

Perception of Government Public Relations Practice by the People in Sabah: A Public Opinion Survey

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This survey focuses on how the people in Sabah perceived Malaysia's governmental public relations practice and their perception of the government based upon it. It includes how the different types of mass media and its content that they expose themselves to have influence their image of the nation administration as well as its policies and implementations. Also included are how their own experience with the various government agencies has impacted their views with regard to those authorities specifically and the government generally. Method used for this public opinion survey is the random sampling technique. Respondents selected were 600 people based on four categories. All of them were located in and around Kota Kinabalu and chosen randomly. For the interview a structured questionnaire was prepared and pilot tested on 40 respondents with ten from each category. This survey finding further revealed that the media the public chose and exposed themselves to, do impact their perception of the government and its public relations, positively or negatively, depending on its content. However, the survey found that the impact was rather moderate with about half of the respondents declaring positively and the remainder not so positive and a few negatively.

Keywords: Democracy, government, government public relations, media, opinion survey, public opinion

In today's world where practicing a democratic form of government is considered a mandatory practice for nations, neglecting democracy can be perceived as unfit to govern. Therefore, an effective and ethical government public relations practice (GPR) must become a necessity and not mere luxury anymore. In the past government public relations is much maligned and perceived to be wasteful and self-serving.

Now, government public relations are proven to provide several essential services that can be utilised to advance the substantive mission of governments and its agencies in ways that save money, time and effort. Hence, in similar manner as budgeting, human resource, strategic planning, and performance assessment, public relations must be included in the contemporary governments' toolbox. This is because currently it is believed that by using unorthodox yet cost effective measures, public relations professionals can enhance the utilisation of governmental goods and services, promote voluntary compliance with new policies and legislations, improve media relations, and strengthen the standing of the

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government and its agencies with the people at large. Therefore, in Malaysia, public relations in government should have a natural and welcoming role as good governance reflect sensitivity to public opinion and the belief that it work best when citizens are well-informed.

On the other hand, Baskin, Aronoff and Lattimore (1997) believed that the most basic function of government public relations are to help define and achieve government objectives and programmes, to enhance government responsiveness and services, and to provide the public with sufficient information to permit self-government. It includes promoting cooperation and confidence between citizens and their government. This in turn requires government to be accessible, accountable, consistent, and to uphold integrity which is again the top task of government public relation (GPR).

Simultaneously, today governments are expected to provide high quality services that citizens appreciate or value; advocate increasing managerial autonomy, particularly by reducing central agency controls; demand, measure and reward both organisational and individual performance; recognise the importance of providing the human and technological resources that managers require to meet their performance targets, and is receptive to competition and remains open-minded about which public responsibilities should be performed by civil servants as opposed to the private sector (Mohd Hamdan, 2010, pg 59).

According to the Department of Information the philosophical basis of Malaysia's GPR and communication is based on the Federal Constitution. The Constitution guarantees the citizens certain fundamental rights while prescribing their duties and obligations to the state and society. Even non-citizens have their rights, for example, equality before the law (<https://www.kpwkm.gov.my>).

As Malaysia follows a system of government that is based on democratic principles that respect the rights of individuals, including their opinions, the government is by popular consent. Under a system where general elections are held every five years, the government has to seek a fresh mandate from the people when it wishes to be returned. As such, any government in Malaysia must justify its policies and actions to the people and have a positive image if it wants to retain its position. This means any government in Malaysia must practice good government public relations with two-way communication and interactive relationship to win the heart and mind of the people. Further, this means government public relations Officers (GPRO) must be a media expert in terms of usage and relationship.

In Malaysia the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture (MICCM) operates and co-ordinates all government's mass media activities, particularly through its three main departments – Broadcasting, Information and the National Film Board (Filem Negara). In fact, the MICCM is responsible in planning, implementation is responsible in planning, implementation and coordination on all policies related to three vital sectors; namely information, communications and culture. The vision of MICCM is to be the pioneer in promoting the 1 Malaysia Concept based on the National Principles to achieve a harmonious and gracious nation. The Ministry's main aspiration is to enhance Malaysia as a global ICT hub in the region, to ensure information from all sources of media is accurate and precise and to preserve thus promotes Malaysia's heritage and culture to the World (<https://www.kpwkm.gov.my>).

