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SEMERN ON "PRESS FREEDOM AND PROFESSIONAL STANDARD"
May 16-18, 1996
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
SUMMARY OF PROCEEDINGS

Introduction

This report summarizes the proceedings of the seminar on “Press Freedom and Professional Standards,” held in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia from 16-18 May, 1996. The seminar was organized by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) with support from Swedish International Development Cooperation Authority (SIDA), Communications Assistance Foundation (CAF), Kumpulan Utusan, UNESCO, The Malaysian National News Agency (BERNAMA) and the New Straits Times.

The objectives of the seminar were to discuss the concept of Press Freedom in the Asian context; to examine the relationship between press freedom and professional standards; to identify emerging media trends and developments in Asia; and to develop actionable recommendations on key issues identified during the seminar.

Sixty communication educators, policy makers and practitioners from 16 countries participated in the three-day meeting. They included representatives countries outside Asia-including Nigeria, Jamaica, Canada and the United Kingdom. The seminar programme included panel discussions and working group sessions on various aspects of press freedom and professional standards. Recommendations were formulated at the end of the seminar based on the seminar deliberations.

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

Day One, Thursday, May 16, 1996

Opening Session

Present during the opening session were Dato’ Mohd. Shafie Apdal, Parliamentary Secretary of the Ministry of Information of Malaysia, Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin, Executive Chairman of the Utusan Melayu Group, Mr. Vijay Menon, Secretary-General of AMIC, Mr. James Bentley, UNESCO Regional Communication Adviser and veteran journalist Mr. T.J.S. George.

In his inaugural address, Dato’ Mohd. Shafie Apdal reminded media practitioners of their social responsibilities. He said that in the midst of increasing commercialization of the media, journalistic standards should not be compromised by sensationalism to generate sales. He also said that it is vital that media practitioners keep up with developments in technology and use new channels of information dissemination to broaden the reach of the media. He said that “the media must choose a path that will channel information from the authorities to the people and in return receive feedback.”
AMIC Secretary-General Mr. Vijay Menon said in his welcome remarks that “many Western proponents of pluralism seek to promote western-style press freedom in Asia. But this is often at variance with the Asian view.”

In his opening remarks, Tan Sri Kamarul Ariffin emphasised the need to examine the ethical issues in journalism practice. He said that each country should evolve ethical standards based on the specific conditions they face.

Mr. James Bentley of UNESCO said a few words about the global importance of press freedom as evidenced by the numerous declarations in last fifty years by various international bodies on the subject. He stressed UNESCO’s commitment to press freedom and professional standards and read a message in behalf of UNESCO Director-General Federico Mayor.

In his keynote address, veteran journalist Mr. T.J.S. George said that the concepts of press freedom and professional standards are not universal and objective realities, but are relative to each country’s social, political, economic and cultural backgrounds. He said that it would not be “prudent nor necessary to apply Western yardsticks or to praise one country or decry another.”

Mr. George cautioned against the increasing concentration of ownership in the media to a few conglomerates. He said that when power is concentrated on a few, it is threat to press freedom. He said that the media practitioners should actively assail the increasing monopolistic trend in media ownership, particularly by the large media corporations.

Session I

The first seminar session on “Press Freedom: Asian Perspectives”, was chaired by Prof. Abu Bakr Hamid, Chairman of the Malaysian National News Agency or BERNAMA.

The first speaker, Mr. Mahfuz Anam, Editor, Daily Star, said that press freedom requires transparency and accountability on the part of government. He said that in Bangladesh the media has a very important role in the democratization process.

Mr. R. Srinivasan, resident editor of the Indian Express in Bombay, was not able to attend the seminar due to passport problems, but sent in his country paper on the state of press freedom in India. He said that in India the press enjoys a great degree of freedom. However, he pointed out the need for the press to focus on issues of socio-economic development in a country where 72 percent live in impoverished rural areas.

Mr Susanto Pudjomartono, editor of the Jakarta Post, in his presentation outlined the role of the Indonesian press in promoting national development. He said that in Indonesia the press is expected to use the freedom it enjoys in accordance with the state ideology of Pancasila. Mr. Pudjomartono also pointed out that while the current state of press freedom in Indonesia leaves much to be desired, the situation is not entirely to blame on the government. He said that journalists in their
overzealousness are also to blame for the restrictions imposed by the government on journalistic practice.

