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Indonesia Media : Grace Under Pressure

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Country Paper: Indonesian Media--Grace Under Pressure

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One day, the editor-in-chief of a newspaper in Indonesia told his reporters a story. He quoted from a famous Indonesian novel. It ran like this:

"As the carriage was leaving the front yard and entered the highway, my mood changed. You don't know your own people! Yes, you don't even know your own country!

"Well, in fact, I don't know my people and my country. Shame! I must face this just accusation. But take that man as an example. What is the weight of the goods he bears on his shoulder? I don't know.

"It may be the weight of a basketful of peanuts. To whom would he sell it? And where to? I do not know. What is the price? That, too, I do not know. Could his profit feed him and his family for a week? I don't know. Is he healthy enough to bear that burden? And why in the world must he transport it that way? I don't know. How much does he produce on how large a plot of land?

"More difficult to answer. Hell! All these questions are beginning to torment me.

"After all, he is only a peanut bearer. You, you simpleton! You conceited simpleton! If you know nothing about such a simple matter, how dare you write about him? What a shame, you vainglorious writer!"

This story, told with great empathy, did not impress the reporters one bit. They considered telling such a story was useless and a waste of time. They said what they urgently needed was no less than new techniques--special, solid know-how to handle their already arduous jobs. Arduous, since the editor-in-chief never stopped demanding

high-quality reporting in a situation where press freedom is restricted more and more. "Give us new techniques, not heart-rending eulogies on grave problems," they said.

This story may possibly depict the outstanding features of the situation in which our present media pursue the profession.

There is, on the one hand, the ever increasing complexity and magnitude of our society's problems. On the other hand, there is a lack of preparedness, of basic understanding, or if you like, of insight on the part of the media on how to provide adequate and sound responses to those very social problems.

Our task would be much simpler had it only concerned mere technique, journalistic technique. We, the developing countries, or for that matter, ASEAN as well, may be considered fortunate, being heirs to the long journalistic traditions of the West. We are fortunate, having been spared from having to create our own journalistic techniques out of scratch.

But we believe our basic problem is not so much technical in nature. It is a problem of another kind. More difficult, perhaps far more fundamental.

This problem poses the following questions: Do we really believe that freedom of information is the basic tenet of our mass media? If the answer is in the affirmative, how do we manage in a condition where that very freedom is continually stifled?

Could it be that freedom is not merely a matter of category, but concerns an on-going process? If so, what is the real nature of the conditions threatening that freedom? Does this mean that in face of such conditions, the media has to restrain its urge for freedom of expression, in the endeavour to attain some things considered more important and urgent, such as the continuing existence of that said media? Or is the process an integral one, challenging our creativity and resourcefulness, trying to keep afloat, while at the same time, seeking to maintain the integrity of freedom of expression?

The complexity and magnitude of our social problems are by no means a negative process. This situation is greatly of our own making, for it is the result of our endeavour to improve the conditions of our people. As defined, our mass media owe their existence and self-esteem to their total involvement in these endeavours. More than that, it is hardly inconceivable for national development without the

active role of the mass media. They have necessary and legitimate responsibilities in any social process.

So far, no problem. But problems arise when someone tries to delineate that role or participation. It happens anywhere, in the West, North and South, in the United States and in Indonesia.

What differs is that in some societies, the basic tenet accommodates the media satisfactorily, whereas in others it plunges into utter confusion.

Most of the time, the latter situation gets its explanation in ready extra-punitive reasoning, or more deplorably, with an apologetic attitude. According to the extra-punitive reasoning, the insatiable and unjustifiable power-holders outside the mass media are to blame. The mass media have to fight to the end, only to be wiped out completely.

When it happens, they become heroes. According to the apologetic one, the situation is considered inevitable, for development is inevitable. Development is impossible without stability, and stability is impossible without restriction of freedom. Then, the severe control of the mass media is inevitable.

Perhaps, our story in the beginning of this paper expresses a soul-searching of another kind of reasoning. It needs explanation that is not extra-punitive, wounded and belligerent. Nor is it apologetic. It considers the possibility of facing the hardest fact, that is the task of reformulating the long-cherished principles of the mass media, and of reconciling them with the most stifling pressure.

At least for mass media in Indonesia, our third kind of reasoning mentioned above, it is considered as the most capable of redeeming these cherished principles.

This reasoning dictates a wholly different need of media organisations and what can be contributed by communication training.

Perceiving this problem, around 1970, the Indonesian editor-in-chief mentioned earlier, conjectured that the reading of humanities was most needed by his reporters.

His reasoning at that time was not as clear as it is now. But he clearly thought he believed that the reporters' deep understanding of human predicaments in Indonesia would render their reportage very effective. He also believed

that this understanding would mould its own specific techniques.

Rightly or wrongly, he could not imagine anybody suitable for meeting this quality if he was not a university graduate. He considered techniques something that could be learned later. He did not think university-level journalism a prerequisite.

Among his some 60 reporters, more than 30 were university graduates. But he very soon found himself rather disillusioned. He found out that even in universities, the reading in humanities was considered odd. So he started to inculcate this understanding periodically to his reporters. The result was not encouraging.

This story is only one example of this constant efforts. Now he is trying to transform this tenet into techniques. He stresses that basically, newspapers in Indonesia are considerably free to expose almost anything, albeit glossed with the dominant frame of thinking or parlance. This could be achieved by any technique you can learn from world journalistic traditions.

Grace under pressure is considered the fundamental trait of any journalistic techniques a reporter may use.

His last problem is probably the best possible method of training. Is it out- or in-house? But since universities and other institutions could not be expected to meet this need, it should be in-house training. The difficulty is how could we find good and competent instructors?

As we try to ponder on this problem, let us hope that all our questions, if not satisfactorily solved, at least would be more clearly defined.