In most government campaigns the mass media are fully utilised. Included are radio and television as well as newspapers and magazines. Further included are mobile units of

the Department of Information who not only give talks all over the country but also organise shows, exhibitions and printed literature. However, according to a former Director General of the Department of Information Mohd Kaus Salleh (1990) the mass media played a crucial role in helping the government to explain to the people. Also, the media shape and condition the attitudes, beliefs and values of the people. Thus, mass media are an essential ally of any government wanting to cultivate and sustain their positive image and position. Without adequate positive media coverage any government may not be optimally visible and having a good image.

Today, the social media is also fully utilised. In fact, to get to the young the social media have become an effective channel. In the last two elections one of the main reason for the opposition political parties doing very well was attributed to their effective use of social media. Thus, the need for GPRO to be computer and Internet savvy is imperative.

Therefore, with the media very rapidly becoming increasingly sophisticated with better penetration and pervasiveness as well as being able to be customised, personalised and interactive their influence are boosted tremendously making it a boon and a bane for public relations professionals, especially for those serving governments. In a government practicing good governance it surely would be a boon while for those working for less than democratic it would be bane for it would be almost impossible to contain or manage information. This is particularly so for the social media. The ability to work well with the media and to be an expert at utilising social media is an increasing challenge for government public relations anywhere in the world. Therefore, this survey includes examining the impact of mass media on GPR as perceived by the Sabah respondents.

Methodology, Demographics, Objectives and Concepts

The methodology used for this study is random survey of which an opinion poll is conducted. It is a survey of public opinion from a particular sample. This opinion poll is designed to represent the opinions of a selected population of which the respondents are chosen at random. An interpersonal interviews approach is conducted using a series of questions and then extrapolating generalities in a ration within confidence intervals. This method is used because it best suits situations where not much information is available about the population and data collection can be efficiently conducted on randomly distributed items, or where the cost of sampling is small enough to make efficiency less important than simplicity. The principle of simple random sampling is that every object has the same probability of being chosen. However, for the purpose of this study biases associated with responses, wording of questions and coverage were taken into account.

The survey was conducted with the help of 50 students taking the Government Public Relations course in the Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Heritage, Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS). Together with the writer they have helped formulate the questionnaires and pre test it with the four categories of respondents numbering 40 persons with 20 males and 20 females. Based on the pre-test, the questionnaires were fine tuned to meet the set objectives. The Statistical Packages for Social Sciences or SPSS was used to analyse the survey findings.

For this study 600 respondents in around Kota Kinabalu were chosen at random. They were divided into 300 males and 300 females and sub-categorised into 150 students of

higher learning, 150 civil servants, 150 private sectors personnel and 150 self-employed. About 72 per cent of the respondents were Malays and indigenous people, 15.5 per cent were Chinese and 12.5 per cent considered as others which include Indians, Eurasians, etc. In terms of age, 37.6 per cent (207 people) of the respondents were between 18 to 24 years old, 38 per cent (230 persons) were between 26 to 40 years old, 20.6 per cent (125 persons) were between 41 to 60 years old, and 3.8 per cent (23 persons) was above 61 per cent years.

Relating to income, 35.1 per cent (107 persons) earns below RM1000, 41.9 per cent (254 persons) earns between RM1001 to RM3000, 18.3 per cent (111 persons) earns between RM3001 to RM5000, 3.5 per cent (21 persons) earns between RM5001 to RM10,000, and 1.2 per cent (7 persons) earns above RM10,000.

Religious wise, 58.3 per cent (347 persons) are Muslims, 17.7 per cent (107 persons) are Christians, 15.8 per cent are Buddhists, and 8.3 per cent are considered others which include Taoism, animisms, etc. As for residential location, 42.2 per cent (250 persons) stays in urban areas, 31.7 per cent (192 persons) in housing estates, and 26.1 per cent (158 persons) in rural areas.

The objectives of the opinion survey are to determine (i) the impact of media exposure on the perception of government and its public relations practice (GPR); (ii) the credibility of the mass media and its impact on respondents' perception of the government and its GPR; (iii) the influence of GPRO on public opinion; (iv) the level of GPRO success on creating and sustaining the positive image of the government; and (v) the level of GPR success in explaining Vision 2020 and 1Malaysia to Malaysians.

Some of the key concepts that are needed to be explained for this survey include democracy, government, government public relations, media, opinion survey, public opinion and theories relating to public relations and change.

