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Opening Remarks

By

Victor T Valbuena
Opening Remarks by Dr. Victor T. Valbuena, Workshop Coordinator

WORKSHOP ON LEGISLATIVE REPORTING FOR BROADCAST JOURNALISTS
11-14 September 1990 Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen:

Governments and legislatures are complex webs of institutions, persons, programmes and activities that tend to confuse the average citizens in society. Thus, they need to be analyzed, reported, described, explained, and interpreted for the citizens, to enable the public to understand and participate meaningfully in the democratic processes of government policy- and law-making.

Legislatures, in particular, are the core of participatory democracy. Their effectiveness is, to a large extent, determined by the responsiveness of the policy-makers and legislators to their constituents, and the extent of involvement of the citizens in shaping legislation through their interaction with their representatives. The mass media have a critical role in bridging the gap between policy-maker/legislator and the citizenry.

In legislative coverage, the most frequently emphasized task of the mass media is the effort to provide the public with information on what government officials or agencies did or said for the day. The approach is to relate as many of the facts as possible, assuming that the citizen can take the bits of information, put all the pieces together, and make something comprehensible out of them. The idea is to give a roundup of the day's intelligence on government and legislative affairs in order
to give the public a chance to be at least minimally informed of government actions, policies and legislation in which they might be interested.

This information-giving approach is in itself good. It can be better, however, if it is supplemented by broader analyses and interpretation which are meant to assist the citizens in really understanding "how government works, what role it plays in the lives of the people, and more specifically, what a given piece of legislation or governmental programme is likely to mean to specific individuals."

As Cecil Neth of Legis 50: the Center for Legislative Improvement, says: "How laws are made is equally as important, if not more so, than what laws are made. There must be, in other words, an orderly and open process supported by adequate resources -- time, staff, money, et al. -- and a press corps capable of interpreting the process."

Norman Lockman of the Boston Globe adds: "The public does care about what the legislature is doing about major issues, and an increasing number of editors are demanding that their statehouse (legislature) reporters devote more energy to analytically presenting the legislative treatment of those issues. That means the statehouse reporter is having to demand more of his sources: more solid information and less self-serving twaddle."

Clearly, the implications are that the background, the context, and the implications of the daily activities of governments and legislatures require more attention.
Accomplishing this "may involve something as simple as adding an extra paragraph or two in the daily material", or "concentrating analytically on the broader issues rather than the events themselves."

As Ralph Izard puts it: "Some time must be found to concentrate not only on what government is doing, but why it's doing it, and how it works. This may take either of two forms: stories on the process of government or stories on how well it works. The latter is the watchdog, the adversarial function of the media. The job of the reporter is to lay out the facts regardless of whether they make government officials look good or bad, effective or bumbling, honest or dishonest."

Legislative reporting plays a key role in keeping citizens informed about government policies and legislation through the mass media, on the one hand, and in creating awareness among policy-makers and legislators about citizen feedback and opinion, on the other. Weaknesses in government and legislative reporting can weaken the whole legislative process by failing to provide an appropriate means of dialogue between lawmakers and their constituents.

With this in mind, the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) organized a workshop on legislative reporting for the print media on August 2-5, 1989. Realizing that in ASEAN, large segments of the population rely on radio and television as their source of information, AMIC decided to organize this workshop for broadcast journalists, to afford them the same opportunity to enhance their perspectives as well their
skills in reporting government and legislative processes.

These workshops, of course, would not have been possible without the generous support of The Asia Foundation. We record our thanks and appreciation to the Foundation for its continued assistance to our work in AMIC.

On behalf of the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, we welcome you, then, to this regional Workshop on Legislative Reporting for Broadcast Journalists. We hope that these four days will provide us with the opportunity to learn from each other's journalistic experiences and draw insights from them to enable us to enrich our work in the media. We also hope that this will be an opportunity for us to cultivate new friendships across the region.

Let us all look forward to a very fruitful workshop!

Thank you.