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Keynote Address

By

Tan Sri Abdul Ismail
First I would like to thank the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre and the New Straits Times for the honour of addressing this seminar of distinguished journalists from the Asia-Pacific Region.

The topic, Asian Values of Journalism, has been much debated, especially in the last decade. Just last year, a similar gathering in Hong Kong discussed Asian values and the role of the media in society. This concern with applying our own values to the practice of journalism is surely suggestive.

In discussing the subject, it is useful for us to bear in mind that values evolve over time, influenced by the peculiarities and priorities of a society and its historical and traditional background. Even when values are shared, we often find that the emphasis placed on them vary from one society to another. Differences in perception of what is important in life exist not just between us and western societies, but among ourselves as well. While it may be true that Asians share more values with one another than with the West, it is wrong to assume that we have a common system of determining what is desirable for individuals and society.
To my mind, a common Asian value system is as illusional as it is elusive because of the diversity in the background and history of nations in the vast expanse of the world's largest continent. This is not to deny the similarity of certain of our experiences and circumstances, not least of all as former colonies of Western powers. The transition from colony to independent country and to developing nation has involved all our media. The re-examining of their mission and guiding principles is part and parcel of our media's continuing response to the challenges of nation-building.

Like the nations that spawned them, the media of Asia have borrowed and adapted the values and norms of the West. The Malaysian media are a case in point. When we attained our Independence from the British in 1957, we found ourselves facing the daunting task of building a nation out of a disparate people of diverse ethnic, religious, cultural and social backgrounds. Our media, which had for so long drawn inspiration from Fleet Street, gradually adjusted their role to support national goals.

Before we discuss the part that the media should play in the life of a nation, we should take a closer look at the world in which they operate. It is a world that neither our forebears nor their colonial masters would have recognised.
The once subject Asian societies are undergoing change at an unprecedented pace. Nations in East Asia and the Pacific Rim are poised for greater economic prosperity. Economic progress, however, does not imply immediate equitable distribution of wealth. Grinding poverty, a high infant mortality rate, widespread illiteracy and malnutrition still plague Asian countries, including those which have registered remarkable growth. Social problems resulting from economic progress are causing serious maladjustments in traditional societies in parts of East Asia and the Pacific Rim. In fact, in some countries the gap between the thin crust of the indigenous elite and the majority poor is widening. Environmental pollution and degradation threaten natural resources as unbridled development overtakes nations hell bent to industrialise.

The world, meanwhile, is becoming one big village as satellite television renders national boundaries irrelevant. Satellite television is also helping the Western media to dominate further the global information system by dint of their technological and economic superiority. It is worsening the imbalance that the New Information Order had sought to rectify.

The more prosperous among Asian nations are joining the race for the open sky but the others have resigned themselves to being passive observers. Some have decried the phenomenon, but most of the Asian media are responding to the challenges of a
shrinking and fast-changing world by reassessing their role and adapting themselves to the shifting scenario professionally and technologically.

News is being redefined in the context of national interests. The media are looking beyond their basic job of transmitting news and information. Analyses and backgrounders supplement the hard news of the day. Information is so disseminated that even the marginalised sections of society could avail themselves of data that help them resolve problems they encounter daily.

The process of change provides exciting material for journalists sensitive to the drama of human endeavour to achieve a better future. I am not referring here to development journalism which has lost credibility in some Third World countries due to its misuse by the ruling elite trying to perpetuate the status quo. I am alluding to in-depth reporting that increases audience awareness and involves the people in the democratic process by opening channels for interaction and dialogue with the Government at every level. The emphasis on such reporting, necessary for adequate recording of the transformation of society, must continue.

To be effective as both an agent and recorder of change, the media must reach all levels of society. Unfortunately, the audience of most of the media in Asia is not quite that wide. Newspapers and television and radio stations in most Asian
countries are industrial entities, located in cities and metropolitan centres. By the very nature of their development, they are biased towards the needs of urban folks and serve the interests of the ruling elite. In countries where a TV set and a newspaper are luxuries that the vast majority cannot afford, freedom of the press is no more than hollow rhetoric.