Democracy is a form of government in which all citizens of age (Malaysia 21 years old) can vote their representatives to parliament or state assembly during the national, state or by-elections. All eligible citizens participate equally, either directly or indirectly through elected representatives, in the proposal, development, and creation of laws. Thus, it is a form of government by the people in which the supreme power is vested in the citizens and exercised directly by them or by their elected agents under a free electoral system.

A government is the system by which a nation or community is organised, governed or administered. Today, it also refers to the particular executive in control of a state at a given time. Furthermore, *government* is occasionally used in English as a synonym for *governance*. Government normally consists of legislators, administrators, and arbitrators. It is the means by which state policy is enforced, as well as the mechanism for determining the policy of the state. A form of government, or form of state governance, refers to the set of political systems and institutions that make up the organisation of a specific government. Government of any kind currently affects every human activity in many important ways. For this reason, political scientists generally argue that government should not be studied by itself; but should be studied along with anthropology, economics, history, philosophy, science, and sociology. Variant of government is constitutional monarchy; a system of governance that has a monarch, but one whose powers are limited by law or by a formal constitution, such as that in Malaysia.

Government public relations (GPR) like all PR activities is to build a reputation earning the understanding, goodwill and support as well as influence and sustain public opinion and behaviour that benefits the government or organisation concerned. GPR generally involves a planned and sustained effort with an integrated and dialogic communication plus an interactive approach to establish the desired effect without compromising public interest. Hence, GPR can be defined as “The art and science of reputation management utilising integrated, interactive, dialogic and ethical communication and activities to enhance government’s image and winning citizens supports based on beneficial relationships, sustainability and public interest” (Mohd Hamdan, 2010, pg 24). Today’s GPR should not only be an image maker or information source or mouthpiece but also government “ears” and “eyes” and be able to advice regarding public opinion.

Media in this study refers to communication channels through which information, news, entertainment, education, data, or promotional messages are disseminated to the general public or targeted audiences. It includes every broadcasting and narrowcasting medium like newspapers, magazines, television, radio, billboards, direct mail, telephone, fax, and internet or social media. Media is essential public relations avenues through which messages are transmitted to target publics using appropriate channels.

Media is the plural of medium and can take a plural or singular verb, depending on the sense intended. Also, it refers to all the organizations, such as television, radio, and newspapers that provide news and information for the public, or the people who do this work. In this study, social media refers to social interaction among people in which they create, share or exchange information and ideas in virtual communities and networks. Here, the social media is recognised to differ from conventional media in many ways, including quality, reach, frequency, usability, immediacy and permanence.

Opinion in this study refers to views or judgements formed about matters commonly considered to be subjective which is not necessarily based on knowledge or proof but rather the result of emotion or interpretation of facts. In this study opinion can also refer to a belief or judgement that rests on grounds inadequate to produce complete certainty or a personal view, attitude or appraisal. An opinion is not a fact. This is because opinions are either not falsifiable, or the opinion has not been proven or verified. If it later becomes proven or verified, it is no longer an opinion, but a fact.

Public opinion is the aggregate of individual attitudes or beliefs held by respondents or target publics about a particular issue or topic. The tide of public opinion becomes very crucial during campaigns or elections and raging controversies. For the purpose of this study public opinion refers to the aggregate of opinions held by respondents on the selected topics. Public opinion poll refers to the measurement of the respondents’ beliefs or feelings of selected issues or topics. The measures are obtained by interviewing respondents from selected population using chosen sampling methods. Usually a standardised questionnaire is prepared for the purpose.

For the purpose of this study the public information specialist theory of public relations is used. According to this theory the primary objective of public relations is to disseminate information. Basically it is one-way communication, source to receiver, and truth is crucial. It is generally practiced by governments, and business social organisations.

Another communication theory that is usually associated with government public relations practice is the change theory. For modern society it is believed that change occurs as the consequences of social interaction, education and communication. It is believed that the changes can either be positive or negative. Generally, the positive outcome is because of effective planning and implementation while the negative ones are considered as unintended consequences or unexpected side effects due to ineffective planning and implementation.

