



60 years of excellence

HISTORY OF

INSTITUTE OF PUBLIC RELATIONS MALAYSIA

by Professor Dato' Sri Dr Syed Arabi Iddid

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INTRODUCTION

The Institute of Public Relations Malaysia (IPRM) was established to advance public relations interests in Malaysia. Its formation in March 1962 came when public relations as a concept and definition was relatively unknown to many.

The development of public relations in Malaysia must be seen within the context of the nation's metamorphoses. The country has transformed politically from Malaya to Malaysia and economically from a newly independent country to a fast-developing country, moving towards industrialisation, focusing on technology, and playing an essential role on the global stage. Its development should also be seen as to how it has impacted the role of universities and higher learning institutions in preparing appropriate education for future graduates entering the industry. Such changes brought direct and indirect impacts on the practice of public relations.



THE PUBLIC RELATIONS SCENE

It was reported that five significant events shaped the country's public relations development (Idid, 2005). The first was before the advent of the Second World War, the second after the War until Malaya achieved its Independence in 1957, the third was until the formation of Malaysia in 1963 to 1980, and finally, the growth era from 1980 to 2005. I would add another significant phase after 2005 that saw a rapid transformation in the country and globally regarding technology development that impacted public relations as a profession. Each corresponding period provided its share of challenges and demands in shaping the future direction and development of public relations in the country and IPRM itself.

The earlier history of public relations in Malaysia began during the colonial days. The events leading to the outbreak of World War II influenced the development of information strategy. Fear of the enemy and the need to provide information and publicity in the colonies led to the formation of the Ministry of Information in Britain (Grant, 1994). Many of the strategies used by the colonial government were the dissemination of information, publicity, and propaganda activities.

When the British returned to Malaya after the war, the British Military Administration created the Department of Publicity and Printing. When the military rule reverted to civilian rule on 1 April 1946, the Department of Public Relations was created to replace the Department of Publicity and Printing. Among its responsibilities of the new Department was to boost public confidence in the British government, to restore law and order, and to encourage people to grow crops (Idid, 1992).



POST-INDEPENDENCE PERIOD

Following Malaysia's Independence in 1957, the Department of Information Services assumed a more comprehensive responsibility in guiding people towards achieving a common identity and national consciousness towards nation-building. In July 1961, the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting was established. The post-independence period was significant when the media centre was shifted from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur. The latter had to develop its media infrastructure to be acknowledged as Malaya's capital and a seat of power. As media was an essential component of public relations, the shift to Kuala Lumpur boosted the growth of the public relations industry in Malaya. Independence also promised a better life for its citizens. In launching the development plans, the government used an information strategy to win the hearts and minds of the people.

Not many public relations practitioners could be found in the early 1960s. Among the handful, several were concentrated in units and departments established by multinationals. The companies with the public relations department then were Lever Brothers, Malayan Tobacco Company, Dunlop Industries, Shell, and Esso. Among the local organisations, the police force and the Central Electricity Board had their own public relations units. The other was the National Union of Plantation Workers.

FORMATION OF MALAYSIA

The formation of Malaysia in 1963, which saw the merger with Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak, widened the horizon for public relations. It added a new dimension to the growth of public relations, with the government machinery taking the lead in public relations campaigns. There was integration of services in the Ministry of Information, namely the Department of Information Services and Broadcasting. The formation of Malaysia also saw a tumultuous period for the government as President Sukarno of Indonesia resented the move, labelling Malaysia as a neo-colonialist, resulting in hostilities known as *Konfrontasi* or Confrontation. Initially, Indonesia won support from several non-aligned nations against Malaysia. Realising that it had a few friends abroad, Malaysia beefed up its efforts through its Ministry of Foreign Affairs to explain the rationale for the formation of Malaysia, and with the support of a few friendly nations, it won over other countries sympathetic towards its cause. The international public relations exercise was highly successful, and since then, Malaysia participated actively in international affairs.

FROM 1963 TO 1980

This period saw the development of public relations in Malaysia hinged on three important contributing factors: the May 13, 1969 tragedy, the rapid growth of academic programs in the country, and the rise of public relations consultancies. Things changed dramatically towards the end of the 1960s and early 1970s. The May 13 incident, the setting up of academic departments for communication studies in local universities, and the implementation of the New Economic Policy signalled a new beginning in the public relations scene in the country. The tragic May 13 incident prompted the government to revise its information policy. The government felt it did not provide enough information to the people about its policies and implementation. Following this, several ministries appointed press liaison officers, and several government departments started their own public relations units or similar outfits and the appointment of full-time officers.

FROM 1980 TO 2000

During this time, the Malaysian economy recorded tremendous growth marked by rapid industrialisation, along with the government's privatisation policy that boosted public relations greatly. Several government agencies like Telekom Malaysia, Malaysia Airlines, Tenaga Nasional, and Malaysia International Shipping Corporation were privatised. These newly privatised entities found that they had to reorientate their services to the needs of their customers as their measures of success counted on the profits they made. The government's vision and the implementation of economic and social projects, plus social stability, gave added impetus for domestic and foreign investors to invest in the country. This period witnessed more companies establishing public relations units and departments which acknowledged the importance of public relations. The transformation of the public relations domain was inevitable, from being information-oriented to market-oriented, from government-dependent to private sector-driven.



