

RECRUITING THE PUBLIC RELATIONS OFFICER DURING BRITISH COLONIAL MALAYSIA

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This is a study on the growth of public relations in Malaysia based on the advertisements placed in the newspapers during the colonial period. Tracing the historical development serves to make a better understanding about the nature of public relations practice. This paper therefore aims at exploring the development of the public relations profession by studying the advertisements placed in the nationwide newspapers, the *Straits Times* and the *Singapore Free Press & Mercantile Advertiser* from 1939 which included the early advertisement that contained the phrase “public relations” to 1956 a year before the independence of the Federation of Malaysia. An analysis of the advertisements was made to fully understand the historical development of public relations in Malaya or then Malaysia.

The very first advertisement that was identified was on 31 January 1948, which was placed by the Department of Public Relations of the federal government. The British colonial government had placed another four advertisements in 1949 and 1950. A British mining Co. was the first corporation to hire an information & public relations officer in 1956. The results showed some differences and similarities through the analyses of advertisements in the job specification, which included qualification, duties, and salaries. The results revealed that those who had higher education and experience obtained a higher salary. The results also showed that some advertisers (companies/organizations had substituted academic qualifications for working experience) when advertising for their public relations personnel.

Keywords: Public relations, public relations officer, recruiting, independence, and Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

The father and pioneer of American public relations, Edward Bernays (1928) mentioned of new activities that called for a new designation of the practitioners. To him, the specialist propagandist in interpreting ideas and enterprises, and in interpreting the public of new ideas and enterprises to the public, has come to be known by the title of "public relations counsel". The growth of a new profession of public relations was because of an increasingly complex nature of modern life thus resulting to make the actions of one part of the public to understand other sectors of the public. The public relations counsel has many duties and responsibilities. He makes his ideas known to the general public by working with the media and with groups in society. In the development of the practice, the expert public relations may be known as public relations counsel or director or in big companies he is called director or vice-president or even secretary. Sometimes he is known as commissioner or cabinet officer. However, regardless the title he may be called, the functions performed are clear and the advice given has specific bearing on the conduct of the individuals or groups with whom he is working.

The developments and changes have made the world smaller: changes such as globalization, communication technology, information technology, and other phenomena guarantee that people will be influenced almost everywhere by events anywhere in this world. These developments have created great opportunities and several challenges for public relations practitioners. The current role of public relations with the social crises and present issues was never expected years ago. The role of "public relations practitioners" is complex and sensitive. It is no longer primarily a communicator. The practitioners must know the functions and activities of their organizations, know the happenings inside and outside their organizations, must behave as relationship builder who tries to handle and prevent expected problems, and expected to bring usable facts, objectivity, and awareness into the decision-making process. Practitioners must also have good skills in public speaking and writing; having the necessary experience to play a significant role in the development of their organizations (Ahmad, 2010).

The question uppermost is how public relations has developed over the years. Each country has its own history to record the growth of public relations. Some countries have seen public relations developing after the second world war (Bentley & Wehmeier, 2009) while other countries have shown evidence of public relations being practiced as a profession and as an occupation before the war (L'Etang, 2007).

