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What Must Asian Communications Be Able To Do?
Underlying Value Concepts In Training Programmes
For Media Practitioners In Asia

By

Y V Lakshamana Rao
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What must Asian Communications be able to do?
Underlying Value Concepts in Training Programmes for Media Practitioners in Asia.

By

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WHAT MUST ASIAN COMMUNICATORS BE ABLE TO DO? 
UNDERLYING VALUE CONCEPTS IN TRAINING PROGRAMMES 
FOR MEDIA PRACTITIONERS IN ASIA 

By 
Y V LAKSHMANA RAO 

A NOTE OF CAUTION: 

This is not the customary note of apology, but one of caution to 
the reader to be aware of the fact that this paper is being 
written at a certain time and in a certain place which must have 
a bearing on the general thrust of whatever arguments may 
eventually emerge as we traverse the by lanes of experiences of 
the past, impinging inevitably on the highways of the present. 
"Many Voices" will silently determine that thrust, but the one 
voice which articulates the arguments is necessarily conditioned 
by its own buffeting by many worlds of which it has been part 
over the years, but most transparently, of the one world of 
which it is now a committed citizen, professionally and 
spiritually... and, above all, temporally. 

My memory retrieves a scene from the past: that of my "boss" and 
friend in Unesco, saying to me in all sincerity and warmth, "I 
envy you for having the courage to get out of the wholesale 
business and going into the retail"! It is as a retailer that I 
now speak, even while those "Many Voices" from the distant "One 
World" of which I thought I was part, still ring in my 
fast-deteriorating ears. 

INTRODUCTION 

I have just come out of a lecture session with the students of a 
post-graduate course in Advertising and Public Relations. The average 
age of the wards it is my privilege to serve, for however brief a time, 
is almost exactly that of my son. Like him, they are all beautiful; 
they are articulate, they are concerned, they are articulate, they are 
concerned, they are all ashamed; they are vigorous, bubbling on the 
outside, frightened deep underneath. About their careers, about their 
future in a world which they did not make, but aware (oh! so aware) that 
they have to live in and with. 

The assignment for the semester that "my" students have chosen of their 
own accord is the designing of a public relations and advertising 
campaign to eradicate begging in the streets of New Delhi. Their
The combined effort at preparing a preambular statement defining "The Problem" reflects clearly their concern, their "shame", their fear of "merely" using the law to ban beggary, lest it turn beggars into criminals. It also reflects a sense of civic pride and more than a willingness to "do something about it" through the instrumentality of their chosen profession. What more can a teacher of trainer ask for? Plenty. That is what this paper purports to be about.

There are questions the teacher can ask of himself; there are some he needs to ask of his employer; of fellow teachers and professionals in the field; of his government and of policy-makers. Eventually, perhaps, of that "One World" at large.

Barring exceptions, the teacher and the trainer in the present-day world are fortunate individuals the former slightly more than the latter. Thanks to whatever the existing world information and communication order is, the teacher has at his disposal raw material which he can mould - more or less - into the shape he desires, for it is malleable and willing. What shape the finished product will take, will depend largely on his own values and beliefs. Provided, of course, he has the energy to mould that material which, by and large, seems to have far more energy than himself; provided he has the patience, for the material is volatile and needs to be handled gently and carefully -- and affectionately; provided he is equally concerned and frightened as his students.

The trainer too has many of those advantages, but somewhat less - mainly because his wards have already been in the profession (for varying periods of time) and therefore less malleable or impressionable; less excited and probably even less concerned. "Blase" might, however, be too strong a descriptor.

"TEACHING AND TRAINING"

After writing that rather free-flowing introduction to this paper, I
made the "mistake" of going back to the original invitation sent to me by the well-meaning organisers of this challenging seminar. The suggested title (please see title of paper) forced me to step on my brakes. But I decided to leave the introduction as is for the simple reason that when we talk of value concepts within the New World Information and Communication Order, it is not only the present practitioners we need to be concerned with, but, in my opinion, more importantly, with future practitioners. As the hasty and impetuous introduction indicates, those future practitioners must need come out of present teaching programmes and not merely out of training programmes for present day practitioners.

The distinction I am trying to make between teaching and training is not necessarily a contrived one. I checked the meaning with two ready sources: one was the dictionary and the other, my post-graduate students. While the dictionary only confirmed my feeling that there is no technical difference, the students confirmed my belief that usage has been quite a distinct difference. They unanimously agreed that training prepares one for a vocation and is skill-based that teaching denotes a stress on knowledge and is relatively less practical.

It suits me to follow the trend of thought of present day usage and my students, in attacking the title in hand. In doing so, I would necessarily have to seek the indulgence of the reader and request him to keep these "operational definitions" in mind.

