Pertanika J. Soc. Sci. & Hum. 13(1): 47-65 (2005) ISSN: 0128-7702
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Social and Cultural Influences in Reception of a Development-oriented Television Programme in a Multi-ethnic Society

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Keywords: Social and cultural influences, reception, development-oriented television programme, The Parkin's Theory of Meaning Systems

ABSTRAK

Kajian ini disusun untuk mentafsir bagaimana masyarakat berbilang kaum memberi kesan kepada rancangan televisyen yang berteraskan pembangunan. Dalam erti kata lain, ia berkisar kepada aktiviti masyarakat yang berlatarbelakangkan pelbagai kebudayaan sebagai penonton rancangan seumpamanya. Integrasi kaedah penyelidikan Sains Sosial dan Kemanusiaan membolehkan analisis perbandingan empirikal dijalankan dalam topik ini khasnya antara media dan perbincangan audien. Satu kajian awal telah dijalankan untuk mengenal pasti isu yang boleh digabungkan dalam struktur borang soal selidik dan kemudiannya dibincangkan dalam sesi bersama kumpulan sasar. Kumpulan sasar tersebut merupakan kaedah penyelidikan utama melalui data yang dikumpulkan daripada pelbagai kumpulan kajian yang dinilai secara perbandingan. Daripada dapatan tersebut, didapati bahawa setiap kumpulan etnik yang menonton program televisyen membuat pertimbangan kompleks yang dimanipulasi, justeru, menyebabkan penghasilan kepelbagaian maksud yang terhasil daripada kecenderungan peribadi. Kajian ini juga menyokong tafsiran bahawa kandungan program televisyen adalah bersifat sosial dan merewang. Faktor yang menjadi belenggu sosial seperti budaya, cara bekerja dan sikap serta taraf pendidikan didapati menyumbang kepada pembentukan sikap pentafsiran responden. Kecenderungan mereka dilihat apabila mereka mengaitkan kandungan media khusus memaksa mereka untuk mengambil posisi pentafsiran yang berbeza. Teori Parkin, *Meaning System* (1972) menolong untuk mengukur posisi pentafsiran ini dan dikenali sebagai *the dominant*, the *negotiation* dan *the oppositional*. Walaupun begitu, kajian ini mencadangkan satu kaedah lebih fleksibel dibina yang boleh menjelaskan kompleksiti dan kepelbagaian dalam pembinaan maksud media. Menariknya, kajian ini juga mengukur subjek pembangunan yang dianalisis daripada pandangan komunikasi dengan menggunakan model komunikasi yang signifikan. Secara khususnya, strategi pembangunan semasa Malaysia, dengan menyentuh cabaran Wawasan 2020, telah dianalisis melalui pemahaman responden dalam program televisyen yang terpilih. Responden mengambil kira tentang persepsi di mana penggubalan polisi adalah dikawal secara politik, justeru mengakibatkan kebimbangan di antara etnik yang berbeza dengan kadar dominan yang berbeza. Maksud diterbitkan yang berpunca daripada interaksi media dengan kandungan media tidak dibayangkan secara nyata pada tahap psikologi pengguna, tetapi selalunya ia juga mencapai pengaruh sosiologi. Kajian ini juga mencadangkan agar kajian seumpamanya dijalankan di penempatan pelbagai kaum di serata dunia.

ABSTRACT

This research sought to understand how a multi-ethnic society interprets a development-oriented television programme. In other words, it dwelt into the reception activities of the people from

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various cultural backgrounds as they watched such a programme. The integration of the Social Sciences method of inquiry and the Humanities enabled a comparative empirical analysis to be carried out on this topic specifically between the media and the audience discourses. A preliminary study was first conducted with a purpose of identifying issues that were to be incorporated into the structured questionnaire which were later used in the focus group sessions. The focus group was the main method of inquiry through which data were collected from various study groups and comparatively assessed. From the findings we found that different ethnic groups made sense of the television programme in a complex and manipulated way, thus, resulting in the production of various meanings that reflect their personal invested interests. The study also supported that interpretations of television programme content were social and discursive. The socially bounded factors of the respondents such as their cultures, working style and attitude and educational level were found to have contributed to the shaping of the respective decoding behaviours. Their predispositions came into play as they relate to the particular media contents forcing them to take different decoding positions. The Parkin's Theory of Meaning Systems (1972) help to measure these decoding positions and described them as the *dominant*, the *negotiation* and the *oppositional*. However, this study suggested that a more flexi measure if developed could account for complexity and multi-variability in meaning making of media messages. Interestingly, this study also indicated that the subject of development could also be analyzed from the communication viewpoint using the significant communication models. In particular, the present Malaysian development strategies, with special reference to the challenges of Vision 2020, were analyzed through the interpretation of the respondents on the selected television programme. The respondents were very concerned about the perception that the development policies were politically-bound, thus causing certain level of anxiety among the different ethnic groups with different dominant level. Meanings produced as a result of interactions with media contents are not conceived merely at the psychological level of the users but often reaching the realm of the sociological influences too. The study suggested that a similar research be conducted in other multi-ethnic societies in other parts of the world.

INTRODUCTION

Reception is the central activity and trust of this research. Reception of development-oriented media contents by the society, however, has a significant role in determining the general health of this country in its effort to gain stability, growth and unity among the different ethnic groups that make up its society. The use of complementarity and non-complementarity of codes in the interpretation of such media contents, and in this case, the development-oriented television programme, had brought some significance to this study.

Audience members acquire different experiences in life, and this decides the members' different social discourses. Reception studies tradition assumes that meanings do vary and these variations are caused predominantly by the audiences' own personal discourses. Although variations in meaning are inevitable in decoding of media contents, in cases where the texts are purposely loaded with some political ideologies that support the national hegemony, meanings that vary from the conventional rules may render special attention. This implies that the audience members have selected the non-complementarity of codes in their interpretation work. Meanings resulted from a non-complementarity of code are regarded as resistant or oppositional to the dominant ideology.

This study was dominantly to find out what kind of decoding pattern exists among the different ethnic groups in this country and what influenced it. What effects did the decoding pattern bring to the society at large socially, economically and politically? Specifically, how would the television relate to the demand of the people towards the meaning of development in this country where the development strategies are predominantly determined by racial hegemony? What would seemingly be the rightful role of television in its attempt to position itself in a country of multi-ethnic societies like Malaysia? In short, could media power in the professional sense be free from hegemonic ideologies?

Why Malaysia? It is non-other than its multi-ethnic nature of its society. Beyond the ethnic segmentation the society is also characterized by the dichotomous 'dominant-subordinate' relationship which breeds a form of power struggle, each grasping for an identity socially, economically and politically. A genuine inter-

ethnic unity was hard to come by. The seemingly inter-ethnic relationship was built on a political census over a conference table for the sake of getting independence from the colonial power, the British.

Today, after about 47 years of independence, unity is still hardly called the product of acculturation because time and again the country had been tested and challenged. Learning from hindsight, affective national policies have been introduced to enable acculturation starts from primary schools. The country is now in the process of social re-engineering of schools to avoid further pseudo unity affecting future society.

With that as a background, the main objective was to analyse the reception or decoding of the different ethnic groups, namely the Malays, the Chinese, the Indians and the Sarawak indigenous people (to represent the Bumiputra population from East Malaysia) towards a particular development-oriented television programme.

