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Report

By

Virgilio Labrador
SEMINAR ON
ASIAN VALUES IN JOURNALISM

24 - 25 August, 1995
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Prepared by

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SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

Introduction

This report summarizes the proceedings of the seminar on “Asian Values in Journalism,” held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia from 24-25 August, 1995. The seminar was organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) with support from Swedish International Development Cooperation Authority (SIDA) and the New Straits Times.

The objectives of the seminar were to discuss the concept of Asian values in journalism; to increase awareness and understanding of issues related to value formation in Asian journalism; to identify emerging media trends and developments and their impact on media values in Asia; to compare Asian and Western journalism values; and to develop actionable recommendations on key issues identified during the seminar.

Thirty-seven journalism, educators, policy makers and practitioners from 14 countries participated in the three-day meeting. The seminar programme included panel discussions and working group sessions on various aspects of Asian values in journalism. Recommendations were formulated at the end of the seminar based on the seminar deliberations. During the third day, a planning meeting was held to discuss the outline of a book on the subject.

(see Appendix A for the seminar programme and Appendix B for the list of participants)

Day One, Thursday, August 24, 1995

Opening Session

The opening session was attended by the Minister of Information of Malaysia, Mr. Mohamed Rahmat, Mr. A. Kadir Jasin, Group Editor of the News Straits Times Press and veteran journalist Samad Ismail.

In his welcome address, Kadir Jasin posed the question whether Asian values could be practised in journalism. He pointed out that in the West, individual freedom tends to override the freedom of society at large.

AMIC secretary general Vijay Menon said that this attempt to bring together journalists and communication scholars from Asia and Australia was a progression of a
process started seven years ago when AMIC and the Department of Information of Indonesia had organised a consultation in Jakarta on 'Press Systems in ASEAN.' According to Mr. Menon, not many Western journalists fully understand or appreciate the critical process of nation building under way in Asia. The libertarian theory of the West evolved in the last century does not apply to present-day Asia, he pointed out. A search for a more positive approach to defining journalistic values and goals on a regional basis is therefore warranted. However, a search for Asian values should not mean the total rejection of Western journalistic codes and conventions, he emphasised.

While pointing out that what we are witnessing is not a challenge to "Western" values, but a reassertion of traditional values by a newly confident Asia, Malaysia's Minister for Information Mohamed Rahmat in his inaugural address drew attention to another pressing issue facing journalists today, the submergence of media organisations in corporations whose only loyalty is to the bottom line, not to any intrinsic value. News is big business and the increasing intrusion of the boardroom -- whose only motive the world over is accumulation of profits -- into newsroom decision making is a fait accompli, said the Minister. The challenge facing journalists from the East and the West is whether they are willing to subscribe to the values of the boardroom rather than the newsroom.

In his keynote address, veteran journalist Samad Ismail commented that while value systems vary from one society to another, Asian professionals share more values than they imagine with their counterparts in the West. A common Asian value system is therefore illusional as it is elusive, he said. He called for more responsibility on the part of journalists because freedom is never handed to the media on a silver platter but has to be earned day after day. An important point he made was that the dual role of the media as both a watchdog and supporter of national building.

Session I

The first seminar session dealing with the issue 'Asian Values in Journalism: Is There Such a Thing?', was chaired by P.C. Shivadas, Group General Manager of the New Straits Times.

The first speaker, Melinda Quintos de Jesus, Editor, Philippine Journalism Review, outlined the factors that made the Philippines the odd person out in the ASEAN region. The interaction between the press and the government in the country is different from most countries, allowing for a free-wheeling exchange, for unbridled critical feedback, which at times, even Filipinos find excessive, she admitted. The free-wheeling, market oriented style of journalism has another mixed fallout, she said. It tends to cater to the public need for entertainment as a way of selling more newspapers. Sensationalised news is a popular formula, making the press perform the role of a referee in the jousting tournament.

However, Ms. Quintos pointed out that Filipino journalists have begun to accept the need to monitor their performance and the Philippine Press Institute has organised a grievance committee made up of senior editors.
In her presentation, Mrinal Pande, Editor of the Indian regional language daily *Saptahik Hindustan*, focussed on the impact of India’s colonial past on the shaping of values in journalism. As an example, she pointed to the difference between the widely read Indian language media and the elitist English language press, which despite being read by a minority, captures the bulk of advertising revenue. However, this situation is slowly changing, she acknowledged, with more and more corporate funding going into TV programmes in Indian regional languages like Hindi and Tamil.

