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Summary Of Proceedings

By

Virgilio Labrador
SEMINAR ON "COMMUNICATION ETHICS
FROM A SOUTH ASIAN PERSPECTIVE"

9-12 November 1993
Hotel Oberoi
Colombo, Sri Lanka

SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

Introduction

This report summarizes the proceedings of the Seminar on "Communication Ethics from a South Asian Perspective" held in Colombo, Sri Lanka from 9-12 November 1993. The seminar was organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC), in cooperation with the World Association for Christian Communication with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Stiftung.

The objective of the seminar was to increase awareness and understanding of issues related to media ethics and social responsibility in the South Asian region; to widen understanding of the social, economic, political, cultural and other environmental factors that encourage or inhibit ethical and socially responsible media practice and to generate actionable recommendations to promote greater adherence to ethical standards among media professionals and social responsibility among media institutions.

Twenty senior editors, journalists, scholars and communication professionals participated in the four-day seminar. The seminar programme included panel discussions and case studies of experiences from India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal. The final day of the seminar was devoted to a discussion with Sri Lankan journalists regarding the recommendations formulated during the main deliberations of the seminar.

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

Tuesday, November 9, 1993

OPENING CEREMONIES

Mr. Vijay Menon, AMIC Secretary-General, in his welcome remarks, said that Asian communication scholars and practitioners are of the opinion that any scale of values based on western communication theories cannot be automatically applied to Asia. He said that there is a need to re-examine western theories and practices in the light of Asian cultures and traditions.

Dr. Radhika Coomaraswamy, in her welcome remarks, stressed the important role of media in disseminating ideas and values to the greater public. She said that their work at the ICES would have little relevance were it not for their media department in propagating their work. She also emphasized the role of media in promoting the diverse cultural heritage of the region, the commitment to the truth and tolerance of opposing views.
Dr. Michael Traber, welcoming the participants in behalf of the WACC, said that seminars have been conducted all the world on the same topic. He noted that while there may be common ethical principles in international communications drawn out from the previous seminars, there has been a wealth of specific expressions of these in various cultural contexts.

Mr. Godfrey Gunatilake, Vice-Chairman of the Marga Institute, in his inaugural address, said that the media possesses the capability and power to mobilize social opinion, to influence the public agenda and to create the necessary social consensus around objectives and goals. For this reason, according to Gunatilake, the media should use this power to promote values such as the commitment to the truth and freedom. He also said that the process of disseminating information should be non-manipulative and participatory.

Nikhil Chakravarrty, Editor of Mainstream, in his keynote address stressed the unique conditions in South Asia that may inhibit what is generally referred to as ethical practice. He said that the seminar should be able to flesh out the particularities of the social, political and cultural context of communication ethics in South Asia.

Regi Sriwardena, editor of the ICES, presented an overview paper which stated that questions of communication ethics cannot be regarded as a simple matter between individual communicator and his conscience. He said that various constraints, pressures and deterrents are constantly exerted by various interest groups on the individual media practitioner as well as media institutions. Mr. Sriwardena pointed out that ethical values may be seen as provisional, tentative and open to continual revision in the light of changing social relations and human experience.

The opening ceremonies was attended by eighty representatives from government, non-government, academic and media organizations from Colombo.

SESSION I

Mr. M.J. Akbar, editor of Asian Age, chaired the first session on communication ethics and media practitioners and institutions.

Lucien Rajakarunanayake, of the Free Media Movement of Sri Lanka, presented a paper on "Communication Ethics and Media Practitioners: Facets of the Sri Lankan Experience." He said that in Sri Lanka there is great confusion about ethics and the ethical. He said that while there is much talk about ethics, ethical values are giving way to demands of the marketplace and the pursuit of profit. Mr. Rajakarunanayake stressed the importance of what he calls the "information ethic." He said that the main purpose of media is to keep the people informed. This function is sometimes not honoured by the state, which often selects what information should go to the public.

Mr. Rajakarunanayake also stressed the need for more opportunities in practical training in communication ethics for journalists. He, however, noted that formal training may not be enough, there is also a need to get the commitment of senior practitioners in the media and media institutions to communication ethics.

Prof. Zakariyya Sajid, Director-General of the Press Institute of Pakistan, presented
his paper on "Communication Ethics and Media Institutions." In his paper, he outlined the various theoretical underpinnings of communication ethics. He noted that the main intellectual influences on ethical thinking in Pakistan are mainly from Western thinking, as evidenced from the curricula of journalism schools in Pakistan. He said that there is a need to develop a local framework for communication ethics that takes into account local conditions.