The specific objectives of this study, however, are as follows:

1. To examine the range of meanings made by respondents (the different ethnic groups) and what causes them to vary,
2. To construct a decoding pattern from the various groups of meaning above,
3. To find out what is the nature or description of 'fit' between the income level based code and the ethic based code in the production of meaning',
4. To identify the 'point of contact' between the respondents and the television programme text, in terms of the most common and salient issue that might have emerged from the viewing,
5. To find out what attitude(s) the respondents have towards the issue and to plot a pattern of their responses,
6. To identify the decoding strategies or interpretative codes used by the groups that produce anti-dominant meanings'
7. To examine the relationships between the pro and anti-dominant decoding and the relevant challenge of the 'Vision 2020'.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Reception Analysis is an emergence of a new type of audience studies, first led by Morley's work on the 'Nationwide Audience' (1980). Since then, much of the writings on this have focused on the new tradition in understanding of how audiences 'read' media contents. Following his path, several studies have been carried out in the last decade implying that reception is social and discursive. The main approach used was through a convergence of text-oriented semiotics and audience-oriented cultural studies. The literature mentioned, Ang (1989); Becker (1984); Evan (1990); Jensen (1987, 1990a, 1990b); Jensen and Rosengren (1990); Lewis (1985, 1992); Lindlof (1988); Lull (1980); Morley (1983, 1993); Radway (1988); Schroder (1994); and Wren-Lewis (1983). The most significant studies were covered either in the factual or news area, the entertainment area, or ethnic, sub-ethnic and sub-cultural area.

The Factual or News Area

In the news-type area, the works of Morley (1980), Lewis (1985), and Jensen (1990a) are worth noting because they represent quality and strength in the qualitative audience studies tradition. Morley (1980) found out that culture determined the respondents' non-complemetarity decoding more than their class position in which his respondents were a part of. The cultural domination or resistance manifested in the respondents' discourse was a powerful determinant in explaining meanings made from media contents.

Lewis (1985), on the other hand, found that decoding of news materials was quite different compared to non-news materials. It involves encoding and decoding process of texts. Viewers of news programmes usually have only a limited range of appropriate meaning systems (narrative contexts) to draw upon. Through what is called 'lexias' (units of meaning as constructed by viewers) the viewers will have only a specific form of access. Therefore, if the narrative contexts of the news items are well constructed, the interpretative meanings will be more dominan or match the preferred meanings of the texts. Lewis' study of 'News at Ten' (1985) found that it failed to get its message across to a majority of its decoders because the narrative contexts were poor, thus affecting the lexias that was produced.

While Lewis worked on the narrative context of the text as a determinant in reception, Jensen (1990a) on the other hand, found that the themes in the news did facilitate participation by the public in political processes. Factual programme contents such as news are usually ideological and

thus, carry ideological implications to the viewers. Jensen saw the respondents' evaluation of 'Danish Television News' as a cultural forum. The national and international political issues and events that served as themes became the determinants in explaining political participation from the public.

Reception of news or factual genre was carried out in many different modes. However, the new audience studies tradition through its empirical qualitative approach has seen that reception could also be explained by the recipients' cultural backgrounds, the narrative contexts of the texts as well as the themes of the media contents.

The Entertainment Area

In this area, great interests have been placed in analyzing the relationship between the soap opera genre and gendered recipients, especially women. Researchers like Ang (1985), Hobson (1982), Radway (1994) and Seiter *et al.* (1989) were interested in knowing 'what' in the 'feminine' genre actually appeals to women who were described as the most common viewers. Ang (1985) described the new tradition as a form of Cultural Studies because it has developed a theoretical assumption that people create their own meanings rather than absorbed pre-given meanings imposed upon them. The success of 'Dallas' against the European public policy by Ang, the work of Hobson on 'Crossroad' (a soap on Independent Television (ITV) channel), and Radway's work on reading of romances, all showed that decoding experiences were related to the broader context of the social system.

The Ethnic, Culture and Sub-cultural Contexts

Katz and Liebes (1984) and Lull (1980, 1988a) concluded that mass communication could be an important resource within other cultural practices. Katz and Liebes (1984) did a study on the reception of 'Dallas' by multi-ethnic and cultural people of Israel. They found that television viewing was social and culturally determined of the meanings they made. Both the culture of the viewers and the producer are manifested through the programme. Methodologically, the focus group method was found to be the most natural way of looking at reception because the discussions acted as a forum for discussing social issues and themes. However, the 'critical distance' of the participating groups contributed further to the different decoding. As such, decoding was categorized at three different levels; as Israelites, as sub-cultures, and as wife and mother.

Lull also stressed that the social use of television depends much on how television influences and how the users interpret and use television within their contexts. He also supported the qualitative nature of looking at television viewing such as, in families because the detailed events the viewers create in order to make meaning will all be considered.

The claim in the new audience studies that reception is a social phenomenon and culturally determined was well proven by the above researchers. Focus group method was most adequate in capturing the fundamental aspects of human interactions, the core of reception activities.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

The main theory used in this study is Reception Theory as opposed to other audience theories such as Effects Theories and Uses and Gratifications. It is a step closer to a better approach in understanding audience reception because it is not merely looking at what media do to people and what people do with the media consecutively; rather, it is understood in relation to the existing socio-cultural system.

This study also touched on the issue of 'preferred reading' that is central to the process of reception. Thus, addresses on reception and preferred reading were also made in contexts of Hall's Theory of Encoding and Decoding (1973) especially concerned with whether it is the property of the text or is it something that is generated by the audience. Nevertheless, according to Morley (1989) this theory does support the fact that audiences do engage in productive work. The other important theory that helped the understanding of reception is the Theory of Meaning Systems by Parkin (1972). It provides the 'potentials' in decoding the structure the various types of meaning audiences make from media contents.

The communications analyzed in this study were made in the context of the Malaysian development policy known as the Vision 2020. Through the viewing of a development-oriented television programme, the respondents made their perception of what development meant to them especially when related to the specific challenges. This shows that development need not necessarily be measured by development

theories and economic indexes only but communications too.

For the study, a research framework indicating the important variables derived from the above theories was developed as illustrated in *Fig. 1.* In reception, the central issue reckoned was 'meanings', the outcome of the respondents' interaction with the television programme content, of "Miskin", meaning, poverty. The source of its production was the government, since poverty is a topic of state and national interest. The government is the state authority in the eradication of poverty programmes as well as in the construction of the national development policy. The television was a tool for reproduction of national ideologies despite its private status in ownership. The communities of meanings characterized by the respondents' socio-cultural qualities of discourse or their world of experience belonged to the various ethnic groups that made up the interpretive communities of this study. Those meanings were regarded only as empirically worthy as the analysis of the programme text was comparatively analyzed against the analysis of respondents' decoding of that text. The meanings that resulted were socially valued as they were interpreted in the context of the social system in which the group lived.

The pattern of meanings resulting from the mapping out of sample groups' responses thus indicated to us the different types of effects that the programme had offered to this study. Therefore, a dominant decoding position was read as the society being receptive of the state hegemony and the reverse was also true. Effectiveness of the media in reception is viewed both from the functional point of view as well as from the support it gives to the present hegemony.

The above model shows that a reception of a development-oriented television programme takes place in a multi-ethnic society. Applying it to the study, the government acts as the source of the messages that influence the television in its production of development-oriented programmes. The messages are loaded with