Having stuck my neck out this far, I might as well go all the way and postulate that value concepts have a far greater chance of being successfully implanted in teaching programmes for the young than in training programmes for the less young. I repeat, I am speaking in relative terms and therefore not ruling out the alternative option. Both are needed; and some value concepts will necessarily be used, whether in teaching or in training, as a base by instructors and teachers. Or at least, one must hope so.

If the kind reader may recollect, we left the communication teacher
changing by his expectations on page 2 of this paper. We had said he/she can ask a whole lot of questions of himself, his superiors, his fellow teachers, professionals, etc. Let us take up that thread.

VALUES AND CONCEPTS

In defining his role, the teacher, often finds that what his students expect from him may not always tally with his own thinking. Essentially they except to be trained for a specific job in a specific medium, so that, in their difficult world, they may find ready employment. The teacher has "higher" aspirations for them; he wants them to be better professionals than the present lot, to discern broader horizons and set higher goals.

The trainer does not always face this problem for, in his case, he is generally in tune with his trainees. Both expect "merely" a refining of skills, and perhaps an adaptation to new technology and new techniques. "Value concepts" are more or less presumed to be known. All that may be needed is a "refreshing" of norms which are already part of the baggage of both trainer and trainee. The former, with his greater experience as a practitioner, sees his task as quite well defined: to pass on his skills to those who already possess a basic knowledge of those very skills. It is refinement and a sharpening of the edges that the trainee seeks; not a questioning of the profession's way of life which he is already fully conditioned to. The teacher sees "educational preparation" as consisting of a broad knowledge of the communication process, of media relationships, the psychology and sociology of communication, of history, economics and political science, with anthropology as a "must", especially in developing societies such as those in Asia. The trainer, on the other hand, presumes that a self-respecting journalist is already aware of his medium in relation to society and its particular audiences; of the profession's own values and concerns; of its freedoms and its responsibilities. There is no need to "lecture" about them.
Without further labouring this point of a distinction that one needs to make between the long-term teaching programmes and the short-term training courses, let us take a look at the fundamental value concepts that have emerged out of the debate on NWICO. None of these is really new, but thanks to the recent debate and the discussions, they have been given a new lease of life, and a new focus. That is about all.

PROFESSIONALISM

Journalists the world over have been reminded of the need for professionalism in a profession which is yet struggling to be recognised as such by those outside it. For the simple reason that values and concepts which should have been firm foundations of the information and communication edifice have been revealed to be weak by the unrelenting enquiries of budding new tenants and by public citizens. The crystallization of the inquiries took place in Unesco's world forum; the global village stood naked with its caste system, tribal jealousies and power plays open for all to see.

The "watchdog" had begun to be watched; the embarrassment was painful.

It is in this context that we are discussing today the role of the teacher and the trainer. One can perhaps re-lay those foundations for future tenants; the other, firm up the existing ones. Needless to say, they need to be the engineers and the architects of the New World - along with their compatriots, the present-day professionals.

We have to start with the premise that journalists are all against sin – even if sin makes news. Policy-makers and governments have no monopoly on that human characteristic. The pot and the kettle, both need cleansing.

Obviously, the professionals in journalism/communication must make that start for, if they don't the governments and the policy-makers will want
to do the job for them. That would be disastrous. To these, I would like to add university administrators, most of whom are unaware of the needs and the components of communication teaching programmes. They are willing to set up departments or faculties of communication without a clear understanding of the qualifications needed of professors and teachers. A Ph. D or an M.A. in "one of the social sciences" is often considered enough "preferably with some experience in the mass media". One cannot blame the administrators for, how else can one find teachers for courses for which there is such a growing demand, thanks to the "Communication Revolution" and "Information Explosion". We need, therefore, to accept the fact that such departments will be set-up whether in universities or outside of them by quasi-teaching institutions whose "diplomas" may be "recognised" by some civic authority whose standards might be even less demanding.

Then there are the very dubious "diploma mills" mushrooming in some countries of Asia, thanks again, to the same "explosion" which has thrown open job opportunities for which there are few job preparation facilities. In a country like India - and this is true in varying degrees in the rest of Asia - young people, unable to make the grade for entering "recognised" institutions are flocking to "schools" and "training centres" which are virtually set up overnight by unscrupulous ex-journalists who can easily fleece the gullible and the helpless. It is easy to draw upon "guest speakers" from the profession.

I know I am painting an alarming picture, but the picture is alarming - especially seen in the context of NWICO and the values concepts that have been defined within its framework.