CHAPTERS, CONSULTANCIES AND STUDENTS

IPRM tried expanding its membership base and allowing more members from different locations to participate in the institute's activities by setting up chapters. The old constitution under Rule 52 empowered the council to form groups. Attempts were made to set up chapters in several locations, but two chapters came into being namely the Sabah and Sarawak chapters. In later years, two more chapters were established in Johor and Penang.

IPRM also took serious steps to encourage universities and colleges to establish student chapters. Known by its acronym IPRMSA, the Institute of Public Relations Student's Association was officially launched on 4 September 1999. It serves as a reference point for the chapters at institutions of higher learning. The objective was to nurture the development of students while they are still studying in universities so that they could gain exposure to professional practice. Today, 14 institutions of higher learning have established their student chapters, six being public universities while eight others are in private colleges and universities.

Consultancies play a significant role in enhancing the number of public relations practitioners in the country and in widening IPRM's membership. Consultancies offer their expertise in helping clients achieve their objectives and strategies. Eric White, an Australian-based company, was said to be the first consultancy in Malaysia when it set up its office in 1965. Other earlier consultancies include MRPC Asia Sdn Bhd, PTM Thomson/ PTM Communications, Leo Burnette, Burson-Marsteller and Prestige Communications. The number has grown to over 50 consultancies today.

CODES OF ETHICS & CHARTER

As a professional body, IPRM plays a role in advocating the Code of Ethics and Code of Professional Conduct for the public relations profession that sets the standards for ethical and professional practice for its members and as a guideline for the industry. Besides, to further commit public relations practitioners to the industry's best practices, IPRM started working on Charter status and Accreditation. However, this has yet to be materialised. Both Charter status and Accreditation demonstrate professionalism and accountability on the practitioner's part and affirm IPRM's role in providing guidance, training and setting a benchmark for the public relations industry in the country.



IPRM ACTIVITIES AND AWARDS

From time to time, IPRM organises various activities. Some of these activities became permanent features, while others just lapsed away. Social activities like dinner and dance are held periodically to foster better understanding and friendship among members while tea talks, conferences and seminars are meant for those who seek knowledge. IPRM also organised several significant events, like the Great Debate and the Battle of Wits, that were well received by the general public.

IPRM has recently introduced another activity, which became a brand name for IPRM. Known by the acronym ChaLK (Chat, Listen and Knowledge Sharing), the activity is an informal talk session held with companies, agencies or institutions of higher learning to foster networking and knowledge sharing.

To provide recognition for excellent public relations programs IPRM introduced the *Anugerah Kristal* (Crystal Awards). The award recognises outstanding public relations programs and acknowledges the high standards of public relations professionalism. It started with the *Sang Kancil Awards*, the forerunner of the *Anugerah Kristal*. Being aware that the award is the sole recognition within the country for the public relations industry and organisations, it was highly appreciated by the public relations fraternity. To further broaden the recognition for public relations practice in the country, Most PR Savvy CEO Award was introduced under the *Anugerah Kristal*. IPRM also introduced the Best Malaysian Newsletter Award.

GLOBAL CAPABILITY FRAMEWORK (GCF)

Launching the Global Capability Framework (GCF) Malaysia on 18 February 2022 was a significant milestone in developing the public relations profession in Malaysia. This followed a research undertaken by Assoc. Prof. Dr Zulhamri Abdullah of Universiti Putra Malaysia (UPM) and his team on how to improve the performance of practitioners within the Malaysian context. The research was based on the study by Prof. Anne Gregory of Huddersfield University UK, the former Chair of the Global Alliance. GCF is the Global Alliance's benchmark for how professionals in public relations and communication management perform at their best.

GLOBAL RECOGNITION AND INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE

The appointment of IPRM's current President, Jaffri Amin Osman, as an executive board member of the Switzerland-based Global Alliance (GA) augured well for the Institute, which provided an opportunity for IPRM to gain international exposure and accorded global credentials to the Institute.

IPRM participated in several programs involving GA on education, training and professionalism for young professionals. Another significant public relations event is the Kuala Lumpur International Public Relations Conference (KLIP), jointly hosted by World Communications KL and IPRM, which saw the participation of public relations practitioners from abroad, including from GA and ASEAN Public Relations Network (APRN).

THE FUTURE – MOVING FORWARD

IPRM has passed the 60-year mark amid a fast-changing environment since its inception. The formation of this institute boosted the professional development of public relations in the country. A longitudinal study conducted in 1972 showed some qualitative changes in public relations in Malaysia, such as the increase in degree holders, more females, and a higher income level (Idid, 2022). In advancing the interest of the public relations fraternity and in catering to the professional needs of practitioners, IPRM has gone through several struggles and challenges. It has shown its resoluteness in surviving the challenges, but the road ahead is still long and arduous. IPRM will continue to re-examine its strategies, missions and objectives to further advance the interests of the public relations profession.



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10th Floor, Ministry of Communications and Digital Malaysia,
49, Persiaran Perdana, Presint 4, 62100 Putrajaya,
Wilayah Persekutuan, Putrajaya.

Tel: +603-8911 7406
eMail: iprm.org.my@gmail.com
Website: iprm.org.my