Another communication theory that is being utilised for this study is the Uses and Gratifications Theory (UGT). This theory explains people usage of media for their needs and gratifications. It states what people do with media rather than what media do to them. The UGT seeks to understand why and how people actively select specific media to satisfy specific needs. It focuses on “what do people do with the media. This is contradictory to the magic bullet theory which states the audience is passive. According to UGT, it is not so. People utilises the media for their specific needs. Thus it has a user or audience-centred approach. It believes even for interpersonal communication people refer to the media for the topic they discuss with themselves. They gain more knowledge and that is knowledge is obtained by using media for reference.

The UGT also suggests that audiences activities ranges. Thomas E. Ruggiero (2009) in his report, “Uses and Gratifications Theory in the 21st Century”, indicates that, “different individuals tend to display different types and amounts of activity in different communication settings and at different times in the communication process”. According to him this would be dependent on what level income, stress and attachment to media.

Even though the UGT focuses on the audiences and neglect to consider the power of the media, this study noted that: the media have the power to shape and direct human lives, media houses are profit oriented, are affected by ownership and control, the content is determined by media owners and audiences are subjected to their views.

UGT has a heuristic value today as it gives us a perspective through which a number of ideas and theories about media choice, consumption, and even impact can be viewed. Also, it include gratifications sought (GS) versus gratifications obtained (GO) result. However, the GS that audiences seek do not always result in GO. This study seeks to know what occurs in the Sabah context.

Consumers' Media Habits

Generally the respondents in and around Kota Kinabalu nearly fully expose themselves to the mass media that are available to them. Their most favourite mass media is television with 92.4 per cent saying that they watch TV with 7.6 per cent said they do not. This is closely followed by the social media with 92.3 per cent and 7.7 per cent not so. In third place are newspapers with 79.5 per cent reading it daily and 20.5 per cent do not. Closely in fourth position is radio with 78.5 per cent listening to it and the rest ignoring it.

In terms of the most believed or credible mass media by respondents the newspapers top the rest with 23.6 per cent stating so. This is followed by television with 22.4 per cent, radio with 21.3 per cent and lastly with social media with 16.8 per cent.

In terms of moderately believed the social media had the most mentioned with 70.6 per cent. This is followed by radio with 66.7 per cent, newspapers with 66.7 per cent and television with 55.6 per cent. The mass media that is least believed is television with 20.3

per cent of the respondents stating it. This is followed by the social media with 16.8 per cent not trusting it, radio with 12 per cent and newspapers with 10.4 per cent.

According to the respondents the most influential mass media is the social media with 41.1 per cent believing so. This is followed by television with 35.6 per cent, newspapers 14.4 per cent and radio at 8.9 per cent. The finding showed that the mass media impact on the public in the Kota Kinabalu area generally is not very significant as the highest media only scored at 41.1 per cent in relation to influence. This is despite the fact that nearly all the respondents exposed themselves to many forms of mass media.

Regarding the differences in relations to gender preferences towards the media it is rather varied. For example, the percentages for most believing in the newspapers between male and female showed that the difference is 14.1 per cent. That is, 24.6 per cent of the males strongly believe in the newspapers as oppose to the women with only 10.5 per cent. As for moderately believing in the newspapers 34 per cent of the female said so as compared to 31.6 per cent of the males. In terms of disbelieving the newspapers 6.3 per cent females claimed so as oppose for 4.1 per cent males.

In terms of most believing in radio the differences between male and female is minimal with only 1.8 per cent percent variation. That is, female at 10.6 per cent and male at 8.8 per cent. For moderately believing in the radio the differences between male and female is also minimal. That is, 34.2 per cent for female and 33.2 per cent for male. It is almost similar for disbelieving in the radio with 6.1 per cent for male and 6 per cent for male. Regarding television, the differences between male and female for strongly believing in it is minimal, that is 10.6 per cent for female and 10 per cent male. The difference for moderately believing in television is also minimal with 30.6 per cent female and 25.5 per cent male. It is also almost similar for the television disbelievers, with 11.6 per cent for male and 8.8 per cent female.

The differences for very strongly believing in the social media between male and female are not very significant. That is 9 per cent for male and 6 per cent for female. Regarding moderately believing the social media the female had 38.3 per cent and the male at 33 per cent. As for disbelieving the social media, the differences are also minimal. That is, 6.5 per cent for female and 6.3 per cent for male.