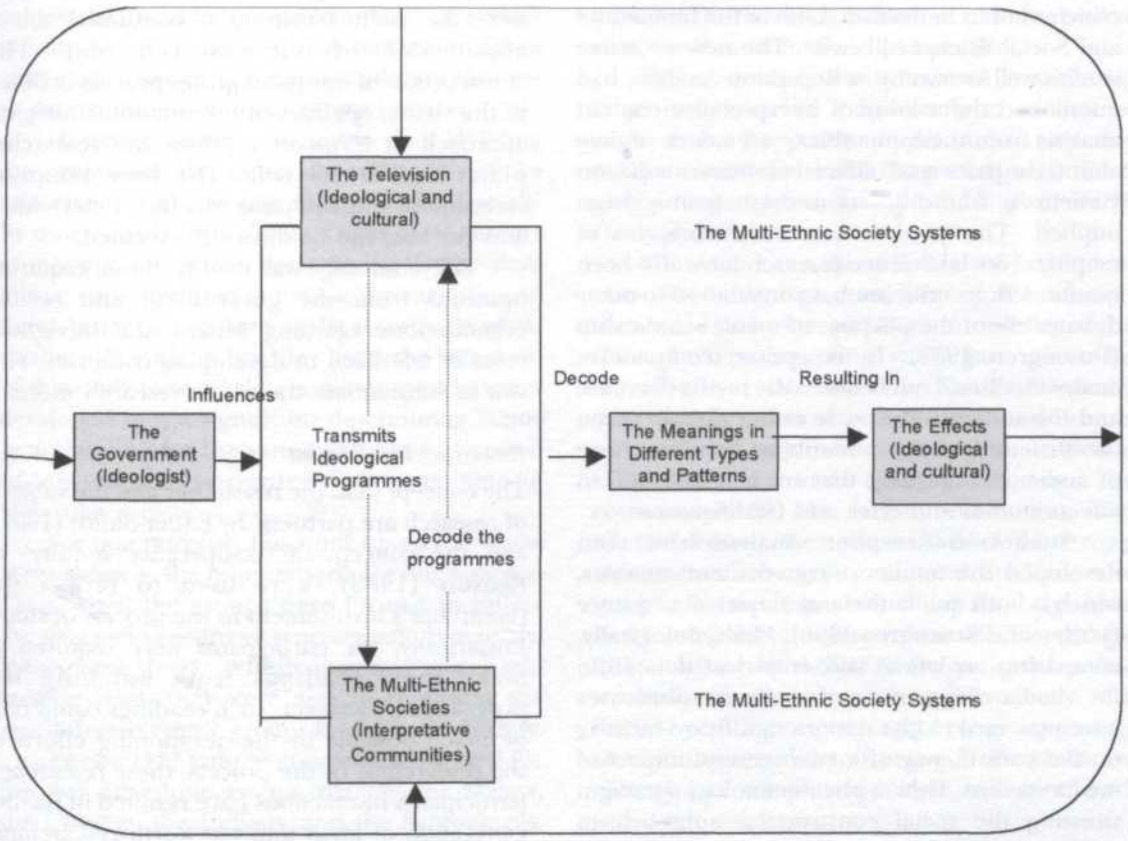

Fig. 1: A research framework model for reception analysis of a development-orientated television programme in a multi-ethnic society

ideologies and cultural elements that aimed to inform, influence and persuade the multi-ethnic audiences (interpretive communities) to believe in the policies and programmes planned by the government in its nation-building activities. As they decode the messages, they make meanings in many ways and patterns resulting in the production of effects, which are ideological and cultural too. This signifies the theory that television serves as an ideological reproduction apparatus of the government in developing countries. The elements contained in the framework interact with each other within the social-cultural system where reception takes place. Thus, media reception in one place produces meanings that signify the behaviors and attitudes of the users at that particular place.

METHODOLOGY

A significant difference between the old audience research tradition and the new is in the mode of enquiry. The old research tradition, which was commonly carried out in effect studies and later improved to Uses and Gratifications, was criticized of its limitations, both in the humanities and Social Sciences likewise. The new audience studies well known by its Reception Analysis, had questioned the validity of interpretative content analysis from the humanities, as a source of data about the uses and effects of mass media on audiences, whose positions have mainly been implied. The predominant methodologies of empirical Social Science research have also been questioned. Its criticism has contributed to many debates about the purpose of media scholarship (Rosengren 1989). In reception, comparative analysis is carried out between the media discourse and the audience discourse rather then between the structure of the contents and the structure of audience regarding that content as found in effects studies and Uses and Gratifications.

Studies in Reception Analysis have then developed the 'audience-cum-content' analysis, which is both qualitative and empirical in nature (Jensen and Rosengren 1990). Methodologically, comparing analytical and empirical data from the media discourses and audience discourses have managed to give a more significant bearing on the realistic way of media use and impact of media content. Thus, a phenomenology paradigm stressing the social construction approach in gathering data was more appropriate to describe the social process of reception that lays centrally in attitudes and values of the decoder. A qualitative research design via the process of in-depth interview was carried out in this study since it could effectively show how the different ethnic groups make meaning out of the television programme content, "Miskin" (A magazine television programme from TV3 known as *Majalah Tiga*).

The Research Design

We conducted the study in *three stages*. The *first stage* was an exploratory study whereby our main aim was to get as much information as possible about the television programme being examined. Such an input about the programme "Miskin" was crucial to the study because it helped in the structure of the focus group questionnaire. We consequently interviewed those TV3 professionals involved in the production of "Miskin". At the same time, RTM television professionals involved with the production of same programme genre were also called to inform us on the rationale used in producing such programmes.

The *second stage*, the focus group interviews, were the main activity as it consumed almost about 85% of our research time. The construction of our focus group process believed in the strong qualities of the phenomenological approach in terms of (a) how the researcher plays his/her its role, (b) how sampling techniques and sampling size are determined, and (c) how the fieldwork is executed.

The *third stage* was mainly about acquiring opinions from the government and related organizations regarding "Miskin" and the rightful roles of television in developing countries. This was to substantiate the whole research more.

Researcher Involvement

The concept that 'the researcher and the subjects of research are partners' by Easter-Smith (1991), and the concept of 'co-operative inquiry' by Reason (1988), were used to reflect the researcher's involvement in the process of study. Empirically, the participants were required to make their readings from watching the programme. However, such readings could only be made possible by the questioning efforts of the researcher. In the process, these researcher-participants interactions have resulted in further generation of ideas that was worth researching. The involvement of the researcher indeed helped to enrich the whole quality and quantity of the

meanings developed in this study. The partnership was indeed an important component of the empirical work.

Sampling and Sampling Size

It is important to note that this study aimed at observing the processes of the different ethnic groups in this country, rather than how the general Malaysians, 'read' a development-oriented television programme. In other words, the study was more interested in finding out how the Malays, the Chinese, the Indians (to name some of the ethnic groups) make meanings when they watch such a programme. The people are better known or characterized as multi-ethnic and multi-cultural rather than as homogeneous Malaysians (S. Husin Ali 1984). Ethnic distinctions were so obvious and not only marked by their physical traits but cultural norms and religious beliefs. Inter-ethnic relations if they exist, are more of 'plural society-oriented'. It is for these reasons that we did not select the typical demographic factors, like age, gender, education, etc., to represent our interpretive communities. We believe that these factors would not add far greater validity to any conclusions of our study. *Ethnic segmentation*, hence, became our prime technique in determining our focus group samples.

However, being a country that is being dominated socially, culturally and politically by one race, could this objectivity be raised at all? In other words, can class-consciousness emerge as a more important determining factor than ethnic consciousness in explaining reception of developmental messages as the country develops further? As such, it has also been the intention of this study to see if class consciousness has now developed into a significant determining factor in accounting for the varied nature of reception of development-oriented contents among Malaysian society.

For that purpose, this study opted for *income segmentation* as the other criteria for our samples. Thus, when the groups were formed to reflect the *three* socio-economic representations, namely, low-income level, middle-income, and high-income level, they were also to represent the *four* different ethnic groups found in the society.

Twelve (12) sample groups were formed for the *four* sub-ethnic groups, namely, the Malays, the Chinese, the Indians, and the Sarawakians. However, the Malays and the Sarawak Indigenous had an extra group each, which made up fourteen (14) groups. The affiliation of the Malays in UMNO and PAS was seen as a factor to account for the different ways the politically-divided Malays in interpreting development-oriented contents. Thus, we formed one group from those supporting UMNO and one other that support PAS. Incidentally, the PAS group also represented the rural character of the Malay population in this country.

Sarawak indigenous society or the Sarawak Bumiputra, is made up of many different sub-groups. Thus, conveniently we drew a line dividing the Sarawak Malay and non-Sarawak Malay, the two main political-bias indigenous groups. Both groups then formed a group each. Psycho-culturally, these two groups were different and hence, we believed that they could supply varied opinions about development. Please refer to Table 1 below for a summary of the sample groups (interpretive communities) of this study.

The table shows a matrix of Ethnic-Income relationship of our interpretive communities. Directly, it was the purpose of this study to examine the decoding pattern of our interpretive communities from these perspectives.

Since our study was not aimed at achieving a generalization or validity effects as that of research in the positive type, our sample size may be considered small (85 participants). Each group ranged from, as little as, 5 (five) to 10 (ten) persons.