The media must be liberal and target a wider and more diverse audience if they are to play a pivotal role in broadening the parameters of freedom and redefining relationships among the various groups in society. They cannot function as catalysts for social change without communicating with the majority.

In the more successful Asian countries, economic progress and heightened political awareness have raised the expectations of the people, encouraging the opening of new channels for expressing their aspirations. In Malaysia, as in many other Asian countries, the will to be heard on the issues is manifest in the proliferation of non-governmental organisations which espouse a wide spectrum of social causes. Their presence has prompted the media to think anew their approach to news coverage, helping to relax the boundaries of dissent and facilitating dialogue with established authority.

My observation is that freedom is never handed to the media on a silver platter. The parameters of free expression have to be probed and tested daily with patience and ingenuity and with
commitment to the wellbeing of the people in the best tradition of responsible journalism. Unless the media are willing to be accountable to the people, their quest for freedom could well be a lonely undertaking.

I am not saying that an adversarial role is the most appropriate for the media in a country like Malaysia. Nor do I believe that absolute freedom of the media exists anywhere in the world. Ideally, the media should be both a watchdog of the people and a partner in nation-building. While we seek to promote the interests or air the grievances of the people, we should remember that freedom is not a license to provoke ethnic or religious strife that wipes out political, economic, cultural and social gains of nationhood. In many parts of Asia, poverty has yet to be eradicated. In Malaysia, despite the economic boom, we still have poverty in our midst. Poverty denies people the fruits of nationhood. Erasing it should still be our media's main concern.

After our rather general survey of developments in the Asian media and the world they operate in, let us look afresh at the question of values in journalism. As we have seen, changes in the Asian media were in part a response to post-colonial realities. The changes have followed reassessment and formation of values.
I do not believe that our media were all that concerned about whether or not the values they came up with were Malaysian or Asian. After they have decided on a more active and direct involvement in nation-building, they laid down guidelines on how they could play their new role. In pursuing their objectives, some values were discarded and others embraced.

This preoccupation with change - with reporting it and helping to bring it about - reflects an attitude that is not unique to the Malaysian or Asian media. James Reston, the former New York Times Vice-President and one of the most respected American journalists, regards change as the biggest news of all. Certainly, no media practitioner of standing will disagree that change is news.

In the Malaysian media, this attitude may be detected even in the way that a journalist is assessed by his organisation. The Crime Desk, which enthralled the public with its colourful reports of nefarious deeds, was once a sound launching pad for an ambitious journalist. A competent crime reporter with a sharp news scent and fertile imagination could confidently eye the news editor's slot. Not anymore. Now he has to contend with political analysts, economic writers, social commentators and others who deal with the issues.

The changes in the Malaysian media cannot be properly explained without reference to our education system and the
policy that governs it. Since the aim is at once to enlighten and unify our multi-racial society, Bahasa Malaysia is made the medium of instruction.

The impact of the system and policy on our society has been inestimable. The literacy rate has soared, with education being more accessible than it was ever before. People became less and less identified by the language they spoke as proficiency in Malay spread. And the circulation of Bahasa Malaysia dailies overtook that of the once pre-eminent English language mainstream media.

Most of the new generation Malaysian journalists are at least bilingual. The Malay journalists speak and write Bahasa Malaysia and English while their non-Malay colleagues are also literate in their mother tongue. Non-Malay journalists are now employed in significant numbers in Bahasa Malaysia newspapers. They also make up a respectable portion of readers of Bahasa Malaysia news over radio and television - all of which was almost unheard of three decades ago. For their part, Chinese and Tamil newspapers have over the years assumed a more Malaysian character, discarding the ethnic-centred policies of the past.

The composition of people in the media has changed in other respects as well. For one thing, the media have long ceased to be the preserve of men. Women journalists have grown
sufficiently in number and stature to influence editorial perception of issues and events and, with their sisters outside the media, articulate their special interests in the nation's life.

