

A Reflection of National Integration Process and the Role of Media in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

National integration is an on-going process in Malaysia since independence. Media are found to play an important role to enhance the process, especially in disseminating government policies. After independence, the biggest task entrusted to the government of Malaysia was to integrate the different races together without taking away the ethnic identity of the races. The integration process reached a breaking and turning point during the incident of May 13, 1969 the bloody riot caused by racial tension. The government became more diligent and the media became one of the machinery by which the government continued to work on nation building and the integration of different races. One policy was implemented after another, from National Cultural Policy; New Economic Policy and the *Rukun Negara*. Revamp of education policies and the setting up of National Unity Department in the Ministry Of National Unity And Social Development was some of the major milestones in national integration. This conceptual paper is a reflection of the past policies and emulation of the present 1Malaysia roadmap for national integration. It started out by defining the different means by which national integration can be achieved such as through the process of assimilation, integration and pluralism. It then took steps back by reflecting on old national integration policies and the prominent role of the media in it over the years. The paper also reflects on the recent 1Malaysia roadmap, press freedom in Malaysia and how it affects the national integration process.

Keywords: *National integration, government policies, press freedom, unity, 1Malaysia.*

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia was said to be one of the country with the most diverse society. The dominantly Malay Muslim country is shared with other ethnicity and religion, such as the Buddhist Chinese, the Hindu Indians and indigenous people. On top of that, the geographical differences and state boundaries created a very different culture between the people of West Malaysia and East Malaysia. It is therefore not surprising that Malaysia struggles with national integration in order to unite the citizens under a national identity.

National integration as understood and interpreted by politicians into policies is very important as the cornerstone of a nation's identity. Malaysia's form of unity works by the way of "bargaining and negotiating" between the races. That means that in order to co-exist peacefully, each ethnic negotiates their parameters and boundaries with one another. They then bargain for the "upper hand" in causes that they feel is important and this sometimes requires giving up certain privileges for better things and so on. This constant process of bargaining and negotiating is done through ethnic-based parties that come together under a Federal party to shape the policies of the country.

However, this "fragile integration" works only for as long as each ethnic gets what they want and their boundaries are not challenged. This is especially so when it affects their social or economic mobility. The 1969 May 16 riot was an example of the integration "disintegrated". However, since then many efforts had been done in order to bring the

nation together as one and the Government are more vigilant. This is where the media plays a crucial role.

The media system in Malaysia co-exists with the political system of the country and has always been machinery by which the government spread their policies, influence public opinion and public discourses, as well as receiving feedbacks to their policies. With the long history of media in Malaysia, and the changing media landscape in current time, it is crucial for scholars to reflect on the role of the media thus far in national integration and how far has that role changed.

Therefore, this paper aims to be a scholarly reflection of the meaning of national integration, the policies of national integration in Malaysia thus far and the role of media in the midst of it all. This paper hope to provide a clear conceptual definition on different keywords that is used for national integration on a global level, such as “integration”, “assimilation” and “pluralism”. Then it systematically unravels the process of national integration in the context of Malaysia by understanding how Malaysia interpreted national identity in its policymaking since independence. Alongside with the political machinery, is the role of the media along the years in disseminating information, creating discourses and so on for national integration.

This paper is only a conceptual and systematic meta-analysis of the Government policies and also the role of media with no intention to generalize the happenings in the country. Rather it aims to enlighten and to give a chronologically clear understanding of national integration processes in the country and the role of media.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIFFERENT MOLD OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION

Each nation has its own definition, propaganda and programs in order to bring law and order as well as unity within the country. The ambiguity and vast definition of jargons such as “integration”, “assimilation”, “pluralism”, “diversity” and “unity” makes efforts of creating oneness within a nation harder than it should be. The conceptualization of each term, while tedious and repetitive, is necessary to draw the borders within which this paper is based on.

Integration

Rudiger and Spencer (2003) explain that in the broadest sense, integration means the process by which people who are relatively new to a country (whose roots do not reach deeper than two or three generations) become part of society. Applying in the context of European Integration, the concept refers to shaping a new structure out of individual entities, the nation states. This emphasis on the new, collectively determined unity which could be useful for conceiving two-way process of integrating migrants and established nationals. Gurpreet Kaur (2013: 45) defined “national integration is the creation of a feeling of oneness where the diversities are recognized and respected by imbibing a sense of nationhood” while Fekete (2008) said integration ultimate aim is to create a multicultural, pluralist society.