The mass media that is perceived as very pro government is television with half the respondents claiming it. May be this is related as to why television is having the lowest credibility with 20.3 per cent not believing it. The newspapers are considered the second most pro government mass media with 34.2 per cent of the respondents perceiving it, followed by social media with 8.6 per cent and radio at 7.1 per cent.

The mass media that is considered as very anti government is the social media with 78.9 per cent believing so. Second position fell to newspapers with 10.2 per cent, third place to television with 8.6 per cent and finally radio 2.3 per cent. With the exception of social media which is perceived as very anti government the rest are considered as being neutral or pro government.

Yet on the question of the mass media that is most neutral to government the social media held pole position with 58.4 per cent. It is followed by radio with 22.4 per cent, television with 11.4 per cent and newspapers with 7.8 per cent.

The mass media that is considered as most suitable for government communication or channels for disseminating its information is television with 39.3 per cent thought so. This is followed by newspapers at 30.9 per cent, social media at 24.1 per cent and radio with 5.8 per cent. Television is most suited for disseminating government information as 50 per cent of the respondents believed that it is the most pro government media.

As to the top media to access government information the social media has the highest score with 55.1 per cent. One of the main factors for this is that all the government agencies have their own homepage and that many of the top government officials have their own homepage or Twitter. Even Prime Minister Dato' Seri Najib is active on Twitter and Facebook. The Deputy Prime Minister and the other top politicians including from the oppositions are also very active in the social media which include Facebook and Twitter. This finding showed that it is worth for the government agencies and officials including politicians to make the extra effort to improve their homepage as well as updating it as frequently as possible and making it more attractive.

The second most accessed media for government information is television with 21.1 per cent said so. Yet, television is claimed by half of the respondents as the most pro government media as well most suited to disseminate government information as said by 39.3 per cent of them. The newspapers are used by 18.8 per cent of respondents to obtain government information as compared to radio with only 5.9 per cent. As radio is one of the government instruments to reach rural folks as well as the poorer citizens more studies should be conducted to discover how it can be further enhanced to reach their target listeners. In fact, the capabilities of all the government media must be improved to enhance their performance in reaching their beneficiary publics as their usage is rather low or unsatisfactory. The media that most create a positive image of the government is the newspapers as said by 31.8 per cent of the respondents. This is followed by television with 22.9 per cent, social media with 20.3 per cent and radio with 19.3 per cent. Looking at the percentages it is clear that the media generally has not created a positive impression of the government.

In fact, the media is generally considered as more neutral in forming a positive image of the government. The social media is perceived as the most neutral with 61 per cent. This is followed by the newspapers with 53.6 per cent and radio and television with 53 per cent each.

In terms of the media creating a negative image of the government it is radio and television that scored the highest with 22.6 per cent each. The social media scored 19.1 per cent while the newspapers received 15.1 per cent. It is interesting to note that radio and television is considered the most in contributing to the negative image of the government as both are perceived as crucial media in delivering national information and policies. One can say that because both are considered as vital government propaganda tools before the coming of the social media. Also, before private radio and television were introduced the government had full monopoly over them. However, more research is needed to verify its status as an important media for the government and how it can improve its effectiveness as an instrument for state communication.

Respondents Perception of GPR

Of the 600 respondents only 29.5 per cent or 179 respondents said that they have come into contact with government public relations officers (GPRO). The rest or 421 (60.5 per cent) respondents admitted of not having any contact or experience with GPRO.

Nevertheless, 9.1 per cent of the respondents perceived that their experiences dealing with GPRO as very satisfying, while 16.2 per cent felt it as satisfying. However, a significant number of the respondents or 41.1 per cent claimed it as satisfying while the rest or 33.7 per cent said not satisfying.

On the effectiveness of GPRO most of the respondents or 39.1 per cent perceived that they are less effective as compared to 36.6 saying that they are effective. Of the remainder, 15.2 per cent said that the GPRO are ineffective and 8.1 per cent believed they are very effective. It can be noted that slightly less than half of the respondent believed that the GPRO is effective while just more than half of the respondents felt that it is ineffective. Hence, the urgent need to take the appropriate steps to improve the effectiveness of GPRO. This includes their media relations.

On GPRO experiences, 42.6 per cent claimed that they are not so experience while 42.4 per cent believed that they have the required experiences. Of the rest, 11 per cent felt that the GPRO are not experience while 4 per cent perceived them as very experience.