Let us take a look at some of these from the pages of "Many Voices, One World" (underlinings are mine):

1. "The importance of the journalist's mission ... demands steps to enhance his standing in society .... journalism needs to raise its standards and quality for recognition everywhere as a genuine profession" (page 263; para 39);
2. "To be treated as professionals, journalists require broad educational preparation and specific professional training ..." (para 40)

3. "Such values as truthfulness, accuracy and respect for human rights are not universally applied at present .... The self-respect of journalists, their integrity and inner drive to turn out work of high quality are of paramount importance. It is this level of professionals dedication, making for responsibility that should be fostered by news media and journalists' organisations ...." (para 41)

4. "As in other professions, journalists and media organisations serve the public directly and the public, in turn, is entitled to hold them accountable for their actions ..." (para 42)

5. "The adoption of codes of ethics .... is desirable .... (para 43)

6. "Conventional standards of news selection and reporting, and many accepted news values, need to be reassessed .... The first step towards overcoming .... bias is to acknowledge that it colours the thinking of virtually all human beings, journalists included .... (page 263, para 45)

The list can be vastly expanded, for the "good words" are on virtually all the pages of this self-critical and reflective book written collectively by the 16 wise men, often with dissenting "notes", some that reveal their own "biases"! Be that as it may, the general agreements on the need to cleanse oneself is praiseworthy. The question, of course, is how the profession, collectively, can go about that task, whether at the national level or the regional or the global. To say that teaching and training are two of the obvious methods is not saying a great deal; at least the statement should meet with general acceptance.
But one immediately became aware of the fact that the teachers and trainers must themselves come out of the maligned profession. Catch 22: or is it? I don't think so.

**POLICY FORMULATION**

The experience of Asia in the last few years provides ample reason for hope. A committed group of professionals have successfully launched ASIAVISION and ANN - at the regional level; Press Councils and professional groups have increasingly launched public discussions on national concerns about media coverage, content and impact; public-spirited citizens, government officials, political leaders and decision-makers at the highest levels have aired their views regarding the development and structures of the media in planning for the 21st Century of satellites, computers, word processors and laser technology. There is, therefore, a greater thrust towards formulating communication policies.

It is this, in my opinion, which makes it imperative that journalists and communicators of Asia, given the nature of communication systems in their own societies (mostly with mixed economic and political ideologies) take stock of their own chosen vocation and its future directions. Let their views be articulated; let their recommendations for themselves be made known; let their own planned actions and policies be aired. The days of journalism as a closed shop not open for scrutiny are over. Communication technology and governments' own increasing willingness to throw information channels wide open (including decentralisation, use of small media and narrowcasting) are encouraging a whole host of young information and communication entrepreneurs to set up their own shops with little or no training. Whether they act "responsibly" or not, their actions are bound to cast reflection on the established media systems - for good or for bad. It is time, therefore, for the "seniors" to be concerned about where "their" profession is headed. Is it going to be a free-for-all and dog-eat-dog situation all over again - only with greater intensity - not only on the global level,
but at the regional and national - or is some "order" going to be established before it is too late, once again?

A paragraph from "Many Voice, One World" may again give us a cue. I refer to page 267, para 65, which, after pointing out the need for alternative means of communication in contemporary society says:

"Communication policy-makers should give far greater importance to devising ways whereby the management of the media could be democratized... by associating the following categories: (a) journalists and professional communicators; (b) creative artistes; (c) technicians; (d) media owners and managers; (e) representatives of the public. Such democratization of the media needs the full support and understanding of all those working in them, and this process should lead to their having a more active role in editorial policy and management.

This conclusion derives from an earlier conviction articulated by the MacBride Commission that:

"Communication is a basic individual right, as well as a collective one required by all communities and nations. Freedom of information - and more specifically the right to seek, receive and impart information - is a fundamental human right; indeed, a prerequisite for many others. The inherent nature of communication means that its fullest possible exercise and potential depend on the surrounding political, social and economic conditions... It is in this context that the democratization of communication at national and international levels, as well as the larger role of communication in democratising society, acquires utmost importance".

Against this backdrop of value concepts (and we have not gone into all of them) which somehow apparently needed re-articulation at the global level that I would venture to draw some conclusions with respect to teaching and training programmes at the regional, and more so, at the
national and institutional level — for, it is at the micro level that NWICO's foundations have to be laid — or relaid. It was for that very reason that NI10 was changed wisely to NWICO.

That micro-level, to put it succinctly, must start at the individual student/trainee's level, imparting to him or her education based on the "surrounding political, social and economic conditions" and on value concepts and priorities of his own milieu by those well-versed in those very conditions. The foundations must be laid at that level before the young man or woman is thrown into the vortex of the profession whose concerns may eventually encompass many other mileaus making up that "One World".