In short, integration is in essence the act of bringing people from diverse background and culture to be united, yet at the same time keeping their original identity without changing it. It is a highly normative concept consisting of complex and multi layered economic, social and cultural practices especially when applied in the context of nation-building.

When one tries to objectify the highly fluid and normative term of integration for the purpose of policymaking, it implies an assumption of an ideal social order with high degree of internal cohesion. The idealistic form of integration suggests stability and order. However, designation of a specific path and outcome of integration process impede the very thing it aims to achieve, which is to recognize and accept differences. Therefore, many nations who seeks to promote integration seems to struggle to come to a common ground on how oneness could be achieved while reconciling stark differences between races, ethnicity, gender, background and so on.

Assimilation

Healey and O'Brien (2007) acknowledge that assimilation is a general term for a process that can follow a number of different pathways, where one of the forms is expressed in the metaphor of the "melting pot", a process which different groups come together and contribute in roughly equal amounts to create a common culture and a new, unique society. Fekete (2008) laid the prerequisites for assimilation as the absorption of minority cultures into the majority culture to ultimately create a mono-cultural or even a mono-faith society.

The difference between assimilation and integration is that assimilation sees the process of eliminating diversity as benign and necessary in order to create a strong unified identity that is based on sharing and inclusion, whereas the integration seeks to retain whatever differences there are and maneuver around the differences to come to a common ground.

Gordon (1964) explained the sub processes of assimilation by making a clear distinction between the cultural and structural component of society. Culture encompasses all aspects of the way of life associated with a group of people. It includes language, religion beliefs, customs and rules of etiquette, and the values and ideas people use to organize their lives and interpret their existence. The social structure, or structural components of a society, includes networks of social relationships, groups, organizations, stratification systems, communities and families. The social structure organizes the work of society and connects individuals to one another and to the larger society.

Pluralism

Horace Kallen (1924) proposed three types of pluralism, namely cultural pluralism, structural pluralism and integration without acculturation. Cultural pluralism exists when groups have not acculturated and each maintains its own identity. The groups might speak different languages, practice different religions, and have different value systems. The groups are part of the same society and might even live in adjacent areas, but in some ways, they live in different worlds.

Structural pluralism exists when a group has acculturated but not integrated. The group has adopted the dominant culture but does not have full and equal access to the institutions of the larger society. Cultural differences are minimal, but the groups occupy different locations in the social structure. The group may speak with the same accent, eat same food, pursue same goals, and subscribe to the same values, but they may also maintain separate organizational systems, including different churches, clubs, schools and neighbourhoods. Group practice a common culture but does so in different places and with minimal interaction across group boundaries. Structurally, however, this common culture is expressed in separate buildings by separate congregations and often by separate racial or ethnic groups.

Integration without acculturation on the other hand refers to a group that has had some material success but has not integrated into the majority culture. Some immigrants group have found niches in the society in which they can survive and occasionally prosper economically without acculturating much.

NATIONAL INTEGRATION IN MALAYSIA AND THE ROLE OF MEDIA IN THE PAST

Malaysia had come far since independence in handling racial issues, be it the positive racial issues or the negative ones. According to Syed Arabi Idid and Latiffah Pawanteh (1989), positive racial issues lead to better understanding of another ethnic values and belief. Positive racial issues, rather known as “light news” would be media coverage on festivals, activities conducted by the Department of National Unity as well as continuous report on the need of national unity and lessening of racial sensitivities in organizations such as schools, companies, government sectors and so on. Negative racial issues on the other hand are “hard” news that is raised mostly by the politicians to legitimize support for their own group against other communal grouping. However, these “hard news” are the ones that shape the fundamental policies of education, language, culture and economics as Malaysia tries to work within the sensitive parameters of every communal group.

The task of bringing this community together become more difficult with political leaders who rhetorically call for racial harmony when speaking to the general crowd, yet speaks differently among their own ethnic. The politicians see “championing the rights of their community” as the ticket to popularity (Syed Arabi Idid & Latifah Pawanteh, 1989). The media in Malaysia, particularly media who are partisan tend to create unease and stir in the community when they choose to highlight the words of these politicians.