On GPRO training, 47.4 per cent felt that they are trained, 37.8 per cent not so trained, 8.6 per cent not trained at all while 5.3 per cent as well trained.

On Malaysia's GPRO being proactive, 47.2 per cent felt that they are so while 40.9 per cent said they are less proactive. Of the rest, 7.9 per cent claimed that the GPRO as not proactive and the 3 per cent as being very proactive.

On the ability of the GPRO to enhance the relationship between the people and the government, 45.5 per cent felt that they have succeeded while 37 per cent believed as less successful. Only 13.4 per cent claimed as not successful and 3.1 per cent as being very successful.

On the ability of Malaysia's GPRO to enhance communication between the government and the people, 44.4 per cent believed that they have been successful while 35.6 per cent felt that they have not been so successful. The remaining 14 per cent said not successful at all and 5 per cent claimed as very successful and 1 per cent unsure.

Regarding Malaysia's GPRO ability to convey important government information and policies to the people, 39.8 per cent of the respondents believed that they have been successful and 35.3 per cent less successful. Of the rest, 13.5 per cent felt not successful and 10.4 per cent as very successful and 1 per cent as unsure.

On the ability of Malaysia's GPRO to influence public opinion, 43.7 per cent believed that they have been successful while 37.5 per cent said less successful. In fact, 12.9 per cent felt that they have been very successful. Only 5 per cent claimed failure and 0.9 per cent as unsure.

Regarding the success of Malaysia's GPRO to inculcate the spirit of 1Malaysia to Malaysians, 39.1 per cent of the respondents said that they have been successful while 37.1 per cent claimed not so successful. Only 11.7 per cent of the respondents felt not successful at all while 11.1 per cent believed as very successful and 1 per cent unsure.

Relating to the capability of Malaysia's GPRO to convey development messages to the people, 35.5 per cent of the respondents felt that they have succeeded and 44.6 per cent as not so successful. On the other hand, 10.7 per cent suggested that the GPRO have been very successful and 8.3 per cent as failed and 0.9 per cent unsure.

Pertaining to the success of Malaysia's GPRO to convey Vision 2020 messages to the people 40.8 per cent of the respondents believed that they are and 39.3 per cent as not so successful. The rest or 9.9 per cent felt that they have been very successful, 9.1 consider them failure and 0.9 per cent as hazy.

On the success of Malaysia's GPRO to sustain the positive image of the government 42.2 per cent of the respondents believed so while 35.3 per cent as not so successful. The remaining 11.9 per cent claimed they have been very successful and 9.6 per cent as unsuccessful while 1 per cent unclear.

Perception of GPR Based on Occupation and Status

Based on occupation and status the study found that those working in government and private sectors believed that GPRO are effective, each at 41.3 per cent. The rest of them are unsure or give no response. Thus, it can be said that more than half of them felt that the GPRO is less than effective and that there is the need to improve their effectiveness and visibility.

The perception is lower for the self-employed and students. Only 38 per cent of the employed opine that the GPRO is effective and students with only 35 per cent. The rest of them say they are not clear or do not response. Thus, the GPRO have to work harder with more creativity to enhance their effectiveness with the two groups.

In term of experiences, 54 per cent of student respondents opine that the GPRO have the experience, 51 per cent of government respondents say so, 40.6 per cent of the private sectors believing similarly and the self-employed with 38 per cent. Again it can be said that on the average less than half of the respondents feel that the GPRO have the required experiences to make them effective PR practitioners.

Relating to GPRO being well trained 53.4 per cent of the government respondents feel that they are well trained while the rest say not so. For the private sector 42 per cent opine the GPRO are well trained and the rest say not well trained. Surprisingly, 56.6 per cent of the self-employed perceive the GPRO as well trained as the remainder not so. The students do not give any response to this question.

Regarding GPRO being proactive the response generally are almost similar for all four groups with students opining 50.6 per cent, government respondents 50 per cent, private sectors 42 per cent and the self-employed at 48 per cent. The finding clearly reveals that GPRO need to be more proactive in conducting their duties as PRO.

Relating to GPRO ability to enhance communication between the government and its people the response to all four groups are almost similar with the self-employed the highest at 50.6 per cent and the private sector lowest at 42.6 per cent. In between are government respondents at 49.3 per cent and students at 46.6 per cent. Again, the GPRO abilities are seen as very average in their effort to increase communication between the government and the people.