Mr. Amando Doronila, editorial consultant of the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, said that there is a long tradition of press freedom in the Philippines. He said that the press acts as one of the important checks and balances in the Philippine democratic system. The Philippines is now experiencing an economic boom, according to Mr. Doronila. He said the Philippines is now a testing ground of the thesis that economic development can be possible in a liberal democratic environment which includes a free press.

Mr. Paisal Sricharatchanya, managing director of the *Siam Post*, said that press freedom in Thailand was the result of long and hard struggle. Now that the press enjoys freedom, the challenge, he says, is to raise professional standards.

Dr. Syed Idid Arabi, in his presentation outlined the role of the press in Malaysian society. He said that the press primary responsibility of disseminating relevant information to the public. He said that the question of press freedom cannot be divorced from the question of social responsibility.

**Session II**

The second session of the first day’s proceedings on *The Role of Media Monitoring Mechanisms*, was chaired by Justice Michael Kirby of the High Court of Australia.

In his presentation, Dr. Usha Vyasulu Reddi of Osmania University, India, gave a comprehensive overview of the role of media monitoring mechanisms in general and in India in particular. She said that the most important monitor of the media is an informed public. Thus, the most important task is media education, according to Dr. Reddi.

Mr. Gamini Weerackoon, editor of the Island Newspaper, Sri Lanka said there were many different media monitoring mechanisms in Sri Lanka such as the Press Council and non-government organizations. The main threat to press freedom in Sri Lanka today, according the Mr. Weerackoon is censorship. Due to the civil war in Sri Lanka, various laws and regulations provide censorship powers to the government. These laws are very controversial.

**Session III**

The final session of the day, chaired by Dr. Syed Idid Arabi was on *Press Freedom and Professional Standards: The Role of Press Councils and Journalists’ Unions*.

Mr. Vergel Santos, assistant director of the Philippine Press Institute, said that Philippine media is undergoing a natural maturing process from being overindulgent to
a more responsible exercise of its freedom. He said that organizations such as the Philippine Press Institute and the National Press Club have a very important role to play in raising the professional standards of journalists.

Mr. Gopal Das Shrestha, Chairman of the Nepal Press Institute, said that while there are many determined efforts by institutions such as the Nepal Press Institute, the Nepal Press Council and the Nepal Journalists Association to upgrade professionals standards of journalists, efforts are largely hindered by lack of material and financial resources. He said that the problem of lack of resources is characteristic of the whole media system in Nepal, which is very underdeveloped.

Mr. Oon Ee Seng, Secretary-General of the Confederation of ASEAN Journalists, in his presentation said that Press Councils must be fully independent and not be controlled by any body or authority, and must be accountable only to the members of the journalism profession. He said that the first step in addressing the issue of press freedom lies in the improvement of the working conditions of journalists. He said that a journalist who does not enjoy good pay and working conditions is susceptible to corruption.

Day Two, Friday, May 17, 1996

Session IV

The second day’s proceedings began with a session on the “Social and Cultural Factors Affecting Press Freedom,” chaired by Dr. Shirani Bandarayanake of the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka.

The first speaker, Associate Professor Oranuj Lertchanyarak of Thammasat University, Thailand said that Thai values such as self-centeredness and being fun-loving is reflected in journalism practice. She said that Thai journalists like to maintain good relations, which sometimes prevent them from taking a stand or from assailing public officials. She said some of the traditional Thai values can impinge upon press freedom.

Professor J.B. Disayanaka of the University of Colombo, Sri Lanka said that in addition to the political, legal and economic constraints to press freedom there are social and cultural factors that affect press freedom. In Sri Lanka, according to Prof. Disayanaka, the two main factors that affect journalistic practice is caste and religion. He said one’s caste and religion affects a journalists’ job prospects as well as the treatment of stories.

Mr. Ramon Tuazon, President of the Philippine Association of Communication Educators, said that press freedom is deeply rooted in Philippine historical tradition. However, he pointed out that some Filipino journalists exercise their freedom irresponsibly. Certain Filipino values such as pakiksama (friendship) and utang ng
Loob (debt of gratitude) can be considered unethical when practised in a journalism context.

Session V

The second session of the day on “Press Freedom: Commonwealth Perspectives,” was chaired by Dr. Rex Nettleford of the University of West Indies.

Mr. Derek Ingram of the Gemini News Agency, UK, that the freedom of journalists is threatened in many Commonwealth countries. He attributes this to government interference in the media. He is confident, however, that the influx of new communication technologies will lead to greater freedom of expression and openness.