According to Samsudin A. Rahim (2001), the Government agenda for unity during the 1960-1970 was to unite the different ethnic and religion entities into a more cohesive unit. The strategy changes in 1970-1990 to ensure fair distribution of wealth to overcome disparities between ethnic groups, regions, and occupational opportunities through offering increased opportunities for participation in the expanding commercial and industrial sector to economically backward regions. Since 1991 the country has begun to lay the foundation for becoming a developed nation by mobilizing the population towards the future and gearing it towards using science and information technology, forging the basis for it to remain competitive.

On 13th May 1969, a racial riot broke as an aftermath of dissatisfaction of the 10th May 1969 General Election result. The celebration of the unexpected victory of Opposition parties turned into racial riot that resulted in death as well as damages of property. Dubbed as the darkest point of Malaysia’s national integration, the 13th May 1969 riot impacted the Government policies in terms of nation building. The *Rukun Negara* (or National Principles) was instituted after the racial riot to promote sense of togetherness among Malaysian.

The most enduring effort of unity of Malaysia was to enshrine clauses into its Constitutions that ensure racial equality, protection towards different communities and also the special rights of the Malays. The Sedition Act/ Incitement Act 1948 was enforced to prevent individuals from raising sensitive issues such as the position of Bahasa Melayu as the national language, the position of the Malay rulers, the special rights of Bumiputera and the citizenship rights of non Bumiputera. The term “seditious” is defined as any act, speech, words, publication, or thing “having” a seditious tendency to promote ill-will and hostility between races or classes in Malaysia.

The Sedition Act as well as the Internal Security Act (ISA) that aimed at protecting the country's interest strongly impact journalists in reporting racial issues, community gap as well as sparkling discourses or debates on these issues. The Act was followed by several media specific regulation (e.g – The Printing Presses and Publication Acts of 1984) which limits the operating of the mass media into three spheres, that is, 1) The institution is owned mainly by Malaysians; 2) sensitive issues not to be raised, and 3) national secrets are not disclosed.

The National Cultural Policy (NCP) in 1971 had the aim to create a national identity for the plural society of Malaysia that is founded upon the Malay culture with the incorporation of elements from other cultures found in the country. The common basis of racial unity at that point of time was defined as the sharing of political power among different ethnic group. That shaped the political landscape in Malaysia up to today, where political parties that are ethnic based come together to create a common federal party. It also affects the media landscape in the country, where different media that conveys message in different languages and cater to specific ethnic group are allowed to flourish. At the same time, Malaysia also has national media that are in Malay language and English to be a common media used by all Malaysian. That had been an effective way of managing a multi-ethnic society.

The New Economic policy (NEP) was introduced after the incident of May 13 1969 to reduce the economic disparity among the ethnic group. The NEP declared national unity as its main purpose as the overall policy is to eradicate poverty and to restructure the society to close the gap between race, economic function and geographical locality (Syed Arabi Iddid & Latifah Pawanteh, 1989). What might be interesting to note is that the NEP was introduced to demolish the economic gap between: 1) Bumiputeras and non-Bumiputeras, 2) People in the rural and town areas, 3) People in the west coast and east coast states, and 4) People in Peninsular and Borneo (Sabah and Sarawak) during that time (Ashraful Alam, 2007). Yet, the discourse on the economic gap between these four different groups is still going on until today.

It is obvious that the ethnic based media in Malaysia tend to highlight on economic policies which are relevant only to their audiences created different economical discourses among the people and it widened the knowledge gap between different ethnic groups with regards to economical issue. The media exacerbated the difficulty of integrating different ethnic group to come to a common understanding of national economic policies.

NCP is a social approach towards the national integration and was introduced in August 1971. Through NCP, people are encouraged to share values among them. It has been done since independence until today. The NCP is based on the culture of the indigenous people of the country. Any universal and positive elements from other cultures which are suitable and contribute towards unity may be adopted into NCP like for example the practice of mutual aid (*gotong-royong*) in Malay society has been adopted in the NCP as the practice is obviously positive. Malay language is made as the official language and medium of the communication in the NCP (Ashraful Alam, 2007).

