of *Akademi Fantasia*, a local musical programme copied from Mexico. Maxis, a country's leading Telecommunications Company which is also partly owned by ASTRO, was 'chosen' as the sole service provider for the interactive activity via the programme. In this programme, television audiences for the first time ever were 'invited' to send in their votes to decide on the winner of the programme.

The interactive SMS technology was also made possible with a joint venture project between Microsoft and ASTRO in 2000. In March the same year, Microsoft made an equity investment in ASTRO to assist in developing and enhancing the new interactive content and internet for the company. In return, Microsoft acquired 9% of the stake in MEASAT (*Utusan Malaysia 16 March 2000*). The new strategy employed by ASTRO is to attract more audience to tune-in into their channels, which has proven a phenomenal success. The first season of *Akademi Fantasia in 2003*, raked in RM 2.5 million profits through the votes made by audience throughout the 9 weeks of the show (*Utusan Malaysia, July 2005*).

The success story of *Akademi Fantasia* and the use of SMS technology in a television programme has also influenced other television stations RTM, TV 3, 8tv, ntv7 and tv9 to use the same formula to attract more audience, thus increasing their revenue. Since then, more television programmes, both imported and locally produced, that use the SMS interactive activities have been introduced in almost every single television station in Malaysia. The phenomenon swept across almost all kinds of television genre mainly within the entertainment domain, i.e reality TV shows, musicals, dramas, game shows and too a lesser extent, local television news.

Today, television in Malaysia is moving towards the process called digitization, where all the data are converted into numbers and computer technology is used to support the system. The move towards the digitization of media system is very much

driven by the idea of creating a society that is equipped with the so-called “Information Technology” (IT).

The philosophy behind the introduction of the project is to further develop the country to become a fully industrialized, modern nation. Every sector is encouraged to help nurture the MSC project including broadcasting and communication sectors. Apart from the MSC project, the change to digital television is also determined by economic factor, whereby the cost to maintain the service is cheaper as compared to the analogue system. Digital television also offers other benefits such as more television channels, on screen television guide, interactive services data feeds, a greater selection of wide screen programming and Dolby Digital surround sound. The ability for digital television to transmit a steady stream of data resulted in less interference and produces better quality (*The Star, 28 September 2006*). This unique characteristics of digital television thus far are only being provided by the 3 subscription based television stations, namely ASTRO, Mitv and FineTV.

Last year, the then Deputy Information Minister, Datuk Donald Lim announced that analogue television broadcast in Malaysia will be totally shutdown by 2015. An estimated of RM 1.34 billion will be spent to upgrade the service nationwide (*The Star 28 September 2006*). The transformation of the system will be conducted in phases, starting with the major cities and town effectively in 2006. RTM (the government TV station) was chosen to lead the project. RTM has started its digital terrestrial broadcast trail in Klang Valley in September 2006 with initial government funding of RM 70 million (*The Star, 28 September 2006*).

By 2008, Malaysia is expected to start shutting down the old system and is expected to completely shut down all the analogue television systems by 2015. This also means that there will be no more analogue TV sets available in the market after 2015. Malaysian viewers are given a ‘choice’ to either buy a brand new digital television set or to buy a converter to enable the old television sets to receive the digital services (www.bernama.com.my/bernama/v3/news.php?id=175313).

The competition among television stations to survive in the industry is becoming more and more intense. From a terrestrial transmission using the analogue terrestrial system, cable and satellite television, in September 2005, the government approved the operation of Mitv that uses the Internet Protocol over UHF (fully digitized) for its transmission. The war of employing technology in the television industry has not come to an end. In the same year, just a couple months after the introduction of Mitv, yet another subscription based television station, known as FineTV was launched in December 2005. Again proper justification for allowing the mushrooming of new pay television station remains undefined. Nonetheless, it is evident that communication technology has created tremendous changes within the television industry and this has certainly gives implications for the industry and Malaysian society, which the next section seeks to address.

Communication Technology and the Market Place

Television is one of the most significant inventions of the twentieth century and has been regarded as a powerful medium for information and entertainment. The development of communication technology has evidently enabled television industry to revolutionize itself, thus enhancing the source of information and entertainment. Hamelink (1994:7) states that the dubious quality of information and entertainment provision by the intermediaries is related to a structural condition that shapes the market in which technology and the television industry have become a large scale commercial activity. In this regard, communication technology should be seen as a commodity.

