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Opening Remarks

By

Heinz Bongartz
WORKSHOP ON MEDIA EDUCATION IN SOUTH ASIA

[04-08 August, 1992]

Indian Institute of Mass Communication, New Delhi

OPENING REMARKS BY

Dr. Heinz Bongartz, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, New Delhi

It gives me great pleasure to associate myself with the opening of the Workshop on Media Education in South Asia and to address such a distinguished gathering of professionals in the many disciplines of communication.

I would like to say how very satisfied I feel about the initiative taken by the organisers of this workshop to bring together in New Delhi professionals drawn from the South Asian region. I welcome you all on behalf of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

In the present day world, significance of communication for human life cannot be overestimated. It is impossible for any society to exist, much less develop and survive, without communication. For the existence as well as the organisation of any society, communication is a fundamental and vital process. Through communication, individuals become communities and societies. Information is the centre of every human activity. Groups and classes have always wielded authority by restricting and denying the masses
access to information and education. Unhindered communication between people and states, as postulated by the United Nations in its Universal Declaration of Human Rights [December 10, 1948], is an indispensable prerequisite to the humane, peaceful co-existence of people and peoples, to education and vocational training, to participation in social and cultural life. Ladies and gentlemen, who would know this better than you as experts in this field.

Much as the media may be criticised, there is no-one who would question their usefulness as such. Nowadays, media are simply indispensable for all social areas and activities. On the one hand, politics, economics, culture, science, and administration are effectively conveyed to the masses, and on the other, all these activities also largely depend on media messages for their information and in their decision-making. Since communication can be used effectively for social development, the development of media, especially in the Third World countries, assumes greater significance. Besides this, creating a high level of awareness about the role media can play in the development of society is also very important. This process of media education will go a long way in the participation of communities' members in media development, which will subsequently lead to their overall development.

While talking about the role of media in social and economic development, we find that there is hardly any news
in the media about the development activities - and here I am referring to media both in the developed as well as developing world. The stupendous task of development, the changes coming about in rural and urban areas, amongst women, workers and others appear to be almost non-existent for the media. It seems that editors and media managers believe more in the popular formula that power, position, money and sex make news - and that virtue, normality, hard work and humility don't. Otherwise, how could one explain that an insignificant proportion of the total news space is devoted to women's and children's problems in the press in the South Asian region? While taking up the issue of the role of media in society, you have to ask the question in your capacity as media educators as to whether we should still consider it wise to adopt the definition of bad news being good news and keep our eyes closed to constructive and developmental activity. Is this what really interests our community members? Are they content to remain ignorant of what is happening in various spheres, of what deepens their understanding, what helps them to discharge their duty as well-informed citizens, what enables them to participate in media development for the democratisation of communication?

The media is expected to provide information, education and entertainment. How much of each depends on the nature of the medium and the policy of the persons who own and manage a particular medium. Generally, a newspaper's first business is hard news, balanced and intelligible accounts
of events in the country and the world. Magazines deal more with opinion, interpretation, background, etc. Radio and television contain a higher proportion of entertainment; films even more so. Information truly informs when it manages to catch and hold attention, and entertainment at its best fulfils a larger purpose. However, here I would like to raise a question. Judging from the overwhelming significance attached to entertainment in our lives, we can easily call the present age "the age of entertainment". How has this sorry state of affairs come about? Is it largely because of the abdication of responsibility by the communicators and the apathy of the social and behavioural scientists? Though we can never deny the role of entertainment in the life of man, to give it so much weightage in the media and neglect priority areas is difficult to understand. The discriminated lot in society, like women, children, workers, etc. need some positive media attention. Also, as a media practitioner today, you should keep in mind that there are people out there who do not like what you do, how you do it, or the explanations you offer for both.

Now a brief word about media ethics. It is understandable that the rush of events leads to ethical decisions more by reflex than by rational thinking. The newspaperman tends to emphasise more on his ability to make fast decisions when he is faced with daily crises. Similarly, people in advertising have to be competitive and enterprising. So is the case with other media people. In such situations, there
is hardly any room for a reasoning process for media practitioners. As a result, an ethical vacuum has cropped up in most media institutions. I am sure that this group of media experts will come up with some suggestions as to how this vacuum can be filled.

Finally, I would like to briefly touch upon the work of the Media and Communication Department in the International Cooperation Division of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. The Foundation has helped to develop mass communication and media in Third World countries since the early 1970s. Promotion of media and communication falls within the Foundation's overall brief to promote democratic structures and processes by which it aims to contribute to countries' and regions' social, political and economic stability. The Foundation's support in this area extends to benefiting especially those who have remained underprivileged within existing structures; to strengthening the economically weaker countries; to improving the position of poorer groups in society.

The traditional activities of the Media and Communication Department of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, aimed at promoting mass media and information systems in the Third World, include:
international and regional conferences organised in cooperation with media-relevant institutions at the highest level;

- cooperation with institutions in the Third World concerned with scientific research in the field of media and journalistic training;

- training and follow-up programmes, such as seminars, workshops, on-the-job training, consultancy, etc., organised in cooperation with individual broadcasting corporations, radio and TV stations and news agencies.

At the moment, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's activities extend to Africa, Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean. Projects of global design are implemented from Bonn. The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung currently supports 20 projects promoting media and communication in the Third World.

I would like to conclude by thanking the organisers of this workshop who gave me this opportunity to be in the midst of experts from the South Asia region. I am confident that such a fine group as this is sure to have very fruitful deliberations on the subject.