There are many possibilities to study the historical growth of public relations. One is to have an interview with veteran practitioners and asking them to narrate the events of the past. The second course is to peruse the documents in the library or in the archives to have an idea of the practice in the past. One is not been able to discern the growth of public relations skills and expertise unless a historical approach is conducted to understand such a phenomenon. One way, which is seldom done, is to study advertisements placed in the media by organisations that want public relations officers. Public relations practitioners are employed by organisations. And organisations placed advertisements to recruit their public relations practitioners. This study is therefore a study on the advertisements placed by organisations in the newspapers through the years before independence, the first being placed in 1939. By studying various advertisements over the years, one can then be able to have an idea how public relations have developed over the years. The objective of this paper undertakes a study on the historical development of public relations practice by studying advertisements placed in the newspapers over the years before independence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholars have postulated on the consequences that the economic and political systems have on the development of public relations in own countries (Bentele & Wehmeier, 2009). Malaysia is no exception, except that the remark made by Bentele and Wehmeier (2009) did not consider the consequences such social and economic systems have on the colonies. This study on the early period of the growth of public relations in Malaysia was when the country was still under colonial rule. Malaysia's relationship with the British began early in the 17 C but it was later that the British began to gain a foothold in the Malay Peninsula and in the Borneo states of Sabah, Sarawak and in Brunei. Labuan was ceded by the Sultan of Brunei to the British in 1846. Melaka was occupied in 1795 and Captain Francis Light was granted Penang Island by the then Sultan of Kedah in 1786. The Treaty of Pangkor signed in 1874 provided for the stationing of a British Resident in Perak. The Sultan of Selangor accepted British protection in 1874. Gradually three forms of entities existed in Malaya, the Unfederated Malay States (Kedah, Perlis, Kelantan, Terengganu and Johor), the Federated Malay States (Perak, Selangor, Negri Sembilan, and Pahang) and the Straits Settlements (Penang, Melaka and Singapore). Sabah and Sarawak were under different British jurisdiction. The Colony of the Straits Settlements initially placed under the India Office until 1867 was transferred to the Colonial Office. The Colonial Office likewise controls the administration of the Malay States.

From the late eighteenth century Malaysia was under British colonial rule until the Japanese occupation from 1942 to 1945. The British-ruled territories of the Malay Peninsula became the Federation of Malaya after the World War II, and achieved its independence in 1957. The establishment of Malaysia was in 1963 with the addition of Singapore, and Sabah and Sarawak. Singapore left Malaysia in 1965.

Other scholars hold a different view by suggesting that public relations was being practiced in early time. The oldest Malay kingdom has included the northern Malaya greater coalition of kingdoms and Kedah. Thus, the earliest practice of public relations in Malaysia could have originated in these early Malay kingdoms or even from earlier kingdoms that are not been discovered yet (Adnan, 1999). So public relations could have started during the days of the Malacca sultanate given this argument.

Idid postulated the periodization of public relations in Malaysia to be in four phases: (a) the colonial rule period; (b) Independence, to the formation of Malaysia (c) Period of formation of Malaysia till 1986; and (d) the Mahathir Era. The beginning of public relations in Malaysia was before Second World War under British rule when the veteran journalist from Straits Times, George L. Peet, was appointed the first director of the Department of Information in 1939. The outbreak of war in Europe made the British very concerned in maintaining and obtaining the support of their colonies. In 1939 also, the British War Cabinet formed the Ministry of Information to meet the challenges of war in Europe and to beef up its propaganda in other parts of the world. The civil servant Dr. Victor Purcell was appointed Director-General of the Department of Information and Publicity in 1940, subsuming the functions of the former Department of Information functions.

The establishment of the Department of Public Relations on 1 April 1946 by the Malayan Union government was established one year after the end of Japanese occupation, and when the British had assumed control over the country. Among the functions of the Department of Public Relations was to restore the image and reputation of the British, to restore law and Order and to help in the campaigns to grow paddy and other vegetables. The period from Independence to Formation of Malaysia

(1957 to 1963) covered two important stages, namely: the emergency period (1948 to 1960) and the formation of Malaysia; it has also, included the establishment of the Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (Idid, 1998).

In Malaysia, the modern practice of public relations may have started with the introduction of print mass media, particularly the newspaper in the 19th century Straits Settlement. With the establishment of Department of Public Relations on 1st April 1946 in Malaysia by the British following the World War II, the term of public relations probably became increasingly used. The first director of Department of Public Relations M.C. Sheppard admitted of being to some extent ignorant of the public relations practice (Idid, 1992).

A yet different perspective is being taken by other scholars who trace the development of public relations through a historiographical approach. Bentele (2013, 2015), postulated a historical growth of public relations by using a theoretical model, rather than a descriptive narration based on a fact-event public relations historiography. This was in contrast to Hoy (2002) who added periodization as another type but Bentele (2013) disagreed saying that periodization can be subsumed under the fact-event historiography. Using this stratification model, Bentele is of the opinion that the first type of PR as a social system and a later type of PR as an occupational field and as a profession, can be better understood. Given this stratification one could then make a study on the advertisements as a study on the early growth of the second public relations layer with public relations developing as a main occupation and the emergence of specialized departments (Bentele, 2013: pg 255). This argument can then be applied as part of the growth of public relations in Malaysia in consonance with the media system in Malaysia.