We made a careful study in our recruitment exercises, taking high consideration of the factors that could reduce credibility and validity of the research. The sampling work gave particular attention to certain issues like 'familiarity among the participants within a group' and 'representation of population to achieve sufficient variability.' We took efforts to remove the common pitfalls, like, lacking moderating skills of the researcher, domination of strong characters in the group, cultural hindrances of the participants especially those from the rural and some political interventions. We faced these limitations or hardships in the process because we dealt with the open society. Fortunately, with the co-operation of people and other supporting community members at research locations, we managed to complete our data collection work with high satisfaction.

TABLE 1
The sample groups (interpretive communities) of this study

Income / ethnic	Malays	Chinese	Indians	S'kians	Total
High-Income					
• Professionals	1	1	-	1	3
Middle-Income					
• Clerical/Technical	-	1	1	-	2
• Teachers	-	-	-	2	2
• University students	1	1	1	-	3
Low-Income					
• Farmers	2	-	-	1	3
• General laborers	-	-	1	-	1
Total	4	3	3	4	14

Profiles of the focus groups were:

Group 1 : Professionals, Shah Alam, Selangor.
Group 2 : Universiti Putra Malaysia students, Serdang, Selangor.
Group 3 : Small-scale farmers, Kuala Rengas, Perak.
Group 4 : Small-scale farmers, Kota Bahru, Kelantan.
Group 5 : Executives, Malaysian Airlines, Kuala Lumpur.
Group 6 : Universiti Putra Malaysia students Serdang.
Group 7 : Universiti Sains Malaysia clerks, Penang.
Group 8 : Universiti Sains Malaysia technical staff, Penang.
Group 9 : Universiti Putra Malaysia students Serdang.
Group 10 : Manual workers, Kelab Golf Perkhidmatan Awam.
Group 11 : Professionals, Kuching.
Group 12 : Student teachers, Kuching.
Group 13 : Student teachers, Kuching.
Group 14 : Small-scale farmers of the Senyawan long house, Saratok, Sarawak.

The researcher conducted the focus group interviews, running from several sub-regions in the Malay Peninsula to Sarawak in Borneo, from July 10 to September 25, 1994. The researcher moderated most of the sessions except two, due to some language problems. To overcome these, the study was assisted by a trained facilitator who mainly helped in translating some of the terms that gave problems in understanding.

The Fieldwork and the Empirical Data

The study opted for in-depth focus group interviews as advocated and adopted by Morley (1980). Although this methodology is not a typical ethnographic inquiry, the data (qualitative) were sufficient to meet the objectives of this study. More importantly, the comparative analysis procedure carried out between the examination of the programme text and the analytical response of the participants towards that text made our research inquiry a scientific and empirical one. As a result, a certain amount of 'closure' resulting from the work of textual or genre conventions contained in the structure of the text (Hall 1973), guided their decoding. The participants did not decode on their own free judgment. This was indeed the essence of the 'preferred reading' theory claimed by Hall (1973).

The proponents of critical research traditions argued that qualitative data from media-audience encounters are empirical and ethnographical because the sources of data are from in-depth, open-ended interviews instead of the 'self-reporting' of the questionnaire-type. Morley (1980, 1992), Ang (1985, 1990), Jensen (1990a), to name a few, advocated the importance of qualitative data in examining reception of media consumers.

Conducting the Focus Group Interviews

The focus group sessions were conducted immediately after the participants had viewed the recorded programme. The intention was to exploit the participants' fresh memory to the maximum. Although studies in television viewing

had called for the activity to be done naturally in the viewing environment or viewing during the actual transmission time, the choice is still dependent on the overall objective of the study. 'Naturality' was not the main aim of the study but the act of decoding of the participants was. The latter took into account both the ideological determination and significance of the text as well as the competence of the participants in decoding the content.

Hence, the fear that the 'pseudo social setting' would reduce the effects of physical and interpersonal conditions in shaping viewers' interpretation would be less of our concern.

Above all else, we were interested to find how codes rather than those factors like physical or interpersonal setting shape their meaning positions to be either dominant, negotiation or oppositional to the present hegemony. The concept of interpretive communities itself stressed on the importance of codes and its sources rather than the environment where the reception took place. 'Naturality' and 'informal environment' were soon achieved as discussions heightened. A high consideration was given to the use of space to remove physical or psychological blockages but motivate effective communication during the interviews. By the way, sessions were mainly conducted in offices, classrooms and houses.

In every session, after viewing the programme, a brief discussion was held to introduce some fundamental issues meant to spark off the thinking process. Common questions like, 'Who is responsible for the eradication of poverty in this country?', 'Can this country be free of it by the year 2020?', 'Can you help?', and 'Do you want development?' After the 'ice breaking' session, the participants were slowly brought to the film again and the first question from the prepared topical guide was given to the participants to start the discussions.

The range of topics attempted to extract both the explicit and the implicit meanings of the content. Since development messages are ideologically symbolic, we certainly needed careful analyzing skills and strategies to understand why such meanings were made. For that purpose, we mapped their reasons within the participants' discourses and experiences.

The topical guide prepared for this study merely contains listed questions relating to the research problems and objectives. It was useful in keeping our time effectively and at the same time helping the moderator to carry out his job consistently across all groups. The major topic touched includes the following:

1. What explicit meaning they make from the visuals or programme content.
2. What implicit meaning they create from interpreting the 'ideologies' transmitted through the programme messages.
3. What 'development ideologies' could the study identify from the programme content.
4. What roles and status our television plays in our society.
5. What presentation styles the programme uses.

Although the order of topics was predetermined, the actual usage was flexible as the needs arise. However, handling shifts was done with much care, as it is known to be one of the fallacies in moderating work.

All along, a video camera was used to record our activities and more importantly to assist in the analysis. Every movement and sound was recorded and the nonverbal interpreted. Although videotaping caused anxiety we exploited it to produce a more dynamic result.

The Choice of Television Programme "Miskin"

One of the requirements of this research was to select an appropriate development-oriented television programme, informative and 'light' enough for any ordinary nonprofessional to understand when viewing it but 'heavy' enough to contain important issues pertaining to development. On deciding which programme to choose, we took note of the concept of 'programme-type preference' from Morley's work (1981) on the issue of taste and preference of the audiences. This is an attempt to avoid mismatching of interest between the programme and the decoders. However, *Majalah 3* managed to solve this question because it came up to be one of the most highly watched television programmes at that time. The high rating it received as shown in the Survey Research Malaysia Report supported this.

Like other television stations in the country, TV3, though private, is a well-regulated broadcast station. It is equally responsible in helping the country meet its goal in nation building. Every socially constructed programme produced expects to operate within the guidelines of Rukun Negara. Loyalty to the ruling government, which is UMNO-based, is thus, an undeniable fact.

Analyzing the Programme "Miskin"

The study did an analysis on the programme before conducting the focus group study. The purpose was to develop a set of empirical data about the programme, which is to be matched later against the empirical data developed from the groups' decoding of the same programme. This process also enables us to identify or predict on the 'preferred reading' built within the messages. We did this with the producer who was responsible in making the intention became a reality. The next step was to seek the following information on:

1. how the topic was first articulated, in particular in terms of how the first idea was generated and by whom.
2. how the development ideology within the message was constructed, in particular in terms of TV3's attitude towards the Vision 2020 or the government's attitude towards eradication of poverty project among the ethnic groups.
3. how the content was structured (how background and explanatory frameworks were mobilized, visually and verbally; how guests were recruited and comments integrated; how discussions were monitored; and how ideologies were stated, openly or covertly).

This content analysis was crucial in mass communication research because it informed us how symbolic the programme messages were. This was particularly true especially when television in developing countries is commonly perceived as the ideological reproduction apparatus for the government. The affirmative economic and development plans in Malaysia had made researchers more eager to conclude that "Miskin" contained the politically constrained preferred reading built in the programme messages.

