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Summary Of Proceedings

By

Virgilio Labrador
SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

Introduction

This report summarizes the proceedings of the Seminar on "Communication Ethics from a South Asian Perspective" held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia from 29 September-1 October 1994. The seminar was organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) with the support of the Asia Foundation.

The objectives of the seminar were to identify the training needs of print and broadcast media in the region and the extent to which these are being met by existing academic institutions and facilities; to assess the effectiveness of communication education activities in Malaysia; identify emerging trends and prospects for development of media institutions and formulate recommendations on key issues.

Thirty-two senior editors, journalists, scholars and communication professionals from Malaysia and Singapore participated in the three-day seminar. The seminar programme included panel discussions and case studies of experiences from the academe and print and broadcast media practitioners. The participants were divided into two working groups which formulated actionable recommendations on how linkages between the media and academe can be strengthened.

To gather some baseline information for the seminar, a training needs survey was sent out to thirty media organisations in Malaysia. The survey, addressed to the training directors or human resources department managers of print and broadcast media organisations, aimed at obtaining information on the perceived training needs of media professionals in Malaysia.

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

Thursday, September 29, 1994

OPENING CEREMONIES

Mr. Vijay Menon, AMIC Secretary-General, in his welcome remarks, said that the upsurge in economic activity has transformed the media scene. The accelerated technological changes in the media has raised the spectre of obsolescence and irrelevance, of antiquated facilities, outmoded faculties and outdated curricula. He said that this danger can only be averted through continuing dialogue and timely correctives, which seminars such as these are designed to provide.

The Guest-of Honour, Dato Leo Michael Toyad, Deputy Minister of Education of Malaysia, said in his inaugural remarks that the new media environment would require
openness to new ideas, adoption of new skills and new ways of doing things. He said that the educational system plays a very important role in providing the media industry with the necessary personnel appropriately groomed, trained and equipped to face the challenges of the changing media field.

The recent Ramon Magsaysay awardee, veteran-journalist Tan Sri Samad Ismail, in his keynote address, said that in Malaysia, journalists should go beyond their conventional role of being mere recorders of events and issues and should delve into the political, economic, social and cultural dimensions of issues and events. This has implications on training of journalists, i.e. they should be equipped with the analytical skills to interpret events and issues. Tan Sri Samad emphasised the need for developing critical thinking among journalism and mass communication students. He said that students should be trained not just to become effective communicators but committed agents of social change.

SESSION I, Communication Education: Responding to Media Needs

The session chaired by Prof. Syed Idid Arabi of the Malaysian Communication Educators Association (DIDIKASI) featured presentations from major academic institutions in Malaysia and Singapore.

Mr. Sankaran Ramanathan, Principal Lecturer of the Mass Communication Department of Institut Teknologi Mara (ITM), gave a brief history of ITM which was the first mass communication training institute in Malaysia, having been established in 1972. In his presentation he emphasised the role of in providing the emerging media industry in Malaysia with a highly skilled pool of personnel. In pursuit of their goals, ITM has forge close links with organisations such as AMIC, the Institute of Public Relations of Malaysia, IPTAR, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (the National Language and Literature Agency) and others.

Dr. Mustafa Anuar and Mr. Zaharom Nairn of the Communications Programme of the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, stressed the need for communication education in Malaysia to veer away from what they call a "functionalist" approach by catering solely to the needs of the media industry. They propose instead a "conscientisation" approach which equip students with a critical consciousness of the media and its role in society.

Mr. Safar Hassim, lecturer at the Department of Communication of the Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), in his presentation stressed the need to balance the requirements of the media industry for communications professionals and the need to integrate national development aspirations in communication education. To this end, communication education should be broad-based to include subjects such as ethics, morals, philosophy and social subjects, according to Mr. Safar.

Mr. Yusuf Hussain and S. Shaukat Ali of the Department of Communication of the International Islamic University in their presentation emphasised the role of their university in propagating knowledge based on Islamic values. The Department of Communication was established in 1990 to produce communication professionals endowed with Islamic values and committed to infusing Islamic values in the media and other professional organisations.

Dr. Raja Ahmad Tajudin Shah and Dr. Musa Abu Hassan of the Agricultural
University of Malaysia (Universiti Pertanian Malaysia) provided a brief background on their Department of Development Communication. UPM has an ongoing extension and non-academic programme to supplement the training of their students. Dr. Raja Ahmad and Dr. Musa emphasised UPM’s role in meeting the needs of their "clients" which include the students, industry and society at large.

Puan Noor Bathi Haji Badarudin of the University of Malaya, presented a background on the Programme in Creative and Descriptive Writing of the Department of Media Studies. She said that their programme includes a mandatory practical training component where students are attached to media organisations. She stressed that being a university department and not a vocational college, the emphasis of their training is on developing the ability to think critically and analytically.

Prof. Datin Sharifah Mariam, head of the Communication Programme of the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS) said that their communication programme is the newest in Malaysia, having just been established in the middle of 1994. Prof. Datin was brought in to establish the programme after a long stint with ITM. She said that rather than just import ITM’s programme and curriculum, they decided to develop their own that will be attuned to the needs of the changing media environment. To get a true picture of the media’s needs, UNIMAS conducted several media surveys. However, the responses were not very encouraging.