The emergence of PR both as a regular vocation and later as a profession, was decisively influenced by the development of mass communication. It can generally be assumed that the expanded activities of the media and their expanded influence had some influence for institutions (e.g. through negative reporting). It has also been shown in the public relations history of U.S that the activities of the muckracking journalism led to the formation of corporate PR and to the establishment of independent PR consultants and PR agencies (Grunig & Hunt, 1984; Hiebert, 1966). (Bentele, 2015: 39). It was Idid (1992) who said that modern public relations ought to be seen with the development of the mass media system. Did the media through its reports lead to the growth of public relations or were there other factors besides the media that lead to the growth of the Malaysian public relations?

It is through the media, then the newspapers, that corporations and government agencies, can address the general public. And through the advertisements companies and government agencies will be able to specify what personnel are part of their organisational requirement. Hence newspapers and advertisements become integral to the growth of public relations in the public sphere.

METHODOLOGY

Newspapers, or specifically the advertisements in the newspapers, became the source through which information was obtained about the personnel required. An analysis was conducted of newspaper advertisements to examine the development of public relations through these advertisements. The advertisements from *The Straits Times* and the Singapore Free Press and Mercantile were drawn from the search engine database of National Library Board-Singapore website, NLB (<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/index.aspx>). Only those advertisements about public

relations positions were selected to collect the data. The searching process in the website was by using keywords in the search engine. The term “public relations” was typed in the search icon, the results showed almost (33,909) advertisements, which covered the whole time period since 1845 so far. After narrowing down the search by selecting the time period from 1939-1957, and chosen the advertisements that includes public relations positions, the results showed six relevant advertisements of all editions of *The Straits Times*. NLB website includes several e-Newspapers that was easy to approach and retrieve information for public and journalists.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The first mention of “Public Relations” in the *Straits Times* was actually made on 29 March, 1939 on page 5 as an announcement alluding to a talk in England to be given by Major General, J. H. Beith, Director of Public Relations at the War office. It was then apparent that a Public Relations Unit was already in existence in the United Kingdom. What was significant was that the term “Public Relations” was already introduced in the Malaysian press way back in 1939. There was no mention of the term or any public relations designation until later in 1948 with the establishment of the Department of Public Relations during the Malayan Union Days.

The first person to hold the post of Director General was M.C. ff Sheppard, better known as Tan Sri Haji Mubin Sheppard. He was then a Malayan Civil Service officer with the British government serving in Malaya and when the Department of Public Relations was set up, young Sheppard was assigned to take over the post.

The Department of Public Relations under Mubin Sheppard was a hive of activities, including recruiting officers in every state and also the setting up of Film Unit. The Department was in charge of several campaigns and managing several duties as part of its mission to restore the confidence of the people toward the British Government that was re-establishing itself after the Japanese occupation (Idid, 1992). To carry out its duties the Public Relations Department had placed advertisements in the *Straits Times*.

A total of six advertisements on public relations were found in *The Straits Times and the Singapore Free Press and Merantile from 1939 to 1957*. These six advertisements were divided in two main categories, the first category was the public sector which included 5 governmental advertisements that were presented by the Department of Public Relations, and the second category was the private sector that included 1 advertisement by the British Mining Co. It can be seen that the dominance of these advertisements was on public sectors advertisements.

It is to be noted that the first advertisement was placed in the *Straits Times* two years after the formation of the public relations department, indicating the seriousness of the British government in the interest of public relations. It can be noted that the sequence of advertisements from the public sector by the Department of Public Relations, which started by only 1 advertisement in 1948, through 3 advertisements in 1949, and 1 advertisement in 1950. On the other hand, British Mining Co. WAS considered the first private company that hired Information & Public Relations Officer in 1956, which was a year before the Independence.

The results of this study showed that there was a difference in job title, and job specification, which included qualification, duties, and salaries. Regarding the job title, three advertisements by the Department of Public Relations included the title of “Public Relations Officer” which WAS published on 31-Jan-1948, 16-Dec- 1949, and 10 Sep-

1949. The other two advertisements by the Department of Public Relations included the title "Publication Officer on 28-Oct-1949, and Senior Public Relations Officer" on 8-May-1950.