Analyzing the Focus Group Interview Data

The objectives of the study were determined through two-level analysis: the participants-content level (micro) and the interactions between the meanings developed from the first level analysis and the selected issue or challenge in the Vision 2020 (macro). As Ang (1990) has suggested, media reception should not stop at the media-audience encounter but should also address the differentiated meaning (if any) and significance of specific reception patterns against articulating social relations of power. Understanding of media reception certainly requires equal attention to the structural and historical aspects of the society social system where the media are a part. Poverty in Malaysia was thus interpreted as a socio-cultural and political phenomenon, and any forms of contradictory meaning (if any) were 'read' as constraints to the existing hegemony.

As mentioned earlier, analyses were done microscopically and macroscopically. Several comparative group analyses were carried at *four levels* in a hierarchical manner. This means that we approached the most basic level before the next higher level is processed. The first three levels which refer to microscopic level aimed at analyzing the different ethnic groups' decoding on the programme, "Miskin". The last and highest level referred to as the macroscopic level was to match the results of the groups' reception against the eighth challenge of the Vision 2020. *Fig. 2* shows the hierarchy of the decoding analysis of a development-oriented television programme in the multi-ethnic Malaysian society.

The above figure shows that the qualitative data obtained from the study went through four layers of analysis. At the *first* level, each individual group responses on viewing "Miskin" was recorded and analyzed. As a result, this process managed to generate fourteen (14) groups of data.

Comparative studies among the groups' responses within a particular ethnic were then carried out. This brought us into the *second* level of analysis. In particular, responses from Group 1 to Group 4, which refer to the Malay grouping, were analytically compared, and so were the responses from Group 5 to Group 7 (Chinese), Group 8 to Group 10 (Indian), Group 11 to Group 14 (Sarawakian). As a result, we were able to generate Malay decoding, Chinese decoding, Indian's and Sarawakian's decoding of "Miskin".

Consequently, these four ethnic groups' decoding data were then crossly examined. The purpose of this *third* or higher level analysis was basically to see how the Malays, for an example, look at development messages compared to the Chineses. What were found to be common among them and what were different? When the meanings differ why were they so? What factors contributed to the different meaning positions (dominant, negotiated and oppositional) as proposed by Parkin (1972)? The multi-ethnic

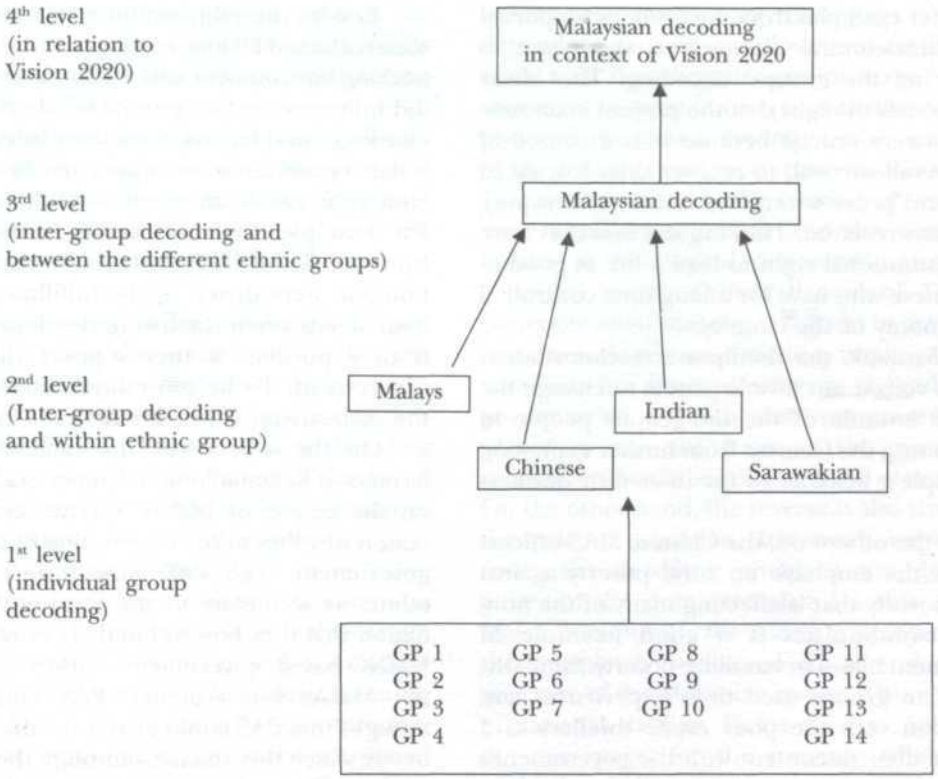

Fig. 2: The hierarchy of decoding analysis of development-oriented television programme in the multi-Malaysian society

decoding that resulted at this level indeed reflect an array of the 'Malaysian feeling and attitude' on development in this country.

As mentioned earlier, mass communication functions in the societal system where it is a part. As such, interpretation of mass media messages has to be made in the context of the social, cultural and political environment of the consumers if it is to be meaningful. In this study, the *fourth* level of the analysis took this role, which was to find out how the Malaysians feel about development in context of the Vision 2020, the big blue print for the multi-ethnic Malaysia to be a fully developed country by the year 2020. The hierarchical analyses that worked on the data obtained from the focus groups-media encounters thus have produced an output that revealed the many ways the multi-ethnic Malaysians perceive development in the context of the Vision 2020.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The study brought up three main discourses that have generally influenced the Malaysian decoding on the programme "Miskin": the ethnic-cultural, the socio-economic, and the social-oriented factors. The ethnic-cultural discourse was found to be the dominant 'fitter' in determining the decoding positions proposed by Parkin (1972) compared to economic and social factors. Socio-economic and other social factors had little or no relationship in determining their decoding behaviours. This means each individual ethnic group interpreted poverty or development mainly from the context of the group's own existence (history-politically and socio-economically) as a sub-ethnic group in a bigger Malaysian society. Relationships between the Malays and Chinese or the Indians and the Chinese acted as important determinants in interpreting development messages. In fact, the economic achievements of the Chinese we regarded as the 'yardstick' to the Malay support of the present corrective economic policy. At the same time, the participation of the Bumiputra groups in the Non-Bumiputra economic monopoly, was a source of Non-Bumiputra discontent. Each ethnic group indeed has its own dilemma and this is affecting the inter-ethnic relationship.

Other examples from the findings supported that ethnic-cultural discourse is significant in influencing the groups' decoding. The Malay professionals thought that the present economic policy is very crucial because it is a source of their overall survival, to recover their lost racial pride, and prove wrong the unfair stereotyping the Malays received. They argued that they have the constitutional right to lead a life as good as the Chinese who have for a long time controlled the economy of the country.

In Sarawak, the Bumiputra teacher-student trainees voiced out how urgent is to change the negative attitude of the indigenous people in order to stop the Chinese from further exploiting the people's weaknesses for their own business ends.

On the other end, the Chinese MAS officers felt that the emphasis on rural poverty against urban poverty that is affecting many of the non-Malay communities is a good example of government biases in handling poverty. Similarly, the Indian groups used their experiences and association with the poor estate dwellers as a basis for their discontent with the government's affirmative economic policies, such as, the New Economic Policy and later revised and changed to the New Development Policy.

In particular, the fear of the Bumiputra groups of the high-rise economic performance of the Chinese and the biases of the government's corrective development policies were the two main sources of the opposite codes used by the Non-Malay or Non-bumiputra groups in interpreting the progamme contents. This shows that there was a lack of a unifying factor that might help the different ethnic groups agree of what should be a good development plan for the multi-ethnic Malaysians at the moment. That unifying factor, which is hard to come by, is 'racial unity', which is merely happening (if ever there is) at a superficial level.

In addition, the political consensus obtained from the different racial groups at the time of independence in 1957, left some legacies that contributed to the differences in treatment of some groups receive especially between the Bumiputra and the Non-Bumiputra. In the Constitution, the special rights of the Malays and the Malays as the 'masters' of state land, always run fresh in the blood system of the Malaysian. On these issues, sparks are easily turned on to start a racial conflict.

