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<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Yb Dato Mohamed Rahmat.</td>
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Speech

By

Yb Dato Mohamed Rahmat
SPEECH BY THE MINISTER OF INFORMATION
YB DATO' MOHAMED RAHMAT
FOR THE OPENING OF THE SEMINAR ON
"ASEAN VALUES IN JOURNALISM"
AT THE MING COURT HOTEL IN KUALA LUMPUR
ON AUGUST 24, 1995
FIRST OF ALL, LET ME WISH YOU ALL A WARM WELCOME TO MALAYSIA AND THANK THE ORGANISERS, THE ASIAN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND INFORMATION CENTRE, FOR ACCORDING ME THIS OPPORTUNITY.

3. LET ME FIRST SAY THAT I DO NO
SUBSCRIBE TO PROF. HUNTINGTON’S
SCENARIO. NEITHER DO I EMBRACE MR.
FUKUYAMA’S THESIS. WHAT WE ARE
WITNESSING IS NOT A CHALLENGE TO
"WESTERN" VALUES, BUT A REASSERTION OF
TRADITIONAL "VALUES" BY A NEWLY
CONFIDENT ASIA THAT IS THRIVING
ECONOMICALLY AND CULTURALLY. IN FACT,
THERE ARE MANY IN THE WEST WHO
SUBSCRIBE TO THESE "ASIAN" VALUES —
SUCH AS THE STRENGTH OF THE FAMILY UNIT
AND THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST PORNOGRAPHY
AND VIOLENCE IN THE MEDIA. IN MY VIEW,
THIS DEBATE OVER "ASIAN" AND "WESTERN"
VALUES, WAGED FIERCELY BY THE ELITES IN
BOTH EAST AND WEST, OBSCURES A MUCH
LARGER ISSUE FACING JOURNALISTS, WHICH
I WILL COME TO IN A MOMENT.
4. BUT TO GET BACK TO THIS DEBATE ON "ASIAN" AND "WESTERN" VALUES. MY VIEWS IS THAT NO JOURNALIST, WHETHER ASIAN OR WESTERN, COMES TO HIS OR HER PROFESSION COMPLETELY VALUE-FREE. WE EACH BRING OUR OWN CULTURAL BIASES AND PREJUDICES TO OUR WORK, BE IT IN GOVERNMENT, THE MEDIA OR THE CORPORATE SECTOR. THE LARGER ISSUE FOR JOURNALISTS AS INFORMATION PURVEYORS IS WHETHER THEY ALSO POSSESS THE CULTURAL SENSITIVITY REQUIRED TO OPERATE IN A GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT.

5. FOR EXAMPLE, CNN IS FILLED WITH BRIGHT JOURNALISTS. HOW THEN IS ONE TO EXPLAIN CNN'S FAUX PAS WHEN IT LAUNCHED ITS INDIAN BROADCAST WITH A PICTURE OF COWS AMBLING DOWN THE STREETS OF BOMBAY? IS THAT A QUESTION OF "VALUES"
OR "SENSITIVITY"? AND LET'S TAKE THE QUESTION OF WHAT HAPPENED ON STAR TV, WHEN AN INDIAN HOST OF A TALK SHOW ALLOWED TO GO UNCHALLENGED AN ASSERTION BY AN INDIAN ACTIVIST THAT MAHATMA GANDHI WAS A "BASTARD". THE BACKLASH AGAINST THAT LED TO RUPERT MURDOCH BEING SUED --- THE LAST I HEARD THERE WAS A WARRANT OF ARREST FOR HIM OUT IN INDIA --- AND THE SHOW BEING YANKED FROM THE AIR. THAT DECISION WAS MADE, SIGNIFICANTLY, BY MR. MURDOCH, NOT HIS EDITORS AT STAR TV.

6. WHICH BRINGS ME TO THE LARGER POINT I WISH TO MAKE HERE CONCERNING JOURNALISM AND "VALUES". THE "VALUES" DEBATE IN JOURNALISM HAS, UP TO NOW, ESSENTIALLY HINGED ON A BASIC UNDERLYING ASSUMPTION: MEDIA THAT PLAY
AN ADVERSARIAL, EVEN HOSTILE, ROLE VIS-A-VIS GOVERNMENTS ARE GENERALLY LIONISED BY WESTERN JOURNALISTS. THOSE, LIKE MANY IN ASIA, WHO APPROACH SENSITIVE ISSUES WITH CARE AND SUBTLETLY ARE OFTEN DISMISSED AS "LACKEYS" OR "RUNNING DOGS" OF THE POWERS-THAT-BE. NEVER MIND THAT IN THE WEST, AS AMERICAN WRITER A.J. LIEBLING ONCE SAID, FREEDOM OF THE PRESS ESSENTIALLY BELONGS ONLY TO THOSE WHO OWN ONE.

7. BUT NOW THE DEBATE HAS MOVED ONTO A DIFFERENT PLANE. DEREGULATION, PRIVATISATION AND EXPONENTIAL TECHNOLOGICAL PROWESS IS MAKING CENSORSHIP BY GOVERNMENTS A MOOT POINT. AS OUR PRIME MINISTER, DATO' SERI DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD, SAID ONLY
PARTLY IN JEST HIS ADDRESS TO THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY IN 1993, THE DAY IS FAST APPROACHING WHEN ALL THAT ONE WILL NEED TO RECEIVE A SATELITE BROADCAST WILL BE A COAT HANGER HUNG OUTSIDE THE HOUSE. WE ARE NOW IN AN ERA WHEN INFORMATION FLOWS VIRTUALLY FREE ACROSS NATIONAL BOUNDARIES, EITHER BROADCAST BY SATELITES ORBITING HIGH IN SPACE OR TRAVELLING AT CYBERSPEED ALONG A SEAMLESS INFOBAHN.