It seems to me that today, we are encouraging a situation where the cart continues to lead the horse and where the average trainee starts with the emulation of "hero" newspaper and broadcasting networks whose own priorities are very different and where such emulation must necessarily leave his or her own potential audiences way behind. The values and needs of those whom the young men and women should be serving are merely "nuisances" which a few well-meaning but unrealistic "do-gooders" seem to have adopted. Besides, the glamour of the "Big Media" has totally eclipsed the continuing relevance of the "alternative means of communication" — not only in the eyes of the average journalist/teacher but also in those of the policy makers. Those means of communication are now left to the "do-gooders" who courageously venture forth into the unknown with a large heart and few tested tools. For, the "real" journalists are busy serving the glamour media and their elite audiences crowding metropolitan concrete jungles of the developing countries of Asia, with value concepts that are often alien to their own cultures. I am the researchers.

It should therefore be obvious that something is really wrong in a profession whose claim to freedoms is, in fact, based on the premise that the media they use are of the people, by the people and for the people. It should perhaps be added parenthetically that there are some
exceptional cases of excellent service-oriented media operations in the rural communities of several Asian countries— including India— but it is these Oases that make the desert look even more arid than it perhaps is.

In any case, the challenge to the profession and, through it, to the policy-makers remains quite well-defined: how to inject the necessary value concepts and community priorities into training and teaching programmes in journalism/communication in Asia?

Given the nature of journalism/communication, it must be the practitioners themselves who should create the conditions for the possible "graduation" of their practice into a true profession.

A "code" must be drawn up; a machinery for its implementation must be devised; entrance requirements must be defined by media owners, even if they are general guidelines rather than strictly drawn up degrees or diplomas with structured curricula and syllabuses.

**PROFESSIONALIZATION AS VALUE CONCEPT**

In other words, at least the first steps towards real professionalism must be taken because professionalization itself should become a value concept. All other values will automatically fall into place.

In so far as trainers and teachers are concerned such value concepts will provide the necessary framework for drawing up curricula; today there is no such framework, either for training courses, or for teaching programmes. What exists is a vague notion of what the profession demands for the immediate satisfaction of its own presumed wants. Even the definition of those wants is determined by the background, the conditioning and the perception of the "course director". True, there are some "obligatory" subjects such as the "media scene" or "history of journalism" or "role of broadcasting/newspaper" which may pass the scrutiny of directors of training institutions or the academic councils of universities in Asia. A closer look at the actual content can be
quite revealing. The provision of "reading lists" is often the exception rather than the rule. Mainly because the practitioner is a doer, not a teacher. He himself has come up the hard way, learning on the job. "What was good enough for me is good enough for you".

But times have changed, the market place is bigger, the variety is greater, the technology is newer. By and large the trainer and the teacher virtually belong to another era. That, by itself may not be necessarily a bad thing, because the value concepts we are talking about today were part and parcel of that seemingly bygone era. We have come around, almost full cycle. However, insofar as technology is concerned, it has gone way ahead of the average teacher and trainer. So have the expectations of the public and the student/trainees.

Therefore it seems to me that a marriage needs to take place between knowledge and skills; between value concepts and professional techniques.

To put it another way, training courses, however short, meant for practitioners, should consist of some communication theory which is, by its very nature, interdisciplinary and can easily accommodate value concepts. Meanwhile, teaching institutions should gear themselves to meet the growing demands for up-to-date technical facilities, even if they may not always match those of the media production units into which the new recruits might eventually be absorbed. A certain amount of on-the-job training must be left to the employer; no teaching institution can provide the full-fledged journalist, be it in broadcasting, or the print media or indeed in advertising and public relations or in government information services. Every other profession (medicine, law, etc.) accepts this as a fact.

The profession needs to be clear about what it expects from the teacher and trainer; for their part, the teacher and the trainer should seek clarification from the profession from time to time since the conditions of work are changing in media institutions. So too are public expectations from the media and the attitudes of policy-makers in governments.
The days of laissez-faire are gone. In the increasingly specialized world of today, the practitioners need training from time to time, even policy-makers need fresh data fed to them. That training and that data collection themselves need specialists: those who can take a detached view of the profession of journalism vis-a-vis the public and the governments. That was the exercise of the MacBride Commission on a global scale, triggered by an international movement for a new order. But to build any such order, efforts need to be put in collectively and separately by professional groups at less than global levels.

The challenge to practitioners in Asia, therefore, must come out of their own experiences seen against some universal value concepts. Those have been redefined for them - as for others - by the commission. It is now for them to see how best they can be translated into practice.

While professional organizations may deal with the present, teachers and trainers must bear the brunt of the future. And today's teachers and trainers of Asia must necessarily look to present-day practitioners to strengthen their own ranks for those growing future requirements. Mutual need, therefore, must beget mutual respect.