Public relations was a highly prized job in the 1940s. The advertisements in 1948 and 1949 listed the candidate to have a diploma from Raffles College, a prestigious college then in Singapore. (Raffles College was later to develop into the University of Malaya in Singapore). It was in the early growth of public relations in Malaya but the management had seen the need for a public relations officer to be well educated and to have a diploma level education.

The advertisements also suggested a well defined hierarchy of organisational position. The post required was a public relations officer and the personnel would then be responsible to the Director of Public Relations. A salary grading meant that the position was career built. There was a period of probation, a time scale and a super scale.

An advertisement placed on 10 September, 1949 mentioned of a probationary public relations officer on a salary scale of RM180 – RM200, and then moving up to the grade of Time scale of \$240 to \$450.

A Publication Officer was also needed in the Public Relations department but the salary scale was much higher than the Public Relations Officer. (28 Oct 1949) But the job required a local born possessing a diploma from Raffle College. Experience in publicity and advertisement was required. The salary was from \$425 -\$750.

The Public relations officer's post was also of certain grade. An advertisement on 31 Jan. 1948 mentioned of a post for a Public Relations officer Grade 1 on a salary scale of \$300x15- -\$420. The position required a person with a Raffles College Diploma, and be able to speak Malay and know government routine. The duty required was, among others, to distribute educational films within the country and outside. In the absence of a diploma, a 1 St Class Cambridge School Certificate was required but the salary would be \$200-A-280.

The advertisement on 16 December, 1949 wanted a public relations officer (Chinese) who could be able to read Chinese. The service grade for the officer appointed was from Probationary (\$180x10-\$200); Time Scale (\$240 x 10-300/Bar/315x15400-\$400) and Super scale (\$470x20-500). A cost of living allowance and other allowances would be provided.

One can also infer from the advertisements the existence of departments of public relations in Malaya. The highest ranked officer held the rank of Director, Department of Public Relations. The post advertised was a public relations officer. Within the Department of Public Relations were various public relations officers able to carry out their jobs in Malay and Chinese. There was also a Publications Officer in charge of distributing educational films.

The results showed also, that three of these advertisements did not indicate any "duties and responsibilities" for the practitioners. These advertisements contained two from Department of public relations on 16-Dec-1949 and 10 Sep-1949, and one from the private sector for the British Mining Corporation on 24-Aug-1956. In addition, the advertisement by Department of Public Relations for Public Relation Officer on 31-Jan-1948, indicated that those who higher education and experience will get higher salary.

However, regarding the educational qualification, two advertisements by Department of Public Relations on 31-Jan-1948, and 28-Oct-1949 required Raffles diploma holders. Another two advertisements the Department of Public Relations on 16-Dec-1949, and 10-Sep- 1949 required Grade I school Certificate. The advertisement by British Mining

Corporation on 24-Aug-1956 required Good School Certificate. Finally, regarding the advertisement by Department of Public Relations for Senior Public Relations Officer on 8-May-1950, mentioned only working experience and not specifying any academic qualification.

The advertisement by the Mining Corporation showed that tin mining was a big activity. It should be required that way back in 1919 a company called the Lampeh British Mining Corporation was one of the biggest corporations in then Malaya. The company did not do well and was struck off the Register of Companies in 1934. So true to the findings in later years, public relations positions were established in big companies. The advertisement therefore reflected that the position of a public relations was needed by a big mining company catering for the East Coast. The candidate required was Malay speaking with a good School Certificate, drawing a salary scale between \$700 to \$900 per month.

CONCLUSION

The current study provided a better understanding in the development of public relations positions by tracing the staffing requirements in public relations departments in newspapers advertisements. Tracing the development of public relations is helpful to understand the role of public relations.

It can be noted that many factors have contributed to the development of public relations in Malaysia such as: (1) the development in qualifications and requirements of public relations positions through the years prior independence has contributed to the development of public relations as a profession; (2) the change of both political and economical situation in Malaysia has brought an influence on the development and practice of public relations.