On the ability of the GPRO to communicate important government information to the people the rating get lower, especially with the government and private sector respondents. That is, 32.6 per cent for government respondents and 38 per cent private sector. For the self-employed it is at 48.4 per cent and students at 46.6 per cent.

The ability of the GPRO to convey development messages is generally considered average with the government respondents giving 63.7 per cent. This is followed by 44.6 per cent of the self-employed, 43.3 per cent of the private sectors and 41.4 per cent of the students.

Almost similar result is offered for the GPRO competency in communicating Malaysia's Vision 2020. As for the government respondents 63.7 per cent claim so. This is followed by the private sector respondents with 48 per cent believing that the GPRO can succeed in conveying the Vision 2020 messages, the students and the self-employed at 46 per cent each.

Relating to GPRO ability to enhance relationship between the government and its citizens the finding is also almost similar for the four groups with the government respondents as the highest with 56.6 per cent and the private sectors lowest at 43.3 per cent. In between are students with 48 per cent and self-employed at 44 per cent. Again the finding shows that the GPRO have much to do to enhance relationship between government and citizens.

Regarding the capability to inculcate the spirit of 1Malaysia, 52 per cent of the self-employed believe that the GPRO can succeed to do so. This is followed by 46.7 per cent of students feeling so, 43.3 per cent of government respondents and 39.3 per cent of the private sector respondents. Even though the ability of the GPRO to inculcate the spirit of 1Malaysia is perceived as less than average this does not mean it is not accepted by Malaysians. What it means is that the GPRO have to work harder to enhance the acceptance and practice of 1Malaysia.

On the ability of the GPRO to sustain the positive image of the government all four categories do not think much of it. The highest rating for it is stated by the students with 49.3 per cent of them thinking so. This is followed by the self-employed with 42 per cent, the government respondents with 41.3 per cent and lastly the private sector with 38 per cent. This again showed that GPRO have a lot to do to sustain the positive image of the government. On the ability of the GPRO to influence public opinion the evaluation is also moderate.

Of the government respondents 45.4 believe that GPRO can influence the public or citizens. This is followed by the student respondents with 44.5 per cent, self-employed with 43 per cent and the private sectors with 42 per cent. Clearly, GPRO must take heed of its ability to persuade or mould public opinion if it is to be influential with the Prime Minister.

Perception of GPR Practice in Sabah

Government public relations practice in Sabah can be said to be moderate or average with 9.5 per cent saying it is excellent and 41.5 per cent believing it is good. On the other hand, 45 per cent say it is not good enough and 4 per cent as inadequate. Hence, it can be said that GPR practice in Sabah is about average. So, much should be done to enhance GPR practice in Sabah to make it more effective.

Not surprisingly, a significant number of respondents recommended that government officers and especially those in the Information Departments should take more public relations courses to improve their effectiveness. This is recommended by 81.5 per cent of the respondents while 17.6 per cent felt it is not needed and the rest are unsure or indifferent.

Almost similar finding is revealed for Sabah politicians with regard to GPR. Only 9 per cent of the respondents believe that the politician practice of GPR in Sabah is excellent. Slightly less than half of the respondents or 44.6 per cent say that it is good. Of the remaining respondents, 37.5 per cent say it is not good enough while 8.9 per cent opine it as not good at all. Thus, it can be said that politicians in Sabah GPR is only average and thus really need to improve their PR capabilities.

Unsurprisingly, a majority or 82.2 per cent of the respondents urged Sabah politicians to attend courses in public relations while 16.5 per cent said not need and 1.3 per cent unsure.

Comparing GPR practice with PR practice in the private sector, 46.7 per cent of the 600 respondents claim that the government PR practice is more effective compared to 53.3 per cent saying no. Almost similar result is revealed when comparing GPR with PR practice of the non-governmental organisations. That is 43.2 per cent of the respondents believing that GPR practice is more effective than the PR practice of the NGOs with 56.8 per cent claiming no. The comparisons with regard to PR practice effectiveness revealed that GPRO really need to upgrade their expertise and skill to ensure that the government and the public are well serve by them. However, it must be admitted that GPR practice is much more complex than the private and NGOs PR as it serve two masters, which is the government and the public.