Prof. Sajid, also noted that while there are a number of laws and codes on communication ethics in Pakistan, there is scant interest in highlighting awareness on press laws and ethics among working journalists. He said that ethics is perceived to be the preserve of the newspaper owners, editors or their legal advisers.

In the discussion following the presentations, issues highlighted include the negative portrayal of minorities in various South Asian media and the nationalistic character of the various media in each of the South Asian countries.

SESSION II

Prof. Sajid chaired the session on "Environmental and Cultural Factors Affecting Media Ethics."

Dr. Tawhidul Anwar, Director-General of the Press Institute of Bangladesh, in his presentation said that in the ethos of journalism, there are two kinds of codes: written and unwritten. In Bangladesh, according to Dr. Anwar, there are many sacred cows that are spared of journalistic scrutiny such as the army. However, he noted that there is a determined effort to promote press pluralism in Bangladesh through the codification of norms of conduct, strengthening of the Press Council and the promotion of a democratic culture.

Mr. G.D. Shrestha, editor of The Commoner, in his presentation said that the communication environment has ceased to be national in nature but becoming more and more global. He said that the relatively recent introduction of mass media in Nepal lends itself to a modernizing role. He said that the media affects attitudes in behaviours in Nepal in ways that often run counter to traditional values. However, he said that question of ethics in the media in Nepal is an evolving process that involves the building of a culture. In sum, he said that Nepalese journalism is headed in this direction, but the process has to be hastened.

In the discussion following the presentations, various environmental and cultural factors have been identified in the South Asian context that bear on ethical media practice. These include religious authorities, government, social pressures and various interests groups.

SESSION III

G.D. Shrestha chaired the session on "The Influence of Policies and Government on Ethical Media Practice."

Mr. M.J. Akbar enumerated various instances of government intervention in media practice in India. He said that old colonial government, as well as after independence, have used various instruments to put pressure on the media. These instruments of control include newsprint and advertising quotas, press advices and use of bureaucratic measures. One glimmer of hope on the horizon is the introduction of new communication technologies,
which have proven to be beyond government control, according to Mr. Akbar.

Ms. Razia Bhatti, editor of *Newsline*, related similar experiences in Pakistan, where the government use the same tactics to keep the press in rein. Repression of journalists and censorship were routinely utilized by successive military governments.

In the discussion that followed questions were raised regarding the role of nationalism in communication ethics and the relationship between the media and the government. The objectivity of the press was also raised as an issue—where does one draw the line between one's journalistic role and one's allegiance to one's own country in matters of national interest?

Wednesday, November 10, 1993

SESSION IV

Mr. A. Sivanesaselvan, editor of Express Group publications, chaired the session on "Ethical Standards: The Role of Press Councils and Journalists' Unions."

Mr. Javed Jabbar, President of the South Asian Media Association, stressed the need to develop autonomous, credible and alert Press Councils with an adequate level of participation by private citizens representing the interests of readers and of society. The composition of the Press Councils should be representative of various sectors of society and not just newspaper publishers who are often the editors, too.

Mr. Mervyn de Silva, editor of the Lanka Guardian, outlined the history of the establishment of the Press Council of Sri Lanka illustrating the role of government in its formation. Quoting a popular maxim, he said that Sri Lanka got the government and the press it deserves. He said that a Press Council cannot be legislated into being, it should be formed out of the necessities of changing conditions and should be able to respond to the burning issues confronting media in a multi-cultural society such as Sri Lanka.

In the discussion that followed, points were raised regarding the role of journalists' unions which should not be limited to the promotion of economic rights and entitlements of journalists, although it was acknowledged that this was a very important function in order that the journalists should be more free from pressures in the practice of the profession. The composition and role of Press Councils were also discussed.

SESSION V

Mr. Manik de Silva, editor of the Daily News, chaired the session on "The Communication Environment and the Teaching of Media Ethics."

Prof. J.B. Dissayanake of the University of Colombo, spoke of the journalism training programme that the Department of Mass Communication is developing. The degree programme in journalism is the first to be introduced in Sri Lanka. Prof. Dissanayake explained that formal journalism training at the university level is a relatively new phenomenon in Sri Lanka. He traced some of the problems of unethical journalistic practice to the lack of opportunities in journalism training.
Gokul Pokhrel, secretary of the Nepal Press Institute, echoed the sentiment of Prof. Dissanayake, that in Nepal, journalism training has been the responsibility of the Nepal Press Institute and the various tertiary learning institutions, which have just recently introduced formal courses in journalism. Of the training courses conducted by the Press Institute since 1984, tangible results have been achieved in improving the professionalism of journalists.

The discussions following the two presentations from Sri Lanka and Nepal focused on the content of journalism training and the emphasis on both formal and non-formal training.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In sum, the seminar noted with concern the rising trend of violence towards the media and media personnel, both by state agencies and other political forces. It also expressed concern at the rise in communalist and divisive forces.