Lamenting the fact that there was very little communication among Asian countries, the next speaker, P. Kharel, Editor of *The Rising Nepal*, said that this made it inevitable that journalists like him turned to the Western media to access information about developments relating to neighbouring countries in Southeast Asia. The bombardment of information by Western news agencies like CNN could not but lead to certain distortions in the values of individual Asian countries, he cautioned. When the Western media reports on developments in its own region, it by and large adheres to the values of accuracy, balance and clarity (or ABC). But these values are given the go-by when dealing with events occurring in other countries.

Western media has an advantage over the Asian media by virtue of its superior resource base. But the answer to this is not more state subsidy for news agencies in Asia, Mr. Kharel warned.

Australian media expert Barry Lowe, from the City University of Hong Kong, drew attention to the politicisation of the debate on journalistic values. The two arguments are on different levels, almost in different languages, he pointed out. Advocates of development communication usually cite the values of responsibility, basic needs, human developments, morality, cohesion, social transformation, cultural integrity, etc. The Western liberal-pluralists on the other argue that the core of values of the ideal media system should be values connected with the word ‘freedom’ -- freedom of expression, freedom from restriction, freedom to criticise governing institutions, freedom of access to information etc., and values connected with the word ‘right’ -- the public’s right to know, citizen’s rights, the rights of the individual, the right to operate in a free marketplace of ideas.

However, despite wide-ranging cultural disparities, a strand of commonness could be discerned in the media systems of the two regions, Mr. Lowe argued. News media products are all cultural products which tell the stories of their societies. Journalists from Iran to Japan are all storytellers, and it is in this fundamental role that media persons can best find the core values that transcend the differences of journalistic practice within different cultural boundaries, he suggested.

While the priority accorded to certain news stories over others could sometimes distinguish Asian media from its counterpart in the West, there is one factor that links publications all over the world, pointed out Endy M.Bayuni, Senior Editor, *The Jakarta Post*, in his presentation. This was the business of selling news. The way journalists select and present news is affected by commercial considerations, and these very often override what are described as Asian values. Sometimes this leads to papers
running lurid pictures and sensational headlines and stories, in the hope of attracting more readership. There have also been cases where some of the racial, ethnic and religious conflicts were triggered off or at least fanned by the press. This is why the press in Indonesia is compelled to treat with caution stories that are deemed to be politically explosive, even though there is no official censorship, said Mr Bayuni.

These are factors that are not taken into consideration by the Western media when reporting on Indonesia according to Mr. Bayuni. One of the traits often found in their reports is the tendency to oversimplify, or paint the situation in black and white. For example, as Moslems against Christians, Malays against Chinese, Javanese against non-Javanese. These tend to distort the reality, he said.

Session II

The second session of the first day’s proceedings on ‘Social and Cultural Influences on Journalism Values in Asia’, was chaired by Prof. Syed Arabi Idid, President, Communication Educators’ Association of Malaysia.

In his presentation, Sankaran Ramanathan, Principal Lecturer at the Mara Institute of Technology, Malaysia, used the findings of his research study involving Malaysian journalists working in the English language, Bahasa Malaysia, Chinese and Tamil newspapers, to highlight the social and cultural influences affecting journalism values in the Malaysian media. Prof. Ramanathan pointed out that the needs of readers emerges as the principal element in the news judgement process of the ‘gatekeepers’ who were interviewed. The so-called western values such as immediacy, objectivity, proximity and timeliness were not accorded the high scores that would have been expected. Economic/business news constituted the leading category of news. The second most popular category was international relations. Third came politics, followed by sports and entertainment.

Surprisingly, news about conflicts/violence was the least mentioned category of foreign news. This lends credence to the belief that Asian journalists are more responsible in reporting on the West than their Western counterparts are in reporting on Asia, said Ramanathan.

Dealing with the concept of Asian values in the context of Indonesia, Zulkarimein Nasution, Lecturer in the Department of Communication, University of Indonesia, referred to the two principles which have shaped the values of Indonesian journalists. The first is the preference for harmony over conflict, an important factor in a communally sensitive society like Indonesia. The second principle is respect for the leader. The positive aspect of this principle is that leadership becomes more effective when imbued with trust, said Nasution.