8. WHICH BRINGS ME TO THE LARGER POINT I WISH MAKE IN THIS DEBATE ABOUT "VALUES". MEDIA ORGANISATIONS ARE BEING SWALLOWED UP WHOLE BY CORPORATIONS WHOSE ONLY LOYALTY IS TO THE BOTTOM LINE, NOT TO ANY INTRINSIC "VALUE" HELD BY JOURNALISTS THE WORLD OVER. THE WALT DISNEY COMPANY’S
TAKEOVER OF THE ABC NETWORK ---
DESCRIBED BY ONE U.S. COMMENTATOR AS
"GODZILLA MARRYING KING KONG" --- AND
WESTINGHOUSE’S BID TO BUY C.B.S., BOTH
IN THE UNITED STATES, ARE MERELY THE
LATEST HIGHLIGHTS OF THIS TREND.

9. WHETHER WE LIKE IT OR NOT, NEWS IS
BIG BUSINESS AND THE INCREASING
INTRUSION OF THE BOARDROOM INTO
NEWSROOM DECISION-MAKING IS A FAIT
ACCOMPLI. FOR EXAMPLE, WHEN MR MURDOCH
PULLED THE PLUG ON THE "NIKKI TONIGHT"
TALK SHOW, OR WHEN HE DROPPED THE
B.B.C. NEWS SERVICE FROM STAR TV’S
LINE-UP FOR CHINA, WAS HE OPERATING AS
A JOURNALIST OR AS CORPORATE CHIEFTAIN?
IT BEGS THE QUESTION OF WHO REALLY ARE
THE GATEKEEPERS OF THIS NEW INFORMATION
ERA. NOTE THAT I SAID "INFORMATION",

8
NOT "NEWS". THAT'S BECAUSE THE LINES ARE FAST BLURRING BETWEEN THE TWO. "INFORMERCIALS" AND "ADVERTORIALS" ARE VYING WITH "NEWS", AS DEFINED THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY", FOR VIEWERS AND READERS. AND THE BOTTOM LINE RULES.

10. THEREIN LIES THE DANGER FOR JOURNALISTS OF BOTH EAST AND WEST. THE DILEMMA THAT CONFRONTS MANY JOURNALISTS TODAY IS WHETHER THEY ARE WILLING TO SUBSCRIBE TO THE VALUES OF THE BOARDROOM RATHER THAN THE NEWSROOM. AND UNLIKE NEWSROOMS, BOARDROOMS THE WORLD OVER SHARE ESSENTIALLY THE SAME MOTIVE: PROFITS. IT"S A CHALLENGE THAT JOURNALISTS WILL EACH HAVE TO ADDRESS IN THEIR OWN WAY, AND THEIR RESPONSE WILL BE SHAPED AS MUCH BY THEIR OWN CULTURAL ATTRIBUTES AS THEIR COMMITMENT TO JOURNALISTIC VALUES.
11. JOURNALISTS IN THE WEST WOULD ALREADY APPEAR TO HAVE MADE THEIR CHOICE. EVEN THE SO-CALLED "RESPECTED" OR "MAINSTREAM" MEDIA THERE, BROADCAST AS WELL AS PRINT, ARE FOLLOWING THEIR TABLOID COUSINS IN A RABID DESCENT INTO GUTTER AS THEY SEEK TO BUILD CIRCULATION AND REAP PROFITS FOR THEIR SHAREHOLDERS. RESPECT FOR THE TRUTH AND COMMITMENT TO ETHICS ARE QUICKLY FLYING OUT THE WINDOW, THROWN OUT BY THE PRESSURE TO KEEP BOTTOM LINES HEALTHY AT ALL COSTS. THE MEDIA'S OBSESSION WITH SCANDAL AND ITS "GOT YOU" APPROACH TO JOURNALISM HAVE CONTRIBUTED GREATLY TO THE CYNICISM THAT ENVELOPS THE POPULATION IN MANY WESTERN NATIONS.
12. IS THIS WHAT WE WANT IN ASIA?

Many of our nations in this region are relative newcomers to the ways of democracy. In fact, we are still in the process of fashioning a democratic system that fits our cultural, ethical and moral sensibilities even while it empowers our citizens. The media, of course, play an increasingly vital role in this process. Are Asian editors committed to this process by moulding an informed citizenry capable of making judicious distinctions between the "freedom without responsibility" attitude of those in the West and the "freedom for the greater good of the nation" attitude of many of us here in Asia, even if that choice means lower returns for shareholders?
13. THE ANSWER, TO ME, IS OBVIOUS. IN FACT, AS A PARTING IDEA, LET ME SUGGEST HERE THAT PERHAPS WHAT EDITORS IN ASIA MAY WANT TO DO IS GET A COMMITMENT FROM THEIR CORPORATE OWNERS TO A "CODE OF ETHICS" THAT RECOGNISES THE MEDIA’S UNIQUE ROLE IN NATION-BUILDING.

14. THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME. I WISH YOU HAPPY DELIBERATIONS AS YOU GRAPPLE WITH THE MOMENTOUS ISSUES FACING YOU IN THIS ERA OF SWEEPING CHANGES IN THE MEDIA INDUSTRY.