The progress in higher education, with an ever increasing number of students graduating from universities every year, has also affected significantly the staffing and character of the media. More and more graduates are going into journalism, especially since universities offer it as a course and the profession has become "respectable."

This was not how it was a few decades back, when journalism was not regarded as a "real profession." Many thought it to be only for school drop-outs or people not-quite-conventional and who do not fit into polite society.

While on the subject of tertiary education, I would like to comment a little on the mass communication courses at our academic institutions. What must be stressed is that book learning is inadequate preparation for the profession. Journalism students should also be exposed to the realities of a changing society through involvement in community-oriented activities so that they can empathise better with the people. A stress on ethics would also be in order, considering the tests of their moral fibre that they will undergo in a society where all too many individuals and
groups seek to manipulate public opinion and those who help to shape it.

The fact is that media practitioners in a rapidly-changing social milieu like ours are inevitably subjected to pulls and pressures from all sides in the endless contest for influence. Our journalists seem to operate under siege, beleaguered by bureaucracy and all the appurtenances of a fast-growing society, where opportunities and opportunists abound.

Idealism and high ethical standards are daily threatened, with so many appeals, requests and demands for "media cooperation" from parties ranging from advertisers to consumer advocates, industry leaders to environmentalists, and public-interest groups to self-interested politicians. The risk of conflicts of interest is ever present in situations where media practitioners find themselves at variance with their conscience and where editors succumb to market forces and pander to the crass instincts of their readers.

I have always maintained that editors should get off their pedestal and engage in meaningful dialogue with their readers since communication, which is their business, is a two-way process. The editors may, of course, argue that their columns are open to their readers. But the point is that
many, if not most, readers are ignorant of what bringing out a newspaper involves. Since what a newspaper publishes affects the lives of readers, it is only fair that they should be made familiar with the editorial policies and stance. Through dialogue, editors would understand better the feelings of readers and their needs.

Journalists target their own society no matter where they are stationed. However distant they are from their own country, journalists always fashion their reports to suit the taste and understanding of the home crowd. This holds true for all overseas correspondents, including Western journalists whose beat is Asia. But while the reports of Asian journalists are read only by their own people, many of the Western correspondents have a world-wide audience. Playing to the home gallery, Western journalists in our part of the world, whether deliberately or inadvertently, have tended to reinforce preconceptions of Asia.

The US Information Service publication Dialogue reproduced an interesting article a few years ago that offers advice to Western statesmen and journalists. The writer suggested that some of them go back to school for a refresher course on history. His view was that these statesmen and journalists had a mentality still strongly influenced by the Cold War, and that they had yet to adjust their thinking to the unipolar scenario that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union.
From their conduct of international relations, we can see that Western nations persist in allotting for themselves a position far above the rest of the world. Asian and other countries which they see as not being like them continue to occupy the bottom of the ladder.

I do not think it is too much of an exaggeration to say that Japan, whose economic power challenges that of the United States, is viewed by the West as something of a freak. The mindset that regards a successful Asian nation as a contradiction in terms is in need of restructuring. For the truth is that Asia has come of age, and not by incident.

The Little Dragons and Newly Industrialised Nations of East Asia and South East Asia did not come forth by a wave of a magic wand. They are the fruition of years of careful and far-sighted planning by leaders harnessing the potential of their people and encouraging their creative participation in nation-building.

In an increasingly inter-dependent world, cooperative partnership is essential for global wellbeing. But this cannot come about without mutual respect, which is impossible as long as the West insists on a self image that is out of sync with the changes that have swept the world.
Like it or not, the West must come to terms with the reality of a new Asia. With the world becoming ever smaller, both East and West should realise that mutual understanding and respect are essential for not only prosperity. They are the sine qua non for the survival of our planet and this strange race we call human. It is really very simple: Either we accept each other or we perish together.

Before I resume my seat, I would like to wish all delegates a fruitful discussion and a pleasant stay in our country. Selamat bersidang dan selamat melawat Malaysia.

Thank you.