In her presentation on the impact of societal change on Thai journalism, Dr. Sudarat Disayawattana, Dean of the School of Communication Arts of Bangkok University highlighted the technological revolution that has swept through the country, leaving its mark on the media. Such a heavy technological inflow has necessitated the need for
greater capital investment, compelling the media to be led by the market system, she said. Maximisation of profits and a disregard for the values of traditional journalism are the trends noticeable in the media today, she pointed out. Thai journalism does not respond to the needs of the changing society or changing audience because the audience is seen only as a potential customer.

Cautioning against viewing Asian values in an abstract context, Dr. Lee Chin-Chuan of the Chinese University of Hong Kong, made a case for bridging the hiatus between West and East in journalism. Asian values can be meaningful only if they are founded on universal values and goals like love, peace etc, he argued. And while concepts like 'third world' and 'Asian values' are useful as tools to study phenomena, there is an urgent need to contextualise them.

Session III

The final session of the day, chaired by Melinda Quintos de Jesus, delved with the topic “Influence of Politics and Policies on Journalism Values in Asia.”

Pointing to the predilection of the people of Bangladesh to talk in generalities and stress the negative aspects of a situation, Dr. Tawhidul Anwar, Director General of the Press Institute of Bangladesh, highlighted how this trend manifested itself in the negativism permeating the Bangladesh press. To illustrate his thesis he gave the example of the last Bangladesh parliamentary elections of 1991 when every newspaper predicted the loser to be the winner only to be embarrassed later. This happened because the press was totally out of touch with the masses, thereby ignoring a value that is of prime importance in Asia, where the unlettered masses have a stake in the political process.

The next speaker, V.S.Gupta of Haryana Agricultural University, India, gave an overview of the influence of politics and policies in journalism in India. He pointed out that at times irresponsible reporting causes cause ethnic and communal disharmony. Another disquieting development in India highlighted by Mr. Gupta was the fact that journalism is being driven more by market forces than by the values of ethics and integrity.

Nantiya Tangwisutijit, assistant editor of The Nation, Bangkok, spoke about the love-hate relationship between the Thai state and press. While the Thai press has had a role in enhancing and supporting democracy, particularly against the military takeover of the civilian government, the government is still somewhat wary of allowing the press to exercise its freedom to the fullest extent, as evident in Prime Minister Barnharn’s evading the press after taking office, she said. Moreover, the government and the army still own all the TV channels, a powerful media arm.
Working Group Sessions

The day’s proceedings wound up with two working group discussions, one among the media and the other among educators, to draw up a list of recommendations for implementation by the Asian media practitioners and educators.

Day Two, Friday, August 25, 1995

Session IV


The first speaker, Victor Gunawardena, Media Consultant, Sri Lanka, focussed on the changes that are overtaking the Sri Lankan media, as a result of internal factors which are largely socio-political and external factors influenced by advances in technology. While radio continued to be an important pro-poor medium, there was a need for the government to desist from using the state radio for politically partisan purposes, he said. The advent of TV had affected radio viewership, he acknowledged. The focus on entertainment in TV programmes and the anomalous exemption which the medium enjoyed from the government’s media ban on liquor and tobacco ads were causes for concern.

Mr. Gunawardena also drew attention to the growing number of cases of intimidation of journalists. While a new sense of freedom was evident in the media shortly after the new government assumed office, gradually a credibility gap was emerging between pledge and performance. Thus fear and insecurity continued to haunt journalists. However, journalists also are not free of blame, he said. It is lamentable that in several sections of the print and electronic media the lack of professionalism is glaring, according to Mr. Gunawardena. He pointed out the need for the media to imbibe a sense of responsibility.

Kyoto Ito of the NHK Broadcasting Culture and Research Institute, Japan, highlighted the changes that had occurred in the media in post-war Japan. The introduction of satellite technology has contributed to the gradual lessening of Japan's regional differences and to extreme centralisation in Tokyo, she said. Nationwide broadcasts have spurred the standardisation of Japanese culture, she pointed out. Another matter for concern is the domination of the North as a transmitter, she said. Most programmes from overseas are made in the United States or Europe. This should be balanced with more transmissions from within Asia, she suggested.

In her presentation, Dr. Maria Celeste Habito-Cadiz of the Institute of Development Communication, University of Philippines, highlighted the growing practice of development communication and development journalism in the country. This has led to journalists playing the role of intermediaries in the process of development. Many of them are actively involved in bringing information related to these sectors to the countryside through the local and community media. But alongside this positive trend
are also negative trends, such as what she described as ACDC (attack and collect, defend and collect) indulged in by some Filipino journalists. Or, to use another term, 'envelope' journalism. Such corrupt practices which tarnish the image of the media are sought to be corrected, she said.