Conclusion

Generally, it can be said that the respondents in Kota Kinabalu are exposed to many communication forms and channel of mass media and they do make use of them for information, interactions and entertainments. It proves the USG theory that the respondents seek the various communication channels or media in accordance to their own needs and circumstances. The study also proves that the respondents are not fully influence by the media that they expose themselves to or have chosen to do so. With this, the impact of the media in projecting the government image is not very apparent or significant.

However, the moderate or even minimal effects of the media do not mean that the GPR is not meeting its desired objectives. It can mean that more need to be done to realise the success of the objectives by reviewing the communication or media strategies and selecting the ones with the best chances of meeting the objectives. What is clear is that the GPRO must know their communication channels very well and which are the favourites of their target groups so that the media can be used optimally for the intended publics so that the desired objectives can be achieved.

The study also reveals that the different media have varied impact on the respondents. It depends on why the respondents use it and how they utilise it depending on their needs and circumstances. Also, it have been noted that the different messages can create its individual impact upon the targeted publics. From the study it can be implied that such effect

can occur. So, it is critical for the GPRO to take the appropriate steps for ensuring meeting their objectives.

The study showed that the credibility of the Malaysian mass media is just slightly above average with regards to the respondents' evaluation of it. This can be said to have led to the moderate impact of media exposure on the perception of government and its GPR practice. So, it is very apparent that urgent step should be taken to enhance its credibility and the chances for success. This should include regular evaluation or research to increase the GPRO capabilities.

According to the response of the respondents Malaysia's GPR practice can fall under the category of the public information specialist theory of PR. This is because its primary objectives are to disseminate information from sources (government agencies) to receivers (target publics) which are usually one-way communication or not so interactive while truth is vital if not essential. In Malaysia case, the messages are clear and focus like Vision 2020, 1Malaysia, Transformation Programs and the various policies as well development projects. To ensure the success of these government policies, programs, projects and many more the GPR plans and implementations are usually put in place with the Information Department given the lead and the coordination functions. Both the mass media and interpersonal communication are utilised to ensure their success as well as to sustain in not enhancing the positive image of the government.

Yet, despite the large fund and the expertise put in place the outcome as noted from this study has not been very encouraging. So, there is the need for more evaluations and studies to overcome the poor outcome and to improve the performances of the GPRO. It can include through better training and appropriate experiences for the GPRO. In this effort, the public universities offering communication specialisations should be sought to help in this effort.

This study also proves that the change theory can be very useful in studying the impact of GPR. It is true that in modern society change occurs from social interaction, communication and education. The study can conclude that for government efforts positive outcome generally is due to effective planning and implementation as well as good GPR while negative ones are unintended consequences or unexpected side effects because of poor planning and implementation plus weak PR. Thus, there is the urgent need to improve and strengthen GPR.

Another communication theory that is usually associated with government public relations practice is the change theory. For modern society it is believed that change occurs resulting from social interaction, education and communication and it can either be positive or negative. Generally, the positive outcome is because of effective planning and implementation while the negative ones are considered as unintended consequences or unexpected side effects due to ineffective planning and implementation.

This study further showed that the media and the GPRO do influence public opinion. The study reveals that 12.9 per cent of the respondents believe that the GPRO have been very successful in influencing public opinion while 43.7 per cent feel that it is successful. Only 5 per cent claim GPRO fail to do so and the rest either unsure or no response.

Government PR practice at the Federal or Sabah state level is perceived by the respondents as almost similar in terms of effectiveness and ineffectiveness. That is, with 51

per cent saying it is excellent or good while the rest or 41 per cent feel it is poor or weak. Thus, it is perceived as moderate or average in strength and implementation.

The findings are almost expected because it is generally perceived that the GPR strategies or campaigns are almost all from the Federal level including the funding. Rarely is it perceived that the PR campaigns in Sabah are planned and implemented by the Sabah state government. Hence, it is timely that the state governments in Malaysia should be involved in planning and implementing GPR as well as evaluating their performances or achievements even though they are conceived at the Federal level.

One of the most positive findings of the study is that more than 80 per cent of the respondents recommended that the GPRO and even politicians are given more training and experiences so that they can be more effective in their duties or tasks. This shows that most of the respondents realised the importance of effective and ethical plus interactive GPR practice for Malaysia. So, it is hoped that the relevant government agencies take heed of the respondents' recommendations as it is not only PR but also very true as their voice is essential for successful GPR.

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