In this aspect of national integration, the media role in highlighting these values such as *gotong-royong* and the shared values of different ethnic group was minimal. However the media did play an important role in promoting important festivities of different ethnic group and promoting a superficial understanding of another ethnic.

Speaking of policies on national integration, one must remember that education system plays a crucial role in uniting different communities. Since independence, the

Government streamlined the education system to promote racial unity through educational reports. The reports are named after the Minister of Education at that time.

The first report, which is a very important one is the Razak Report 1956. The report was made by a committee formed by the British Government and was headed by Dato' Abdul Razak Hussein, Minister of Education at that time. Below are the proposals: 1) There should be one education system only, 2) Malay language is made the national language and the medium of instruction in education, 3) Malay and English language to be made compulsory for all primary schools and secondary schools, 4) For national-type schools that is English, Chinese and Tamil languages to be the medium of instruction and 5) To establish one type of school opened to all races.

Rahman Talib Report 1961 made some amendment to the Razak Report by proposing two types of schools namely national school and national type school. The medium of instruction in all primary school would be in Bahasa Melayu and not English. Chinese as well as Tamil should be taught when at least 15 pupils or parents request it. Starting from 1970, Bahasa Melayu became the medium of instruction in Peninsular and later on extended to Sabah Sarawak in 1976. The national education syllabus was then synchronized across the different schools.

Hussein Onn Report 1971 restudy the National Education Policy to ensure basic education to all children in the schooling ages that can be accommodated in Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil stream schools. English was stressed as an important language to learn even if it isn't the medium of instruction. Mahathir Report 1985 focused on ensuring the existing education system satisfied the country's goal of producing united, disciplined and trained society.

All the reports focused on using the Bahasa Melayu and a centralized school curriculum as well as examination as unifying factor. Courses that ensure integration, tolerance and national consciousness such as Civic and Moral Studies were carefully designed.

At the university level, two common courses, namely, Nationhood and Ethnic Relations are made compulsory for all undergraduates. Universities are seen as the place to establish a Malaysian culture and shared values among different races as they learn to interact with each other on a deeper level than school. However, there are critics that said that the universities had failed to unite diverse students and in fact, universities are used as the breeding ground for intolerance, ethnocentrism and segregated communities. Ramlee Mustapha et al (2009) concluded that the problem begun in home and school as these institution failed to internalize the spirit of unity among these youngsters. As a result, the university becomes a highly polarized place. Students from diverse ethnic groups often have differing opinions and viewpoints about wide range of pressing contemporary issues such as religion, war, terrorism, death penalty, free speech and the prevalence of discrimination.

Reflecting on the changes of the education policies over the years, the ethnic media in Malaysia has always walked the thin line between championing the education rights of their respective communities and at the same time, supports the government in the efforts for national unity through education. Over the years, the media has done well in disseminating information on the Government education blueprint; create the right direction for discourse on education system among the people and at the same time, be the champion of minority ethnic demands for fair education.

The Ministry of National Unity and Social Development was established in 1990, whereby one of its objectives is to encourage unity of a multiracial society and to promote national

integration. A few departments were formed such as the Social Welfare Department, the Department of Social Unity, Department of Orang Asli Affairs, Department of Women's Affairs and National Welfare Foundation.

In 1969, National Unity Department in the Ministry Of National Unity And Social Development was established. Other than that, agencies and organizations were also set up such as KEMAS, RELA, Rukun Tetangga and through RELA, the government encourages all races to be member of RELA.

Rukun Tetangga (Neighbourhood Ideology) was established to tackle the rising number of crimes related to drug addiction and to minimise security problem in residential areas. Residents are encouraged to participate in Rukun Tetangga and act as a citizen surveillance for their own community. It targeted the males between 18 to 55 years old. The whole purpose of it was to create an environment where people from the same neighborhood will interact, take care of each other and create a sense of belonging. However, the lack of response to this voluntary duty left this program wanting for more (Syed Arabi Iddid & Latifah Pawanteh, 1989).

The government then changes the strategy and tried to encourage participation of residents in various activities ranging from house visits, recreational activities, dialogue sessions to counselling on social, family and professional matters. Hence, the new programme created a strong bond of relationships among residents, and greater sense of belonging to the community should be present before residents can voluntarily participate actively in these self-help programmes.