Besides the ethnic-cultural discourse, other social-oriented factors, such as political affiliation, working environment and organizational culture, did influence certain groups beside the existing ethnic-cultural factors. Some may be regarded as isolated cases but some others may be significant enough to create an alarm on national security. For example, the low-income Indian workers from the Kelab Golf Pentadbiran Awam, Kuala Lumpur, were driven by the fulfillment of their basic needs when discussing development. This is only possible if they support the present government. To be too ethnocentric and fight the mainstream is just too abstract for them.

On the other side, the small-scale Malay farmers in Kelantan pointed at political affiliation on the course of Islamic survival as the main reason why they were in opposition to the present government. The PAS sympathizers regarded ethnic as secondary to the creation of Islamic nation that they bow to build. They rejected the UMNO-based government's effort to develop the Malays but accepted PAS because they thought that PAS could guarantee their spiritual needs, which they manifest through their political activities. This is a case of high level abstract in setting up a discourse.

Understanding reception of development messages in Malaysia does require us to understand first the history and ethnic-cultural perspectives of the interpretive communities. They are the main sources of their decoding codes in interpreting development-oriented programme contents.

The first level of analysis examined how this ethnic-cultural discourse plays its role in helping the different groups decode or make meaning out of "Miskin". This analysis aimed to answer the first objective of this study, which is to find the range of meanings, and what causes them to vary as the groups responded to the text. A summary of the findings are as the following:

1. That development is ethnic-oriented: the challenge is to ensure the state experiences an economically-just society.
2. That 'communalism' (Malay-biased) occurs in television: the challenge of establishing a united Malaysia
3. That government and its policy function as a source of strength and weaknesses: the challenge of establishing a prosperous society.
4. That the poor has a poor attitude: the challenge of creating a psychological liberated society.

5. Religion versus development among the Malays: the challenge of establishing a fully developed and moral society with strong religious values.
6. That education is politicized: the challenge of establishing a progressive society.
7. That television functions as an ideological apparatus: the challenge to achieve the objectives of the Vision 2020.

The above served as the 'ideological themes' generated by all of the groups and used as the *agenda* for the next subsequent analyses. To understand the attitude of the groups further on the 'ideologies', we drew up a decoding pattern according to the Parkin's Theory of Meaning System (1972) that tracked the various meaning positions made in this study.

Parkin introduced *three* types of meaning position: the dominant value-system known as *dominant* meaning, the subordinate value-system known as *negotiated* meaning, and the radical value-system known as *oppositional* meaning positions. Since the value of each decoding positions vary from one to the other, we assigned each decoding with a numerical tag reflecting its degree of dominance. The value ranges from (+3) to (-3), with (-3) carrying the least value of dominance.

The process of making the verdict, which group takes what position and with what value was the prerogative of the researcher, very much dependent on our intuitions and feelings. To know what decoding the groups make is highly important because in reception studies decoding positions manifest some important 'signals' out of the text the audience come in contact with. This is more so when the concept of 'economic owners' of the television and the concept of 'media as ideological apparatus' were much defended in the Critical School of Thought. Generally when studying reception in developing countries, dominant decoding implies that the television has been effective in defending the government policies and programmes, in whichever way, the status of the government could undoubtedly be enhanced and strengthened. On the other hand, the reverse is also true about the role of television, but more importantly, contradict decoding criticized the dominant power of the dominant class (in this case the Malay Bumiputra), the ruling government, and the completely socio-economical and political structure of the Malaysian system. This is a threat to national stability. Please refer to Table 2 in the next page, for the summary of decoding positions of all groups.

The above table illustrates the pattern of decoding positions assigned to the various ethnic groups and in fact, a graph according to the degree of dominance could easily be plotted out of this data to show the pattern of distribution

TABLE 2
A summary of the decoding of "Miskin" by the various ethnic groups according to the degree of dominance, as in Parkin's Theory of Meaning System (1972)

Decoding Positions & Degree of Dominance / Ethnic groups		Dominant (+1 to +3)	Negotiating (-1 to -3)	Oppositional (-1 to -3)
Malay-	Gp 1 professionals	+2		
	Gp 2 students	+1		
	Gp 3 farmers (Perak)	+2		
	Gp 4 farmers (Kelantan)			-3
Chinese-	Gp 5 professionals		-3	
	Gp 6 students			-2
	Gp 7 general staff		-1	
Indians-	Gp 8 technical staff		-2	
	Gp 9 students		-2	
	Gp 10 laborers	+1		
Sarawakians-	Gp 11 professionals		-3	
	Gp 12 teacher trainees (M)	+1	-1	
	Gp 13 teacher trainee (NM)		-1	

of the decoding position. *Fig. 3* in the next page illustrates the above mentioned graph on the groups' decoding positions indicated by their value of dominance. However, the above table shows that the Malay groups except the Kelantanese (Gp4) represented by the PAS sympathizers fall into the dominant column. The rest fall into either the negotiation column or the oppositional column, except the Indian laborers, who went under the dominant column. The Chinese students from UPM (Gp6) were rather oppositional to the government. Group10 represented by low-income laborers thought that basic needs to their survival are more urgent than political matters. The Sarawak professionals (Gp11) however, felt that the Bumiputra status

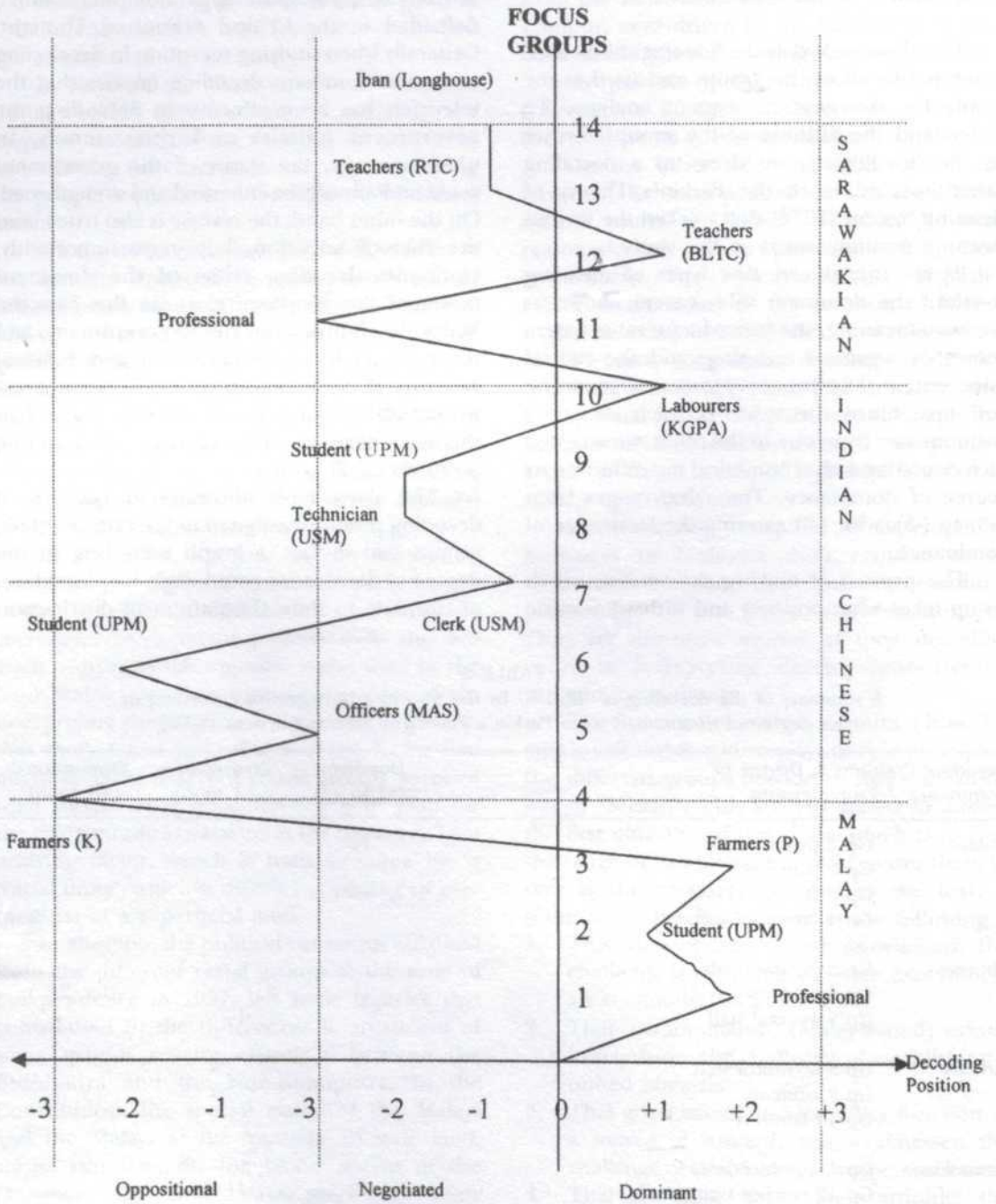

Fig. 3: Graphical pattern of groups' decoding position indicated by their value of dominance