It is evident that at each stage of the introduction of a new television station audience/consumer has always been a central focus in positioning the strategy of the new player in the industry. Often a unique feature of the service/product is used as a selling point of the station. Typically, television stations highlight the technology used in their service as something ‘revolutionary’ and, supposedly, must be owned and experienced. In doing so, the word ‘new’ is commonly used to describe their product and services to imply the most up to date and sophisticated technology being used that would appeal to the mass audience. The idea of value-added is emphasized to ensure audience satisfaction and sophistication.

To this end it has been argued that the existence of the technology is to respond to the notion of consumer sovereignty. However, this paper argues that the existence of consumer sovereignty within the capitalist industry would be too superficial. The discourse of consumer sovereignty needs to be understood by looking at the underlying economic factor that functions to sustain the industry.

In the *New Straits Times*, June 2004, Mitv Executive director and chief operating officer was quoted as saying, “...*Mitv plans to add other ‘new and yet unseen’ Malaysia channels*”, when he was asked to explain about the unique feature of the station in comparison to the existing pay tv, ASTRO. The same tone was also used by FineTV, in their website “*FineTV is a revolutionary concept in television technology that integrates information, education and entertainment, and provides it at your convenience, in the comfort of your own home. This new style of home edutainment is tailored for all Malaysians*” (www.finetv.com.my/what_isfinetv.html).

The term ‘new’ is probably applicable to describe the different developments and technologies used to transmit television signals and content. From the only terrestrial-analogue system that was available in Malaysia in the beginning, the current trend illustrates that the mode of transmitting television signal and content is now more diverse. Lister, M et al. (2003:11) explain that the term ‘new’ is commonly used to mean different things; to mark a break with history but often seductive. In this regard, the term ‘new’ is actively used to appeal to the mass audience, thus emphasizing consumer vulnerability.

In a more critical manner, the term 'new' could also be interpreted as 'new economic dimension'. Schiller (1999) points out that telecommunication technology offers uniquely supply instruments to cultivate and deepen consumerism. It is obvious that technology that has an appeal to the mass audience, and it is needed so that the industry players are able to locate and re-locate themselves in a competitive marketplace to sustain and maximise the profit.

The myth of consumer sovereignty as a central aspect in the changing landscape in television industry in Malaysia is further intensified with the need for the industry to migrate from the old analogue technology and to the new digital television in order to improve audience viewing experience. According to David Butaroc the Chief Operating Officer of ASTRO stated:

“Going digital is not about technology. It is about providing the consumers with choices. The technology is merely there to help us to do what we have to do. We need to look at technology and recognise that digital increase choice” (ABU Press Release, 3 October 2005).

It is evident that in the local context, the adoption and proliferation of the communication technology has contributed to the growth of the television industry. From only one television channel available in 1963, to seven television stations currently in operation, with a different mode of transmitting television signals and content. On the surface, the increased in number of television stations and a more diverse way to deliver the service, has to some extent created the perception that there are varieties and choices available for the audience. In actual fact the different choices that are in existence now are essentially limited. In short, the choice is becoming saturated. It is evident through the kind of service/product that is currently available on each television station tend to resemble each other. In this sense, Hamelink has stated:

“Diversity becomes the choice markets can offer; but markets tend to offer multitude and more of the same, not fundamentally distinct goods; everything that does not pass the market threshold because there is not a sufficiently large percentage of consumers, disappears”.

(Hamelink,1994:8).

What is also evident is that the technological shift that is currently taking place and will continue to take place in the country will certainly further expand the television industry to a bigger market place. With 5.5 million household in Malaysia owning television set it seems that the move towards digitization undoubtedly will nurture the growth for a 'healthy capitalist environment' thus promising profit for the industry.

The introduction of ASTRO in late 1996 offered a 'new' television viewing experience. Interactive television technology was then introduced in Malaysia for the first time ever. At a glance, interactive television can be referred to an opportunity to 'manipulate' and 'intervene' with the system which can be read as the 'power is in

the viewer's hand'. In general sense, Lister, M et. al (2003: 20) stated that interactive stands for a more powerful sense of user engagement with media text, a more independent relation to source of knowledge, individualized media usage and a greater user choice.