In view of these developments, the participants were divided into two working groups that called for action in two areas of priority:

A New Ethics for the Media Profession

1. There is a need to upgrade the professional competence and capacity of media practitioners throughout the region, since this is a necessary foundation for the raising of ethical standards in the media.

2. Existing codes of ethics, laid down by Press Councils, are in some ways obsolete and inadequate to meet present needs and have no effective means of enforcement to back them. These codes should be reviewed and revised to give them contemporary relevance.

3. Since most of the currently existing Press Councils in the South Asian region act in effect as Government agencies, they should be replaced by Media Councils, covering all media - print, audio, visual - and acting not as extensions of the state but as genuinely independent bodies and perceived to be so. Such Media Councils should comprise respected media practitioners and eminent persons from public life, through a mechanism ensured by appropriate legislation.

4. A genuine problem exists in the absence of machinery for meaningful redress in cases of serious criminal libel in the media. Because of the phenomenal burdens on the judicial system, justice is often denied by being delayed. The proposed Media Councils should therefore be vested with appropriate judicial powers.

5. It is urgently necessary that professional bodies of media practitioners undertake the task of monitoring coverage in areas of ethnic and communal violence and violation of human rights and the rights of minorities, women and children. These bodies should evolve a mechanism for corrective action in these fields.
A New Framework for the Teaching of Communication Ethics

1. Media ethics should be recognised as a specific course at the undergraduate and graduate levels at colleges and universities and centres offering training in both print and electronic media as well as becoming part of in-service training.

2. Media ethics should be looked at in a comprehensive way to assimilate emerging issues of ecology, gender, children and the like.

3. Codes of ethics of advertising for both national and transnational media need to be reviewed by professional bodies and citizens' movements, particularly in regard to portrayal of women and the commercial exploitation of the innocence of children.

4. In the development of curricula for media ethics, a series of case studies, e.g. of ombudsmen in practice of media ethics, should be highlighted for critical appreciation of a wide range of practical problems. In this respect, specialist training should be organised for teachers and trainers of media ethics.

5. It is imperative that the media, both print and electronic, make their ethical norms public and explain them to audiences and readers on a regular basis.

6. The introduction of media studies in secondary schools for understanding the nature and responsibilities of the mass media should be encouraged. This is crucial for the fostering of ethical awareness. The media should also co-operate with media reform movements which work for the greater public good.

7. The participants are convinced that three fundamental principles of media ethics are non-negotiable and must be adhered to at all times. They are:

   a. Commitment to truth.
   b. Respect for human dignity, and
   c. Concern for the vulnerable, disadvantaged and oppressed.

8. The media must reinforce acceptance of socio-cultural pluralism in the understanding that a plural society strengthens democracy and safeguards national integrity.

Thursday, November 11, 1993

Seminar for Sri Lankan Journalists/ Media Persons

The final half-day of the seminar was devoted to a session for Sri Lankan journalists aimed at providing a forum for the discussion of communication ethics from the viewpoint of Sri Lanka and to validate the findings and recommendations of the main seminar from the Sri Lanka perspective.

Mr. Ajit Samaranayake, editor of The Island, gave a keynote address on "The Need for a New Communication Ethics." He spoke of the ownership of newspapers in Sri Lanka being concentrated on a few with interlocking interests in other industries. The interlocking interests of newspaper owners have made them susceptible to various pressures, according
to Mr. Samaranayake. He also pointed out the declining standards of journalism in Sri Lanka which has given rise to sensationalism and sloppy reporting. He said a new journalism ethics is needed to maintain the standards of the profession.

The chairpersons of the two working groups, Mssrs. Regi Sriwardena and Michael Traber, presented the working papers of the seminar. An open discussion followed. The Sri Lankan journalists present, generally agreed with the recommendations. Specific references to the situation in Sri Lanka were contributed by the participants. Among the issues that surfaced include the development of journalism training programmes in Sri Lanka and improvement of the working conditions of journalists.

Evaluation

Overall, the participants rated the quality of the programme very highly. The participants likewise gave very high ratings to the presentations and discussions. The seminar was generally regarded as a success in meeting its objectives. The seminar generated some actionable recommendations and provided a forum for the discussion of a very important topic. The only negative comment of the participants was regarding the number of participants. More people could have been invited and the participation from Sri Lanka could have been more active.

Conclusion

On the whole, the seminar achieved the objectives it set. In-depth discussions on a very important issues of concern to the region and actionable recommendations were generated from the working group sessions. Follow-up activities were identified for action with the proper agencies.
Regional Seminar on
Communication Ethics from a South Asian Perspective
November 9-12