treats the indigenous and the Malays from the Peninsular, rather differently. They also believed that a certain amount of religious discrimination cause the difference in treatment.

The **second level analysis**, which examines the decoding of the four ethic groups separately, brought up a list of 15 types of 'development ideologies', that is, from the Malay groups, the Chinese, the Indians and the Sarawakians. Comparative analyses on these four decoding were then carried out to locate the most salient issue brought up by the study. These ideologies were as follows:

1. Development is politicized
2. Television is controlled by the government
3. Negative attitude of the poor
4. Problems of the implementers
5. Sympathy towards the government
6. Caring concepts
7. Development programmes in television as propaganda
8. Involvement from the private sector
9. Malay hegemony
10. Economic gap
11. Poverty ruins nation's credibility and image
12. Television as a source of awareness
13. Economic imbalance among regions or states
14. Abuse of the term 'Bumiputra'
15. Education is politicized

The next process was to identify the 'most salient issue' and this was succeeded by counting the highest score in the 'number of mentions' received by a particular issue. This then became our 'perspective' against which a relevant challenge of Vision 2020 is matched. In research, this particular issue is regarded as the 'point of contact' the groups had with the text.

The study found that the politic-biased development policies and programmes became their main concern when discussing economic or national progress. Thus, it represents the meaning that 'binds' all the four ethnic groups together by inscribing their attitudes. Does the Non-Bumiputra have equal opportunities in the economy? Does the new development programme change their traditions in acquiring wealth? For general information, the next most frequently mentioned issue is 'television is not objective', followed by 'the poor attitude of the poor'. Among the least frequently mentioned are 'Malay hegemony', poverty ruins the nation's image, and 'television as a source of awareness'. This makes our study a holistic one in trying to examine the inter-ethnic reception towards a selected development issue in the country.

The **third level analysis,** however, focused on the attitude and other psychological aspects of the groups who represent the Malaysian nation in conceptualizing the idea that the national development policy is politically-biased towards the needs of the Malays and Bumiputras. More importantly, this examination has brought us further into how this issue relates to the well-being of the different ethnic groups in terms of relating themselves to each other.

The Non-Bumiputra generally agrees on the issue that development needs to be redressed. Nevertheless, they were not in consensus at how the government plans to implement the policy. The Bumiputra members argued that the bases used in the restructuring of this 'untypical' affirmative development policy, were historical rather than logical. Failing to accept this point, they will never be in favor of the dominant ideology.

The 1969 riots were an important point in history, and the development policy resulted from it was mainly structured to 'correct' many of the past 'wrongs' done by the then government. Critiques analyzed that the newly independent government (1957-1969) actually took off on the wrong premise (Mahathir 1970). This naturally requires more than an ordinary reformation. The UMNO-based government demands the dominant Malay's economic needs must continue to be served and protected. Such a development policy will not survive unless it is supported by political regimentation.

The study revealed that justifications on formulating a national development policy that serve every ethnic group's needs are hard to come by. The meanings generated from the comparative decoding analyses were grouped into either the Bumiputra or the Non-Bumiputra type of meaning.

As mentioned earlier, all the Malay groups with the exception of the PAS supporters favored the dominant position. They actually are the beneficiaries of the policy. On the other hand, the Non-Bumiputra with the exception of the low-income Indian group, took either the negotiated or the oppositional stance. This level of analysis resulted in the birth of Bumiputra and Non-Bumiputra dichotomy of meaning. The

following is a list of the 'pro-dominant' meaning of the Bumiputra groups and 'anti-dominant' meanings produced by the Non-Bumiputra groups in this study:

I. The pro-dominant meaning

1. Assistance to the Bumiputra must continue
2. National stability
3. Racial equality
4. Humiliation of being dominant but poor
5. Power for the elected government
6. Responsiblility
7. National pride
8. The 'we can' attitude
9. Contra-cultural economies (emigrant's control over the economic welfare of the locals)
10. Heterogeneity causes ethnic orientation in development approaches
11. The special position of the Bumiputra
12. Racial harmony

II. Anti-dominant meaning

1. Development is for 'supporters'
2. Discrimination in eradication of poverty
3. Rural vs urban development
4. Subsidy culture
5. The commercial, industrial and professional Bumiputra community
6. Position led to communalism

The comparative analyses carried out at this level indeed answered the quest to understand how multi-ethnic Malaysians decode development in this country. The study managed to produce an empirical theory that supports the notion that 'audience in modern mediated-societies is complex and at the same time contradictory'; that mass cultural text is complex and contradictory, so much so that the multi-cultural audience who use the multi-layered meaning text, produce a culture of equal complexity and contradiction'. This study also confirmed that the dominant group decided on the dominant decoding position and the reverse is true.

As mentioned earlier, reception studies tradition believed that reception studies would only be meaningful only if they are examined and analyzed within the socio-cultural framework of the society. Ang (1990) raised the status of reception analysis by conceptualizing it as a 'cultural critique' because it is deeply embedded in the political and cultural processes where the media are a part. Every study is thus differently tailored and unique to its surroundings. This added value to reception is made possible because, unlike the positivist approach, she said, this tradition is far better able to explain the ways in which people creatively make their own meanings and thus create their own new-born culture. That is what underlies the thesis of Cultural Studies, in which consumers are indeed seen as cultural users of mass culture. With that, reception has successfully secured a central place in Cultural Studies.

Findings from this study confirmed this when the **fourth level analysis** brought an important insight where some form of political tension and ideological dilemma did exist when testing the groups' reception on poverty. The television and the groups were indeed involved in a context of power relations when they discussed development or poverty eradication, which is the ideological issue contained in the eighth challenge of Vision 2020. This analysis therefore, is to examine how the different groups decode "Miskin" in relation to the 8th challenge of Vision2020 because it has a direct relevance to socio-economic development in Malaysia – the political scenario which served as the prevailing cultural condition affecting the activities of Vision 2020.

In this study, the vision has created a feeling of dissatisfaction among some groups, in particular the Chinese. They were basically not happy about the idea of middle classing of the Bumiputra; the creation of a commercial, industrial and professional Bumiputra community; and the 30% target for Bumiputra ownership of capital equity in corporate sectors. The new development should not be at the expense of the economic expansion of the Non-Bumiputra members, they claimed. The swing, they said, had affected their businesses and industries. The act of 'ethnicizing' and 'politicking' of the national development was responsible in creating the 'resistance' among them. These notes illustrate some of the central as well as controversial issues emerging from the national development plan constructed during the post 1969 era. In political-cultural terms, this could be understood as disempowerment on the dominant discourse by the minority.

The **8th challenge of Vision 2020**, which aims at "establishing an economically just society in which there is a fair and equitable distribution

of the wealth of the nation, in which there is full partnership in economic progress", implies that happiness and peace will never be achieved as long as identification of race is linked to some economic functions. The government believed that our quest for nation building would not materialize if the nation were unwilling to struggle for economic justice.