Studying advertisements on public relations has given an insight into the organisations that had placed such requirements. They gave an indication of the salary structure, some job specifications and suggested a career path for the practitioners who occupied the positions. Public relations was emerged as an occupation way back in 1939 but was really acknowledged in 1946.

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APPENDIX

31-Jan-1948

APPLICATIONS are invited from locally born Raffles Graduates for the post of Public Relations Officer, Grade I, Department of Public Relations. Candidate must have a good personality, a good knowledge of Malay and preferably a knowledge of Government routine.

The successful candidate will be on three years contract on the salary scale of \$300-A15-\$420 subject to a probationary period of three months in the first instance. His duties will include the Supervision of Distribution of Educational Films and he will be responsible for correspondence with groups connected with the Production and Distribution of Educational Films both within Malaya and in other countries.

Applications from candidates who do not possess Raffles Diplomas but who hold class 1 school certificates will be considered but in case of such appointments the salary scale will be \$200-A-\$280.

Apply with copies of recent testimonials to P.O. Box 1037, Kuala Lumpur.

16-Dec-1949

NOTICE

APPLICATIONS from Federal Citizens or persons eligible for Federal Citizenship between the ages of 20 to 30 are invited for the appointment of probationary Public Relations Officer (Chinese) on the salary scale:

Probationer—\$180x10-200;

Timescale—\$240x10-300/Bar/315x15-450;

Superscale—\$470x20-550.

In addition C.O.L.A. and other allowances at current rates are payable.

Candidates must hold the Grade I Cambridge School Certificate with credit in English, but preference will be given to holders of the Diploma of Raffles College in Arts. Candidates should also have a knowledge of Chinese script up to the standard required for a pass in the Junior Middle School together with a good knowledge of two Chinese dialects.

Application in writing should reach the Director, Department of Public Relations, P.O. Box No. 1037, Kuala Lumpur not later than the 23rd December, 1949.

28-Oct-1949

APPLICATIONS are invited from Federal Citizens or persons eligible for citizenship for appointment as Publications Officer to supervise the publishing and distribution sections of the Department of **Public Relations**, on the salary scale of \$425x25-750 p.m. plus C.O.L.A.

Candidates must possess Raffles Diploma or equivalent or higher qualifications. Executive experience in publicity and advertising work is essential.

Applications in writing should reach the Director, Department of **Public Relations**, P.O. Box 1037, Kuala Lumpur, not later than 8th November, 1949.

10-Sep-1949

NOTICE

APPLICATIONS from Malays between the ages of 20 to 30 are invited for the appointment of probationary **Public Relations Officer** on the salary scale: Probationer—\$180/10-300; Timescale—\$240x10-300/315x15-450.

Candidates must possess Grade 1 School Certificate with credit in English, but preference will be given to holders of Raffles College Diploma.

Application in writing should reach the Director, Department of **Public Relations**, P.O. Box 1037, Kuala Lumpur, not later than 15th October, 1949.

8-May-1950

PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS

DEPARTMENT OF **PUBLIC RELATIONS**,

Federation of Malaya.

Applications are invited from experienced Journalists for the post of Senior **Public Relations Officer** in charge of the Press Section of the Department on a salary scale of \$425x25-750 p.m. plus Expatriate Pay (if eligible) and cost of living and rent allowances at current rates.

Applicants must have had not less than 15 years' journalistic experience of which not less than 5 years has been as a Sub-Editor or Editor.

The appointment is initially on a 3 year contract with prospect of emplacement on the pensionable establishment at the end of that period.

Application, in writing, with copies of testimonials should reach the Director, Dept. of **Public Relations**, P.O. Box No. 1037, Kuala Lumpur not later than 12th May, 1950.

24-Aug-1956

BRITISH MINING CO. Requires Malay Information & **Public Relations Officer** for East Coast Mine. Applicants must possess good School Certificate with Credit in English, be of good personality and appearance; capable of translating fluently from English into Malay verbally and in writing (Jawi). Some journalistic experience would be an asset. Age not over 35. Three year initial contract: free quarters, light, water: Salary dependent on qualifications and experience in the range of \$700 to \$900 per month. Apply Box A4593 S.T.