The media was told and used by the Government to increase awareness of the public to these various activities for further interethnic interaction. Unfortunately, the news items have low sensational value and media appeal, thus these programmes were rarely highlighted in the local media.

CURRENT SCENARIO OF NATIONAL INTEGRATION AND MEDIA IN MALAYSIA – 1MALAYSIA ROADMAP

The sixth and current Prime Minister of Malaysia, Dato' Sri Haji Mohammad Najib bin Tun Haji Abdul Razak kick-start his office term in 2009 with the concept of 1Malaysia for national integration. 1Malaysia had evolved by leaps and bounds since then to be completely different from what it sets out to do. From a concept of unity, it is now a brand of all policies done by Najib, be it a political policy, economic policy or others. 1Malaysia had become so vague since its inception until the current time. Essentially, the official Roadmap of 1Malaysia that was published by the Government should be the guiding book of what 1Malaysia is all about.

The definition of 1Malaysia, as given by the Malaysian Prime Minister is we stand, we think and we act as Malaysians and this suggest that Malaysian urged to take action based on the needs of all ethnic groups and not restricted to one's ethnic needs (Hanita Hassan et al, 2011). According to the official roadmap, 1Malaysia is built upon the foundations of Malaysia's Federal Constitution, various laws and policies, the Rukun Negara, Vision 2020 as well as the National Mission. They listed up policies and strategies that were taken from prior Prime Ministers such as the Federal Constitution, Rukun Negara and Vision 2020.

The 1Malaysia is also built upon the following basic ideas, commitment and moral and aspirational values of:

- Unity in diversity and inclusiveness: 1Malaysia is fostered through inclusiveness, not mere tolerance or respect. This means accepting diversity amongst ethnic groups, embracing the unique qualities each group brings and capitalizing in this diversity as a competitive asset for the nation. It is through true inclusiveness that we can build a foundation of trust and cohesiveness.
- Social justice: No group should be marginalized on account of any element of its background, be it ethnic, religious, political, geographical and socio-economic. 1Malaysia compels the Government to provide support and opportunities to all Malaysian on the basis of individual need and merit while taking into account the differing levels of development amongst groups.
- The 1Malaysia moral and aspirational values expounded by the Prime Minister: These are basic human moral and aspirational values which have formed the foundation of 1Malaysia. They include a culture of excellence, perseverance, acceptance, education, integrity, wisdom, humility and loyalty.
- People First, Performance Now: These are the twin commitments of the Government under 1Malaysia. The people come first in all policies and projects, and the NKRA and MKRA have been identified accordingly. Emphasis on performance now will ensure delivery of big result fast and positive outcomes for the people.

The official roadmap also mentions the National Key Result Areas (NKRA), which are reducing crime, fighting corruption, improving education outcomes, raising living standards of low-income households, improving rural basic infrastructure, and improving urban public transport. These are a beginning to managing some of our nation's complex polarities. Identified and formulated based on public feedback, these six NKRA are meant for all Malaysians and cut across race, religion and region. Four of them- education, low-income households, rural basic infrastructure and improving urban public transportation- target the needs of the lower income and disadvantaged groups. Incidence of poverty and lack of infrastructure are more prominent amongst Malays, Sabah and Sarawak Bumiputeras, Indians and Orang Asli, though not exclusively so.

Hanita Hassan et al (2011) find that Malaysians, in particular are very sensitive with issues of race or ethnicity. It is very crucial to get the message of 1Malaysia across to the public especially through the media. The research argued that the media can take on the role as the advocate of unity by promoting cross-cultural understanding, tolerance and acceptance of other ethics, culture and religions.

The Government Transformation Programme Roadmap also touches on the topic of promoting an all-inclusive 1Malaysia media. They stated that, print and electronic media in Malaysia have thrived in the four major languages, Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese, English, and Tamil, while Kadazan-Dusun and Iban-Dayak supplements are included in some Bahasa Malaysia and English papers in Sabah and Sarawak. While the English-language press caters to English-educated readers of all ethnic backgrounds, the Bahasa Melayu, Chinese and Tamil papers tend to cater more to their respective ethnic communities. Therefore, there is a tendency for the media in each language to select and frame news as well as form editorials that can cater to the demands and interest of their major readers. The Malay press tends to give more coverage to Islamic countries and communities, the Chinese press of China and The Chinese diaspora, the Tamil press of India and the Indian diaspora. In many ways Malaysian media reflect and reinforce the diversity in Malaysia. The various ethnic-

cultural communities in Malaysia are well informed about and stay connected with the larger Muslim, Chinese, Indian and Western Worlds. This has cultural and economic value that ultimately contributes to Malaysia's overall advantage. However if and when some of the reporting and writing becomes too ethno-centric or even takes on a more race-centred angle, then it will raise, rather than break down barriers. Thus, rather than promoting understanding and unity, it may have the opposite effect and impact.