The Video-on-demand concept that was first introduced by ASTRO allows viewers to make selection from its pay per view package which consists mainly of blockbuster movies and sporting events. A similar mode was also available on Mitv (the second subscription based television). Known as 'Affordable Transaction', Mitv currently offers video on demand, music on demand, games-on-demand, and e-learning-on-demand for its subscribers (*Utusan Malaysia*, 23 August 2004).

Using an *a-la-carte* approach, the total interactive approach (video-on-demand) offered by FineTV, the third subscription based TV station allows the audience to 'design' their own television scheduling/programme. FineTV is currently offering 18 television channels ranging from serial drama, game show, reality tv show, sports, education, cartoon and music video are available upon viewers request or selection. The cost for each programme varies from RM0 to RM5.00 each preview (<http://www.fine tv.com.my>).

From the industry's perspective, the interactive activities could be seen as empowering television audience. In this sense, a liberal interpretation would assume that interactive technology enables audiences to exercise their 'power' through personalizing their viewing habit, thus promoting the idea of consumer sovereignty. It is argued that the needs and wants that exist in the television industry do not happen naturally. In fact it is carefully structured and implemented to appeal to mass audience. As Feather (2000: 83) rightly points out, the supply of information and entertainment to consumers typically takes place in a commercial ethos. Feather (ibid: 112) further argues that consumer sovereignty in this sense works as long as there is a cost (direct or indirect) that the end user is prepared to pay to have access to the 'service'.

Communication Technology and the Democratic Impact

Prior to the introduction of satellite television in Malaysia, viewing experience in Malaysia involved just a one-way activity. The interactive technology that was introduced and popularized by ASTRO is now becoming a popular feature on all pay television station and to lesser degree on free-to air TV. Under the interactive label, television experience can no longer be associated with passivity but rather an experience that allows active choice through television (Lister, M. et. al, 2003:61). They further point out that the interactive activities are pervasive in communication technology so much so that the term is now taken for granted (ibid: 43).

A narrow definition of interactive television would equate the autonomy and freedom in selecting and responding to television content with promoting active participation and further democratization. However, this paper argues that the function of active participation on television in Malaysia is only confined to entertainment programme. If anything, this aspect only reinforces the idea of pseudo democracy.

The success story of *Akademi Fantasia* would be a best example to illustrate the statement. The interactive television experience was first initiated by ASTRO through its popular programme *Akademi Fantasia*. Following the same foot step is *Malaysian Idol* and few other musical/talent reality TV shows. The programme encourages audience participation and freedom to vote in order to decide on the winner of the programme. Audience is treated as an important factor and is essential in ensuring the success of the programme. To this end the right and freedom to vote can be seen as providing a sense of democracy to the audience. Unfortunately, this sense of democracy is only applicable to certain types of programmes such as entertainment and safe media products, which do not challenge the status quo (Juliana:2005).

The popularity of featuring SMS service on television in Malaysia has also been extended to other types of television genre; actuality programmes, namely news. It has been observed that the idea of creating a democratic space to Malaysian via television is currently employed in television news. Audience is invited to vote / state their opinion on various issues including state affairs. It has been observed that the question that appeared on television screen are leading questions and in favour of the ruling elite. To a certain extent, the questions that appeared are totally insignificant and sensationalized. Interestingly, the results that are announced are always in favour of the government. To this end 'democracy' only works as long as they are non-threatening and reinforces the position of the dominant group (Juliana:2005).

The advent in communication technologies has undoubtedly changed the outlook of the television industry in Malaysia. *Divergence* and *convergence* allow greater volume of television content which includes information and entertainment programmes in more diverse forms which seem to be available to more people. Consequently, the diffusion of the communication technology should be seen as a democratic process. However, the democratic sense that is created in the current setting is, in fact, is not applicable to all sections of the society. Indeed, most of the unique features that are currently available as a result of advances in the communication technology are only confined to subscription based television.