Justice Michael Kirby in his presentation said that the radical changes affecting the media in recent years pose important challenges to legislators in regulating the media. He pointed out two main areas of the media will have serious international legal implications: ownership and transborder data flow. He said that if left unchecked, the media, if controlled by a few can do irretrievable wrongs to individuals and cultures. He said that the media should be made accountable to the government of laws and not of men.

Session VI

The final session on “The New Multimedia Environment and Its Impact on the Press” was chaired by Derek Ingram of Gemini News Agency, UK.

The session featured two interesting demonstrations of the use of the INTERNET by newspapers. Mr. Low Huang Ping, Group General Manager of Singapore Press Holdings, demonstrated SPH’s new website. He also explained SPH’s new venture as an INTERNET Service Provider, AsiaOne. Mr. Derrik Khoo, General Manager for IT Publications of the News Strait Times Press, Malaysia, explained that newspapers cannot avoid the new technologies such as the INTERNET. He said most newspapers now have a website and have also ventured into other media such as CD-ROMs.

Mr. Brajesh Bhatia, Managing Director of Fourth Dimension, Malaysia, said that the proliferation of new communication technologies has given the consumer many media choices and has thus put them in the driver’s seat.

Mr. Fazal Quereshi, Managing Director of the Pakistan Press International, said that even a developing country like Pakistan is now experiencing the greater freedom as a result of the influx of new communication technologies. However, he said that freedom also has its price with the resulting social tensions in Pakistan due to open clashes between warring ethnic and political groups.
Seminar Recommendations

The participants were then divided into two working groups which discussed specific aspects of press freedom and what measures can be undertaken to strengthen it. The working groups resulted in a unified set of recommendations adopted by the participants. The recommendations were divided into two parts: preserving and promoting press freedom and mechanisms for strengthening professional standards. (See attached summary of recommendations)

Evaluation

Overall, the participants rated the quality of the programme very highly. (Please see attached evaluation report)

Conclusion

On the whole, the seminar achieved the objectives it set. In-depth discussion on very important issues of concern to the region was realised and actionable recommendations were generated from the working group discussions. Follow-up activities were identified for action with the proper agencies.
Evaluation Report

Seminar on Press Freedom and Professional Standards
May 16-18, 1996. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

On the whole, the Seminar on Press Freedom and Professional Standards rated satisfactorily with its participants. Out of about 60 who attended the seminar, 18 provided feedback through evaluation forms. Each of them rated the various categories on a scale of 1 to 5 (5 being the most favorable).

Among the five panel discussions during the three-day seminar, the session on "The Role of Press Councils and Journalist Unions" was the most well-received. Half of all respondents rated the discussion 4, with another 22% rating 5. The papers presented were regarded as "stimulating."

The first panel discussion, on "The Role of Media Monitoring Mechanisms," did not go down as well with the participants, however. It scored a low 3.5 average, mainly because the discussions were seen as "lacking depth."

Many respondents praised the arrangement of forming working groups during the seminar. Discussions were considered "useful" and "current." This section scored 4.2 points on average.

The primary objective of the seminar — to examine the relationships between press freedom and professional standards — was considered "met" by many participants. All except one respondent rated the category 3 or better.

The participants were pleased with the way the seminar was organized and the facilities available. The categories scored on average 4.2 and 4.3 respectively, with nearly all respondents rating them 4 or higher.

Also popular were the opportunities open to the participants to meet counterparts from other countries. With more than half (10) of the respondents awarding full points, the category scored 4.3 on average.

Finally, 83% of the respondents felt the seminar was relevant to their work, rating it 4 and above. This category scored a credible 4.1 average.
Among several suggestions from the participants, many focused on the working groups formed during the seminar. One respondent remarked the recommendations of the working groups would “go a long way in strengthening press freedom and professional standards.” However, one other participant said the recommendations were “rigid” and not applicable to too many press systems. The comment echoed that of another who observed “more room was needed for diversification.” Many respondents believed follow-up to the recommendations was in order.

The respondents also suggested a wide range of topics for future AMIC seminars. Among these are: the role of print media in the age of the Internet, a 21st century comparison of print media and electronic media, codes of ethics for television journalists, “orientation” for practitioners and academics of journalism, training for journalists in rural areas, and new communication technologies.
Evaluation Report

Seminar on Press Freedom and Professional Standards
May 16-18, 1996. Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

(No. of respondents: 18)

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