Session V

The second session of the day on “Value Formation in Journalism Education in Asia,” chaired by Dr. Yeap Soon Beng of the School of Communication Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, got off the ground with a presentation by Eric Loo of the University of Wollongong, Australia. He critiqued the Western media for not accepting the concept of development journalism. At the same time, he also criticised Asian journalists for treating news as a commodity and not as a tool for social change. He stressed the need for follow up, which is the only device through which reporters can participate in social change. There is an urgency to break off from conventional reporting and focus on the community.

If the journalist is to be a social change agent, he needs to be a skilled communicator, said Mr. Loo. One technological input which could help in this process is electronic mail, which could serve as link for journalists and educators to exchange information and facilitate networking.

Dr. Chung Dae-Soo from Kyungnam University, Korea, confessed he was unclear about what Asian values were. However, he could put down what he considered were Korean values, he said. And these were: human rights, environment, social welfare, regional autonomy and national unification.

Mr. Mohd. Dhari Othman of the School of Communication Studies, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, argued that since for Malaysia the priority is to develop the people social and economically, to foster greater integration between the various ethnic groups, to maintain a stable political system, it is believed that freedom of speech if practised to the extreme would do more harm than good to the society. Thus various forms of legislation existed, curbing the freedom of speech in the country.

Session VI

The last session of the seminar, which posed the question: “Asian Values in Journalism: Idle Concept or Realistic Goal?,” was chaired by Abdul Rahman Sulaiman, Member of the Malaysian Parliament.

The first speaker, Dr. Crispin Maslog, of the Institute of Development Communication, University of the Philippines, after arguing that journalism in Asia had come a long way from being an imitator of Western values to a practitioner of a value-system more relevant to its own context, sought to concretise the discussion with a slide presentation which listed Western or traditional values and Asian or developmental values. Western media, according to him, were non-purposive, mostly events-oriented, factual, elitist, not pragmatic, personality-oriented and individualistic
in its approach to reporting. Asian media, on the other hand, was purposive (to promote development), process-oriented, ind-depth in presentation, had a pro-poor bias, was pragmatic, was people-oriented and scientific in its approach to reporting.

Sinha Ratnatunga, Editor, The Sunday Times, Sri Lanka, awaiting trial in a defamation case initiated by the Sri Lankan President, used his own experience to illustrate his thesis that while he did not subscribe to the western formula of publishing anything that sells the paper, he believed very vehemently in a free and unfettered press, a press not subject to over or covert censorship by the politicians in office. Freedom and responsibility are two sides to the same coin which give value to the press. One without the other would be valueless.

The same plea was made by Owais Aslam Ali, Secretary General of Pakistan Press Foundation. Highlighting the struggle of the Pakistan press against authoritarianism, he said that for the concept of Asian values to develop and have credibility, Asian journalists should be in the forefront in the efforts to create a form of journalism relevant to the needs of the countries of the region, while at the same time, fostering traditions of a free press.

Striking a different note, Asad Latif of the Straits Times, Singapore, made an impassioned plea to eschew the ‘search and destroy’ brand of journalism that had gained currency. The assumption that the government must necessarily be evil is a dubious one, he contended. If a journalist says a government is honest and efficient, why should he be distrusted? was the question he posed. Why should the lifestyle of one part of the world be the only choice for another part? There should be room for alternative voices in the media, and that is bound to happen with the changing balance of economic power tilting in favour of Asia, he said.

Relating the concept of Asian values to Kantian philosophical discourse, Enayetullah Khan, Editor, Holiday, Bangladesh, posited that these values in each country, as the societal expression of the collective, are not uniform. But they do share a commonality born of historical and political experience. A repugnance of the colonial past, and a suspicion of neo-colonial regime of exploitation are the two principal elements in this commonality, he contended.