This paper argues that the crucial factors for the democratic sense to work require cost to the end user, which in fact creates the disparity between 'information rich' and 'information poor' in society. The term 'information rich' refers to those who own technology. It refers to those with money to purchase and have access to communication technology. Whereas 'information poor' refers to the opposite, that is to describe those who lack access and information (Stewart et al:2001).

Feather (2000:7) points out that the cost of those technologies, and the cost of gaining access to information through them, has made it often difficult and sometimes

impossible for information to be obtained by its potential beneficiaries. He further emphasizes:

“...instant access and instantaneous transmission depend upon a vastly expensive infrastructure of telecommunications and broadcasting systems on the part of the providers, and the acquisition of appropriate equipment (and some time skills) on the side of the consumers. Those who are excluded are the majority of the population of the Third World and significant minorities even in richer countries” (Feather, 2000:7).

In Malaysia there are currently 5.5 million households who own television set, and out of this number, it is estimated that less than 2.5 million households have access to subscription based television. In this regard, it is evident that the privileged group that currently benefits from the technology development account for less than half of the total households who own television.

With the poverty line in Malaysia still being hotly debated, as the cost of living in Malaysia is getting higher each year, it is proposed that RM 1,750 could be a realistic amount to set the poverty line for Malaysians. If this amount is used to set the poverty line, this would mean that around 50% Malaysian are poor (Devaraj, 2004). With the up front cost to subscribe to the service is on the higher side (Mitv-RM 799, FineTV-RM388 and ASTRO RM-199) pay television would be a costly ‘venture’ for Malaysians. This element could be the contributing factor for the low penetration rate of subscription based television. In this sense, pay television remains a luxury item that many households cannot afford, as Golding and Murdock (1986: 82) points out in the context of United Kingdom: *“High entry cost to this market place, together with continuing high cost of consumption provide an effective barrier of exclusion to large number of less affluent household”*.

Although there has been a move by the Malaysian government to implement a fully digitized television service on all free-to-air television stations, which would allow more sophisticated features on television to all Malaysians, the outcome is yet to be seen. What is evident at the moment is that the migration to the new communication technology, and this would mean more costs will be incurred. Access in this sense is determined by the ability to pay, as the former Deputy Information Minister stated:

“ This would mean that no more analogue TV sets would be available in the market after 2015 and the public would have a choice—either to buy brand new digital TV set (which is a bit expensive) or buy a converter to enable their TV sets to receive the digital service” (<http://www.bernama.com.my/bernama/v3/news.php?id>).

With digitization of all free-to air television station, it seems that the gap between the information rich and information poor society is reduced, and more people will have

opportunity to experience changes in communication technology. Historically, it is evident that technology is not fixed but deemed to change through new innovations. In this sense, the full benefits of technology only serve to those who are able to purchase and keep up with the constant changes. Due to the very fact that communication technology is a commodity and access to communication is often 'exclusive', inequalities in gaining its benefits is likely to continue.

Conclusion

Within the Malaysian context, technology is seen by the Malaysian Government as one of the crucial element for developing the country. When television was first set up in the country, the two state-owned television stations were given a mandate to disseminate the ideology of the ruling elite, purportedly to help in developing the nation. Since then, television has undergone numerous changes – some genuine and some are merely cosmetic. With one state-owned terrestrial television station in the beginning and followed by the second television station in 1969, the 'boom' began in 1980s, with the introduction of the first private television station (1984), to the establishment of the first cable/pay television station (1996) and the introduction of satellite television (1996), all spurred by the government's Privatisation Policy and further intensified with the launched of the MSC project.

The ongoing mantra seems to be that communication technology would bring positive implications that would subsequently benefit Malaysian society as a whole. However, the paper argues that embracing the technology has not necessarily contributed to the well-being of the whole nation. This paper's stand is that technology certainly is not neutral, due to the fact that owners of communication technology in many ways can determine the range and types of choices offered to the consumers of their products. As such, this creates consumer vulnerability to the dictates of the owners of television stations; the much-touted consumer sovereignty has thus been demystified. It is also evident that, the preoccupation with the adoption and utilization of communication technology in Malaysia has only benefited certain sections of the society. Access to communication technology is therefore only applicable to the privileged group thus creating disparity between those have power to purchase and maintain a high demand on technology on one hand and to those have not on the other.

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