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<th>Seminar on Media Monitors in Asia : 29 June - 1 July, 1994 Bangkok : [opening remarks]</th>
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Opening Remarks

By

Vijay Menon
OPENING REMARKS BY THE SECRETARY-GENERAL, VIJAY MENON, AT THE AMIC SEMINAR ON "MEDIA MONITORS IN ASIA", BANGKOK, THAILAND, JUNE 29 - JULY 1, 1994

It is my pleasure, on behalf of all of us in AMIC, to welcome you to this seminar on "Media Monitors in Asia".

Our purpose in selecting this theme for this seminar was simply to fill an obvious gap - the absence of any Asian publication on the topic. Our objective is clear: to promote a dispassionate, academic if you like, discussion of an important topic. But if we take it out of the realm of academic objectivity, it can provoke passions, suspicions and controversy. We must, therefore, preserve our academic objectivity.

Three years ago, at Windhoek in Namibia, a UNESCO-sponsored meeting declared that "the establishment, maintenance and fostering of an independent, pluralistic and free press is essential to the development and maintenance of democracy in a nation and for economic development".

The declaration defined "independent press" as a press independent from governmental, political and economic control or from control of materials or infrastructure essential for the production or dissemination of newspapers, magazines and periodicals.

I am confident that all of us gathered here subscribe to the concepts of media pluralism and democracy. But there are two sides to every issue, and so it is with media freedom.

Let me give you a short quote:

"The press is overstepping in every direction, the obvious bounds of propriety and decency. Gossip...has become a trade which is pursued with industry as well as effrontery. To satisfy a prurient taste, details of sexual relations are broadcast in the columns of the daily papers".

This is not a complaint by Clinton or Clark. These words were written over a hundred years ago by Warren and Brandeis. So, the question of privacy and the complaints of an intrusive press are not of recent origin. It is an old problem and clearly a stubborn problem.

But, the debate on press ethics has gained in intensity in recent years. There is more talk now of an absence of standards, of deception and misrepresentation, of incompetence and irresponsibility.
It would be pertinent to recall the words of Singapore’s Minister for Information and the Arts when he addressed his ASEAN colleagues in Manila in December 1993. He had this to say: "While we should support freedom of information, we should never allow this to weaken the family and other social structures...We must find ways to preserve our values and to transmit them".1

Again, the Prime Minister of Malaysia in an address to ASEAN journalists some time ago, expressed some pertinent sentiments. He said, "The media must be given freedom. But this freedom must be exercised with responsibility. They must be given the freedom to express opinion freely, even the right to be wrong. But they must do so without prejudice and without malice...The media need to educate and themselves be educated with the rest of society, especially since their reach is so vast and their power so great".2

This seminar, hopefully, will contribute to that process, by examining both the role of the media as watchdogs and the effect of watchdogs on the media.

Today’s seminar is one of about 16 that we will be holding this year. In addition, we have a number of activities relating to Documentation, Publications and Research. All these activities are made possible by the support we receive from the Government of Singapore and the Friedrich-Ebert Stiftung of Germany, besides a number of well-wishers and benefactors, such as the Swedish International Development Authority, which has made today’s seminar possible, and the Faculty of Communication Arts of Chulalongkorn University, our local partner organization for this seminar.

In the final analysis, the success of a seminar is what the participants make of it. We are grateful to all of you for being here with us today. We look forward to your active involvement and participation so that we can collectively derive the fullest benefit from these deliberations.

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