In tracing the history of Malaysia's Chinese newspaper, Lee Kok Tiung and Mohd Safar Hasim (2015) said that the initial role of the Chinese newspapers was to update the Chinese immigrants on the development in their hometown. However, as the Chinese becomes more integrated, the newspapers played crucial role in nation building by integrating the Chinese into local communities, being a voice for the Chinese interests and is inseparable from the political institution.

The GTP Roadmap addressed how while some seeks to provide constructive and valid criticism, there are journalists that abuse the greater freedom of expression and express feelings that are racist or inflammatory in nature and tone, particularly through the electronic media, which can be easily and widely transmitted, and provoking reactions and over-reactions amongst larger segments of society. The roadmap also highlighted that while censorship is antithetical to democracy, there is a need to introduce, instil and internalise a commitment to journalistic professionalism, a sense of responsibility and self-restraint, with sensitivity to the divergent views and feelings of the diverse communities in Malaysia.

The policies laid out however may not work out so well for the past few years. The 13th General Election in 2013 marked an important milestones for Malaysia media whereby the online news portal are gaining ground as reliable and dependable source of political information that can't be derived from the mainstream media. Lumsden (2013) argued that the online news portal contributed to more political discourse with balanced reports that criticized both the government and the Opposition. The research also indicated the stress by the ruling coalition to strategize with the new found press freedom through online avenue and the eroding credibility of government news outlets.

Maizatul and Wan Idros (2014) found from their survey on 451 respondents in Klang Valley that the people acceptance of the Government Transformation Programme was relatively lukewarm. 51% of the respondents opined that the effectiveness of GTP was only moderate.

2015 saw some tension between the political institution and media institution in Malaysia. In 2015, reports on the alleged misuse of the 1MDB state investment fund sparked criminal proceedings against four media outlets, and two others were temporarily suspended. In July 2015, *Sarawak Report* news website was blocked by the government for extensive reporting on the 1MDB scandal. A radio journalist received violent threats on social media upon publishing satirical video efforts to implement the Islamic criminal code in Kelantan state.

The Press Freedom House placed the freedom of media in Malaysia as 26 out of 30, which means it isn't free due to all the arrests and happenings of the journalists. The government of Malaysia, in ensuring greater press freedom reviewed all media laws in 2012, amended the 1984 Printing Presses and Publication Act by repelling the need for printing houses and publishers to apply for annual permit. However, Press Freedom House criticized the move, alleging that the amendment led to other restrictions, such as the government's right to revoke the licenses without any judicial review (Freedom of the Press 2016 for Malaysia, 2016).

There are however two sides of the coin to each story. Government officials, including Prime Minister Najib had called for stricter media regulation in the country, especially the social media as the Government opined that the social media incite disharmony and create disturbance among the public (Freedom of the Press 2016 for Malaysia, 2016).

CONCLUSION

Reflecting on the past and the present scenario of national integrity policies in Malaysia, one would wonder if 1Malaysia Roadmap is working for the past 7 years since it's launching especially when the slogan 1Malaysia had been abused as a brand of Najib's political machinery rather than one that can unite everyone. What would be important from this point onwards, would be seeking to understand the current discourses as reflected in the media and also the public.

Media system in Malaysia is so closely linked with the political system in Malaysia, that it is hard to distinguish the role of media in the process of national integration. Now with the advent of new technologies, widespread usage of traditional media and online media alike within the nation, it creates an exciting time to see how far can the media now distinguish itself as an institution and how this would eventually affect the process of national integration. The fragmentation of media audiences and narrowcasting trend of media also create new challenges and concerns for unity. The researchers end the reflection for hope of more researches and conceptual papers reflecting on the role of media in national integration in contemporary media landscape.

BIODATA

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