The findings indicated that resistance and threats still lived by the people, especially the Non-Bumiputra more so if they are sympathizers of the opposition parties. To them 'special position' makes all the difference. The indigenous people of Sarawak felt that they were treated as 'second class Bumipura' while the PAS sympathizers found the vision was incompatible with their political ideologies.

However, the response was, in general, encouraging compared to that in the past. This fact points to the economic progress experienced by the country. Despite this, there is always a basis for alarm because inter-ethnic problems have its roots deep down in the history. Nevertheless, we still need to ask some questions. Firstly, to what extent will this affirmative policy remain the dominating factor in upholding or breaking the inter-ethnic relationships, even among the Malays or the Bumiputra? Secondly, will Malaysia have other significant cultural values in the future that will serve as new discourses for interpreting economic justice and development? Further research on reception of development-oriented messages is therefore necessary and needed to ensure that Malaysia will forever preserve the successes she has achieved in her quest for progressive nation building.

CONCLUSIONS

The final attempt of this effort was to test the selected theories used to see whether or not they were able to explain the reception process of Poverty by the multi-ethnic Malaysians. The concept of meaning is indeed a very complex entity. Hence, other related theories other than the Reception theory (Morley 1980) were recruited so as to produce a more meaningful result. The study proved that the Reception theory together with Parkin's Theories of Meaning Systems (1972) and Hall's Theory of Encoding and Decoding (1973) had successfully examined the multi-ethnic Malaysian's reception towards the television programme on development. It dealt with the strengths and weaknesses of each theory in its process of explaining the attitude and the discourses as far as development is concerned.

In an attempt to add further research value to the study, the analysis did not stop at media-audience relationship but went beyond to evaluate the Malaysian development strategies. The reception of Poverty thus became more social and public worthy. Generally, the 'true' sense of how Malaysians felt about the development systems was then revealed.

The research concluded that, *firstly*, the Reception Theory was successful in accounting for the complexity in meaning making. The different ethnic groups did make sense of the television content "Miskin" in complex and unexpected ways, while the interpretive meanings they produced were social and indeed discursive. Meaning making involved not only the psychological aspect of the decoders but also the interplay of other factors, such as, their socio-cultural discourses, the power relation experiences and the language constraints caused by language rules and codes in the text faced by the different ethnic groups that made up the society. These factors helped to explain why a communication phenomenon might be interpreted in many different ways.

Secondly, the groups' opinion that 'the development policy is being politicized, thus, creating a biased development policy favoring the Bumiputra' was claimed to be the 'preferred meaning' to the programme content. The messages were intentionally structured by the producer and were a reproduction of the hegemonic ideologies. The 'closure effect' concept by Hall (1973) had helped the Malay decoders (especially the Bumiputra) to decode the message as such, thus, making the opinion the dominant meaning. Nevertheless, the non-Bumiputra groups were found to be taking the oppositional position regarding this meaning.

The Bumiputra and the non-Bumiputra differed in their 'critical distance' (in Katz and Liebes (1984) terminology) towards the programme. Likewise their attitude towards what had been manifested by the text also differed among the groups due to the varied discourse the groups experienced. The study theorized in politically-oriented messages or propaganda-typed programmes; the concepts of 'encoding' and 'preferred meaning' are related to the issue of 'intention' of the producer. Preferred meaning

is not the absolute property of the text because textual production is full of language constraints, more so when the content is politicized, much of the meanings are unsaid.

Thirdly, the three decoding positions defined by Parkin (1972) delimited the probability of having extra meanings to the programme content, hence, the intention of generating new insights from the study, if unchanged, would have been much defeated.The decoding position needs to be expanded so that all the complexities in decoding will be accounted for.

Fourthly, media effects are an indirect variable here delivered through the interplay of media in presenting a specific ideology. The conception of effect is being superimposed by the more important role, that is, the reproduction of hegemonic ideology. Effects were translated through the extent of the television in maintaining and defending the State's hegemony. The understanding of effects thus remains with the extent of power the media had in getting the people to think like the dominant powers.

Finally, the National Economic Policy first introduced in 1970 was an inevitable response to the May 1969 racial crisis and had aroused relatively little opposition in principle. Even the non-Malays, especially those from the higher-level income and educated groups, understood the rationale for such an affirmative policy. Post-1990, the Malaysians experienced further consolidation of all of the policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our recommendations are divided into two parts. The *first* was on the communication theories used in this research and subsequently on how to make the process of decoding or meaning making go in tandem with the government development policies. The *second* part was on how to address the issue of 'national unity' with the national development model Vision 2020, as its base.

In the *first* part of the recommendation, the study supported the Reception Theory to account for the complex, unexpected, social, and discursive nature of decoding, but there are a few areas within the theoretical framework that needed modifications. As the content was about development, the 'level of education' and the 'system of education' were found to be significant characteristics of the 'interpretive communities' to be examined. These factors are worth researching, as they might have been able to explain the tolerance level of the people towards the affirmative development policies in this country.

With regard to Parkin's theory, the gap between one decoding position and the next was rather too wide to accommodate the various characters of decoding. As a result, a detailed account of decoding variations of the groups was unable to be captured exhaustively. We recommend that each type of decoding position be subdivided. The decision on the fraction is however, the choice of the researcher, depending on how detailed the researcher wishes the account to be.

Finally, the Genre theory was equally important in the study of reception. Consideration should be given to whether or not the selected media text is relevant to the decoders discourse. Morley's (1981) recommendations on plotting the 'purchase' (Moores' terminology) of media genre for various categories of decoders, should be given due attention. The question of 'who prefers what' before proceeding into the investigation would help the researcher not to experience 'programme distance' (Moores 1993).

The *second* part of the recommendation was on national unity. The growing ethnic division had a class texture, which originated in government policy, albeit unintended (Jomo 1994). The non-Malays have been quite tolerant of the current development scenario because of the coalition government concept used by the government. The issue on national unity should be measured using both the traditional economic approach and non-economic approach. The non-economic, which is more of our concern, should work towards nationalizing or 'Malaysianizing' all schools so that 'unity' starts from young. Therefore, the country should reform the school system so that the country is able to remove all identified obstacles to national unity. One of the existing issues in the school systems that is currently bothering the nation is the vernacular system that many people think is hindering national unity. Thus, 'Malaysianizing' the schools will create a new Malaysian society that is willing to watch local media production more and will love the country even more.

Suggestions for future research in media reception are as follows:

Firstly, development-oriented television programmes are relevant media contents for the study of reception in developing countries. More so if they approach the study using the critical audience research tradition. The result will be more holistic considering the socio-cultural and political perspectives that influence the meaning making activities of the media users. As such, more research is needed in developing countries where the selection of such genre is relevant and the ethnographic approach can give a more meaningful finding, while at the same time, able to preserve and maintain the empirical quality of the work.

Secondly, future researchers may adopt the same research framework model to replicate reception studies in other developing multi-ethnic countries having similar backgrounds as Malaysia. The hegemonic status could be crystallized and the roles of the media could further be defined for the benefit of the varied cultured society.

Thirdly, future studies may capitalize the local television news programme to track the reception of various local social groups towards some of the contemporary issues transmitted through the television. A decoding pattern could then be plotted to show the people's attitude toward the issues broadcasted in the programme and their perception on the media's attitude toward the same issues. For programmes communicating foreign-based ideologies, studies could be focused on how reception will be read in the context of the local societal set up.

Finally, a follow up research should be carried out after the year 2000 (five years after the study was carried out), because the character of the interpretive communities might have changed following the changes brought up within the country or globally. Specifically, the study would like to see if the decoding trends of the Bumiputra versus the non-Bumiputra, the Malays versus the non-Malays, the west versus the east Malaysians, have changed. Has the income level factor become very more important than ethics factor in analyzing people's reception in decoding development-oriented programmse? Finally, would there be new emerging variables to describe the future social character of the Malaysian society? We believe that the forthcoming research would be able to deliver a comparative reception analysis 'before and after' the millennium year 2000.

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(Received: 11 December 2003)