Ms. Chesu Mustafa, lecturer of the Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM) in Kedah state, presented their communication programme which is under the newly-formed School of Social Development. They have yet to offer a Bachelor’s degree in Development Communication, which is scheduled to commence in 1995. Meanwhile, they are offering elective courses in communication management, development communication, public relations and advertising. The UUM uses a interdisciplinary approach in education.

Dr. Mark Hukill, deputy director of the Mass Communication Programme of the National University of Singapore as well as Senior Lecturer of the School of Communication Studies of Nanyang Technological University, presented a brief history of communication education in Singapore. He said that communication education is a relatively new phenomena in Singapore. The first institution granting a diploma course in communication was established in 1989. However, he said that close links with industry through mechanisms such as advisory councils and representation in various industry fora, have ensured that communication education meets the current needs of the media in Singapore.

By way of summarising the proceedings of the first session, the chairperson, Prof. Syed Arabi Idid, reiterated some of the main points of the discussion. He said that the communication education institutions and media organisations often have diverging interests. However, with the developments in the media industry in Malaysia showing no sign of abating, there is a need for greater cooperation and more effective linkages between the two.

Session II, Panel Discussion on The Needs of the Broadcast Media: How Does Communication Education Measure Up?

Dato Abdullah Mohamed, Director of the Asia-Pacific Institute of Broadcasting Development chaired the session.
Mr. Zainal Abidin Ibrahim, Controller of TV2, Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) focused his remarks on one specific area which can be improved, ie. practical training. He said that students sent for practical training in media organisations such as RTM are ill-prepared for the tasks put before them. He said that more careful planning and coordination between media organisations and communication education institutions can prevent many of the ensuing problems of students on practical training. He called for closer cooperation between media organisations and communication education institutions in not only practical training but in sharing of resources and personnel.

Mr. George Abraham, Controller of Radio 4, Radio Television Malaysia, said that his main problem is attracting students and graduates to a career in radio—which is perceived to be an unglamorous or even dying medium. He said that compensation scales in radio do not compare to other media such as broadcasting, which is another deterrent for potential graduates.

In the discussion that followed, issues such as the development of the broadcasting industry in Malaysia and the resulting increase in demand for qualified personnel were discussed. The high capital required for broadcast training facilities, which have to be constantly updated, necessitates the sharing of resources among broadcasting organisations and communication education institutions.

Session III, Panel Discussion on the Needs of the Print Media: How Does Communication Education Measure Up?

Mr. Ahmad Rejal Arbee, Group Editor of Berita Publishing chaired the session.

Haji Taib Ahmad, Editorial Manager of Utusan Melayu, the leading Malay paper, said that although generally they have been quite happy with the products of universities in Malaysia that Utusan have hired, there can be room for improvement. He said, that although their main requirement is proficiency in the Malay language, English language ability is just as essential. He also said that the practical training component is much too short (sometimes taking only one or two months) and should be of longer duration.

Achmad Talib, Associate Editor of the New Straits Times (NST), disagreed with Mr. Taib Ahmad’s observation regarding the quality of journalism graduates. He said that generally journalism graduates fall short of expectations. He said that they have been more impressed with people without degrees or those with a non-journalism degree. Like Mr. Taib Ahmad, he suggested longer practical training period and a structured programme to get practitioners to lecture on campuses.

Mr. Chong Saw Tai, Features Writer of the Sin Chew Jit Poh, lamented the lack of training opportunities for Chinese- and Tamil-language journalists. He said that Chinese- and Tamil-language journalists have to be trilingual and therefore need more training. He said that the language training is one of the weakest areas of journalism graduates. There is also a need for more specialised training in various areas of reporting.
Session IV. Panel Discussion on Trends in the Media: Implications for Education and Training

Mr. Sankaran Ramanathan chaired the session which aims to discuss mass media trends and their implications for communication education and training.

Mr. M.A. Razman, Editorial Training Manager of the New Straits Times in his presentation, identified several trends in the media, i.e. the emergence of highly specialised fields, the influx of new technologies and an emphasis on media ethics. He said that these developments require from journalists a broader base of knowledge than what communication education institutions are currently providing. He also said that it is essential to keep up with the developments in new media technologies.

Mr. Azman Ujang, Editor of BERNAMA News Agency, reiterated the rapid changes in the media environment in Malaysia. He said that in order to cope with the global competitive environment in the media, Malaysian journalists must have a good grasp of English. He stressed that basic spoken and written English ability should be a pre-requisite for all journalists.

Closing and Follow-Up

In sum, the seminar noted with concern that communication education in Malaysia still falls short of expectations of the media. After the panel discussions, the participants were divided into two working groups which drafted recommendations for follow-up action (see Appendix E for recommendations).

Dato Jaafar Kamin, Director-General of Radio Television Malaysia, gave the closing remarks. He stated that the media situation in Malaysia is very dynamic and that we can foresee more changes in the near future. More players will be entering the field, making communications one of the fastest growing industries in Malaysia. He said that these developments will pose a challenge to communication educators and the media.

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 participants specifically appreciated the fact that they were able to meet with their counterparts in industry and academe. The only negative comment of the participants was regarding the fluctuating number of participants. More people could have been invited and the participation from Kuala Lumpur could have been more active.

Conclusion

On the whole, the seminar achieved the objectives it set. In-depth discussions on 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. The participants suggested that follow-up seminars should be held at least once a year.