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**Does Responsible Reporting Limit
The Concept Of Journalistic Autonomy?**

By

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LIMIT THE CONCEPT OF
JOURNALISTIC AUTONOMY?

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by Suthichai Yoon

"Responsible reporting" is at best an elusive term. "Journalistic autonomy" is even more so. To pose the question of whether one affects the other is necessarily an academic exercise that could prove futile. After all, responsibility and autonomy should, at least by general definitions, supplement each other. Why then has the question been raised?

In the realm of journalism in developing countries, however, such phrases do take on different nuances, particularly by powers-that-be inclined towards authoritarian rule. "Responsible reporting," in this case, means nothing else but toeing the government line--and that certainly runs counter to "journalistic autonomy." Even in a relatively liberal political atmosphere, governments and journalists could hardly agree on what "responsible reporting" is. Casualties among protectors of "responsible reporting" in such cases have indeed been high and the struggle for "journalistic autonomy" has gone almost unnoticed among various regional organizations claiming to help promote the standard of journalism.

The sad fact remains that even the term "Press freedom" is being abandoned in favour of "journalistic autonomy." The simple, self-explanatory and down-to-earth struggle for the freedom to express one's opinion through the Press has been given a new name. Is this part of the "New World Information Order" syndrome too?

Autonomy, according to Webster's Dictionary, means: the quality or state of being self-governing; especially the right of self-government and "self-directing freedom and especially moral independence." Journalistic autonomy, therefore, carries with it some very outlandish nuances.

Responsible reporting may be less ambiguous but what it boils down to is, if one was permitted to get back to the basics, professional reporting.

To ask whether professional reporting runs counter to Press freedom would be preposterous. But somehow, the emergence of new phrases in the academic discussions of the "free flow of information" has resulted, sad to say, in this kind of futile exercise.

Obviously, in many developing countries, and ASEAN members are no exceptions here, few practising journalists could afford the luxury of devoting much time or energy to the academic discussion of "responsible reporting" and its relationship with "journalistic autonomy" when the daily pressure demands that they strive to achieve both to a reasonable degree--a remote ambition at best, and a dangerous self-destructive dream at worst, when they face the continuing rigid restrictions imposed by the government.

"Responsible reporting" has been used to indicate, in certain circles, a tendency to avoid "rocking the boat" while in another sense it conveys a journalist's attempt to report "both sides of the story." Still, a very crucial question arises: Responsible to whom? To most professional journalists, the answer is simple: Responsible reporting carries with it the burden of being able to report the truth in a responsible way, respecting the public's right to know and struggling against government efforts to cover up on information vital to national interests. This line of interpretation naturally means that such reporting could be carried out only in an environment of a "free Press," whether or not it fits the definition of "journalistic autonomy."

However, if responsible reporting implies what most governments in this region have been preaching--refraining from the so-called "sensitive issues" (by government decree) and highlighting the official lines over and above 'embarrassing' public clamour for changes--it certainly limits the concept of basic journalism, as it is traditionally known.

It has often been said by self-proclaimed "communicators" that responsible reporting must first be created among journalists before "autonomy" is possible. Others have expounded the same theory in another form: That "balanced reporting" is lacking among journalists in this region prompting government authorities to nudge them into a more "responsible position". But it must also be said that "balanced reporting" in an "unbalanced society" is not only impossible, it is also irresponsible on the part of journalists who are often, the victims of such misleading policy, which is understandable to a certain extent, although not necessarily justifiable by any social standards of an open society.

In this context, the "communication challenges in Asia" must inevitably include the return to basic definitions of what "communicators" assume their roles to be in society--and whether they believe they are responsible for creating a free environment for the people to obtain information of all shades and colours to judge their government by as well as

to improve on the social conditions, in the process fighting against any mis conceptions about "journalistic autonomy" which has been linked to "responsible reporting"-- that represents nothing more than communicating to convince the masses that the status quo is the ultimate ambition.

This, indeed, is a dangerous trend, particularly in view of the lack of stimulation from the Press itself and the various communications organizations to offer the new generation of journalists to become more critical of their own roles and the political, social and economic environments around them.

The misleading concept that "responsible journalism" must somehow indicate a stamp of approval from the authorities or the peer-group pressure offers little incentives to potential journalists to take journalism seriously as a career which has traditionally involved the drive to challenge the established sets of social and political guidance so that the pursuit for changes for the better will always be the torchlight of the profession.

Much philosophizing on the communication issues has dominated the scene but the practical solutions for the practising journalists on the basic problem of overcoming the very real hurdles of being able to carry out professional reporting to serve public interests rather than government leaders' whims and wishes (in some circles, this is labelled "irresponsible reporting") have yet to be found. To be realistic about it, however, the struggle would have to be fought on the journalists' own home grounds. But genuine support and more down-to-earth discussions on these vital issues, rather than academic generalizations, would certainly be appreciated.

"Responsible reporting," after all, implies the freedom for journalists to serve their role responsibly. In the end, the question boils down to: Who sets the rules of the role of journalism and who have the final say in defining these rules of the game? To raise the question of responsible reporting versus journalistic autonomy before these posers are cleared up is to invite more questions of an equally puzzling magnitude.