Closing Session

The proceedings of the seminar closed with a wrap-up by AMIC secretary general Vijay Menon and a discussion on the two lists of recommendations presented by the working groups of media persons and educators. In the consensual document, Asian organisations involved in the promotion and development of journalism curricula were called upon to cooperate and coordinate their research activities, while the media industry was asked to create greater access to the creative energies of youth which is a significant and growing segment in the region. It was also felt that efforts should be made to create effective media watch groups in respective countries to monitor deviations from professed journalistic ethics and standards in the Asian setting.
The strategies outlined for the achievement of this objective included the setting up of an Internet discussion group and a World Wide Web home page for journalism educators and practitioners in the region, initiation of teaching courses and workshops geared towards an Asian-centred journalistic discourse, promoting collaborative research and establishing annual awards to recognise outstanding achievements in Asian-centred journalism, constantly upgrading conceptual skills, and initiating effective interaction between the media and under-represented groups such as women, ethnic minorities and the economically and socially disadvantaged.

The question and answer forums interspersed between sessions proved a lively source of debate and discussion, ironing out -- and sometimes taking apart -- many of the issues thrown up by speakers. The scope of the issues ranged from the extent to which journalists should participate in nation-building to the context in which any form of censorship can be justified to even whether such a concept as Asian values exists. There was a general agreement over the belief that the press should not be used or abused by politicians. At the same time, it was felt, the 'victim mentality' of the media should give way to a more positive alternative perspective. Instead of blaming the West for all the problems faced by Asian journalists, they should start examining their own practices.

Another positive suggestion that emerged during the discussions was the need for synergy between journalists and politicians. Mooted by a Philippine media person, it sparked off a heated debate calling for a clear indication of the limits of such interactions.

One question related to the methods to ensure equity in Internet -- how to avoid the power imbalance, when some countries who do not have access to the technology are bound to be left out of the network. Another issue that concerned participants was how much emphasis should be placed on the acquisition of language skills. One questioner posed whether journalism could be taught at all in institutions, or whether it is better to learn on the job.

Commercialisation of the media was also a cause for concern. The advertisements that disturb the flow of programmes on TV came in for much criticism. So also the predilection to carry sensational stories in the interests of 'selling' the newspaper. The question was how much importance to give to entertainment. The consensus was that even educative programmes and stories could be packaged in a more 'entertaining' manner.

**Seminar Recommendations**

In conclusion, a set of recommendations were adopted by the participants. The recommendation were divided into two parts: approaches and strategies for promoting and applying Asian values to journalism practice. The recommendations were as follows:
Approaches:

1. Asian organisations involved in the promotion of the development of journalism curricula should cooperate and coordinate their research activities.

2. Journalism educators should adopt a more historical, comparative and critical approach to journalism teaching.

3. Journalism educators should seek greater involvement of media institutions with regional schools of journalism.

4. The media industry should create greater access to the creative energies of youth which is a significant and growing segment of the region.

5. Efforts should be made to create effective media watch groups in respective countries to monitor deviations from professional journalistic ethics and standards in the Asian setting.

Strategies:

1. Establish an Internet discussion group and worldwide web home page for journalism educators and practitioners in the region.

2. Develop teaching resources/ manuals, audio-visual materials and video programmes geared towards identifying an Asian-centred journalistic discourse.

3. Conduct focused practical workshops to establish a workable concept of Asian-centred journalism.

4. Seek sponsorship for graduate studies in journalism and promote academic exchange in Asian communication schools.

5. Establish annual awards to recognise outstanding achievements in Asian-centred journalism.

6. Promote collaborative research related to Asian-centred journalism.

7. Regularly upgrade practical and conceptual skills in journalism among practitioners and educators.

8. Initiate effective interaction between the media and under-represented groups such as women, ethnic minorities, and the economically and socially disadvantaged.
Evaluation

Overall, the participants rated the quality of the programme very highly. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being the lowest and 5 being the highest, 79 percent rated the programme with a 4, 11 percent gave it a 3 and 5 percent gave it a 2. No rating of 1 was given. The seminars sessions overall, obtained a rating of between 4 and 5. Likewise the participants rated the relevance of the seminar to their work and the opportunities for exchange of between 4 and 5. In addition, 74 percent said that the right target group were selected for the workshop and most of the participants suggested follow-up seminars and training courses.

Conclusion

On the whole, the seminar achieved the objectives it set. In-depth discussion on very important issues of concern to the region was realised and actionable recommendations were generated from the working group discussions. Follow-up activities were identified for action with the proper agencies.

Already some of the seminar recommendations are being implemented. Work on a book based on the papers presented in the seminar in now in progress. Planning for a follow-up seminar is now in progress. An Internet world wide web site for the discussion of Asian values in journalism has already been opened. The address is: http://www.uow.edu.au/public/faculties/crearts/journalism/AJNet.html.