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Author(s)	Menon, Vijay
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Welcome Address

By

Vijay Menon

SEMINAR ON "COMMUNICATION ETHICS FROM A SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVE",
COLOMBO, NOVEMBER 9 - 11, 1993

WELCOME ADDRESS BY VIJAY MENON, SECRETARY GENERAL,
ASIAN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND DEVELOPMENT CENTRE (AMIC)

It gives me great pleasure to welcome all of you to this seminar on Communication Ethics from a South Asian perspective. I am particularly glad that we have with us this morning Dr. Michael Traber, Director of Studies and Publications, of the WACC, London. Today's meeting owes much to his insights and inputs and his generous support.

The debate on communication ethics is not new. But it has gained in intensity in recent years. There is more talk now of a search for standards, more discussion of reporters and their sources, of deception and misrepresentation; of incompetence, irresponsibility and lack of objectivity.

Not long ago, a senior Indian journalist suggested that a code be devised for the press. He felt that if adhered to, the code would liberate the press, not enrage it; it would have the virtue that any authority attacking the person adhering to the code would at once put itself in the wrong and at once vindicate the person.

An Indonesian journalist's retort to this was brief and forceful. "I think", he said, "all this (about) a press code being able to liberate and not enrage the press sounds rather esoteric in the context of the reality prevailing in many countries of the Third World. The Government is omnipotent; the press is emasculated".

Theodore Peterson who articulated the widely accepted social responsibility theory wrote that "freedom carries concomitant obligations; and the press which enjoys a privileged position...is obliged to be responsible to society for carrying out certain essential functions of mass communication in contemporary society". But, twenty five years later, he commented that "the ethic that has developed is an unreasoned ethic without a philosophical base".

Asian communication scholars and practitioners, on the other hand, feel that any scale of values based on western communication theories cannot be automatically applied to Asia; that there is need to re-examine western theories and practices in the light of Asian cultures and traditions.

It is interesting to note that the countries of Asean not only have their individual journalistic codes of ethics but also a regional code. In South Asia, regrettably, the South Asian Media Association has not yet attained the level of acceptance or activity of the Confederation of Asean Journalists.

Recent political and economic developments have brought about tremendous changes in the South Asian mass media, raising serious questions of media ethics and social responsibility. It is our hope that at this seminar we will be able to explore some of these issues, arrive at an understanding of the social, economic, political and environmental factors that influence media practices, and decide on a set of practical recommendations to promote greater adherence to standards of ethics and social responsibility.

For the benefit of those who are unfamiliar with our organisation, I would like to explain that the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre or AMIC, to use the more popular abbreviation, was founded in 1971 with the support of the Government of Singapore and the Freidrich Ebert Stiftung, an independent foundation in Germany. We are a non profit organization focusing on mass communication in the region. AMIC's primary mission is to promote the understanding, development and use of mass communication as a field of study and its application within the broad framework of economic, social and cultural progress.

What is most gratifying to us is the support we are privileged to receive from within the region and outside. Today's meeting is one of sixteen workshops and seminars to be organised in 1993. These are made possible by the support provided by organizations such as the WACC and FES - Colombo and the collaborative assistance of local partner institutions, such as the International Centre for Ethnic Studies. Our thanks also go to our participants, who readily give us the benefit of their time and thoughts so that our meetings might be fruitful. A special word of appreciation is due to Irwin Weerakody who has rendered invaluable assistance in his role as our honorary Country Representative.

In closing, I would also like to thank Mr. Godfrey Gunatillake for agreeing to deliver the inaugural address and all of you, ladies and gentlemen for giving us the encouragement of your presence here this morning.