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Press Freedom and Professional Standards

By

T J S George

The subject before us today has been a topic of discussion ever since Asian countries became independent. So why are we taking it up again now? As it happens, circumstances have developed around us that give the subject of press freedom new and urgent relevance. I refer to what is clearly a massive new offensive for the hearts and minds of Asia. The scene of the offensive in Asia and the objective is the domination of public opinion here. But the campaign itself comes from outside Asia. Australia’s Fairfax group has just launched a publication called Asia Pacific Magazine. British interests are in the process of launching a new publication called Southeast Asia Monitor. Time magazine company in moving its international headquarters to Asia. These new initiatives will shore up the work already being done by the International Herald Tribune and the Asian Wall Street Journal and other publications from the West.

I suggest to you, ladies and gentlemen, that this is a development of the utmost importance. Media in the advanced countries have perceived that Asia is where the future is. And Asian minds they must influence and dominate. It is in this context that we have to examine press freedom and professional standards. And we can profit only if we examine them free of the popular myths associated with them. Press freedom, for example, is generally considered an irreducible bedrock of democracy, not open to any abridgement. Professional standards are seen as an absolute verity which must shine forth whatever the surroundings. Are these popular notions valid? I propose to argue that press freedom and professional standards are not objective realities that stand on their own. They are relative. And they are, and must be, subject to various constraints. Some of these constraints are unhealthy and ought to be resisted. But some are constraints that should not make us unduly worried.
A note of caution I must sound rightaway is that this is not an area that lends itself to convenient black and white segments. There are plenty of subtle greys in between. We are not as lucky as the American Sunday School boy who was asked to name the very first human being on planet Earth. They boy readily replied: George Washington. "No", corrected the teacher, "the first human on our planet was Adam". The boy said, "Oh, I didn't know we had to include foreigners also".

The first thing we need to do if we are to cut through the underbush of popular myths is to stand on our own. We are, all of us, the products of Western media. Our minds have been, subliminally and otherwise, shaped by The Economist and The New York Times, by CNN and Mickey Mouse. Some of us recognise this, but we also recognise that there is precious little we can do about it. For a variety of reasons, we seem trapped in the culture provided by the purveyors of information from the West. Even when this culture shows up as predatory and pernicious, we seem unable to get away from it, dazzled by its material power, its sophistication and glitz.

It is important to come to terms with this ground reality before we can discuss any aspect of media in
Asia meaningfully. The very definitions of the terms we use are governed by the seen and unseen influences upon us. So pervasive has been the influence of Western media that we need to pause and ask if we mean the same thing as they mean when we use words like freedom, responsibility and democracy itself. In recent years, Western media leaders have started raising questions about the validity of Asia's very identity. When references are made to an Asian point of view, an Asian sensibility, they ask with an air of superior wisdom, whether the point of view that may prevail in Manila is the same as that in Colombo. A glib question deserves a glib answer, so let me say yes, Manila and Colombo have the same sensibility, just as New York and London have. Having said that, let me drop the subject. It deserves no further attention from us. The very theme of this seminar, Press Freedom and Professional Standards in Asia, assumes that Asia is a region that we wish to consider as an entity in itself. If others want to quibble about it, let us not deny them their pleasure.

For our purposes, then, how should we look at press freedom and professional standards? The picture will fall into perspective if we take cognizance of the limits to freedom. The limits imposed by history and by the need to respect other freedoms are reasonable and
therefore acceptable. Those imposed by the growth of monopolies and by vested interests within media are among the undesirable constraints. In between are problems created by perceived national interests where the media tends to identify itself with the political establishment of a country in the name of patriotism.

Considerations arising from these factors are common to all countries and regions. In the West as well as in Asia, history has been a basic influence on the way the concepts of press freedom shaped themselves. The particular historical circumstances of the United States, for example, made possible the freedom of information law which gives a unique stamp to press freedom in that country. But the assumptions underlying that law are not applicable, for example, in the United Kingdom where a different set of historical factors gave rise to the Official Secrets Act, the distinguishing stamp of press freedom in that country.

Similarly in Asian countries historical factors have brought about different realities in different societies. In India, the growth of a vibrantly anti-colonial, nationalist press before independence permanently conditioned the subsequent growth of press freedom as a powerful element of democracy. In Indonesia the early spirit of the independence movement
was overtaken by the communist putsch and subsequent crackdown, leaving press freedom in a realm of sunshine and shadows, aglow and dormant by turns. Singapore's resolve that its historical role was to achieve economic muscle meant relegating the press to a lesser role where it, too, has acquired material prosperity comparable to the best in the world. Malaysia's multi-racial society imposed on it a history of which the press necessarily had to be a part, except that its functioning democracy allows an establishment press to be balanced by a non-establishment press. Thailand's background as a country that escaped colonialism has given rise to a concept of press freedom that is as healthy and vibrant as any in the world. Philippines provides an example of what it can be like if freedom is taken lightly. It's a grand free-for-all there and a great time is being had by all. What this bird's eye-view of our region shows is that each country has grown under its own historical compulsions and that the freedom of the press - or any freedom, for that matter - necessarily has had to be fitted into the general pattern. It is neither prudent nor necessary to apply Western yardsticks to this scenario and praise one country or decry another.

While history enforces its own compulsions, there are other restrictions made legitimate by the nature of civilised society. The right to privacy is part of our
civilisation and persistent violations of this right have led to a near-crisis in Britain. The so-called popular press in Britain had gone overboard with its voyeurism and its checkbook journalism. The coverage of Princess Diana - or should I say, the uncoverage of her - got so outrageous that government moves appeared likely to put restrictions on the press. Already a Committee on Privacy had looked into the matter, found that the Press Council in Britain had failed to discipline the press, and recommended a stronger body called the Press Complaints Commission. If this body also failed, then the recommendation was that a statutory body should be set up by the Government to control the press. The press was anxious to avoid such statutory control which, it feared, would amount to censorship. So it appointed its own Privacy Commissioner in January 1994 with powers to investigate newspaper practices on his own. The aim of the industry is to see that all regulations are exercised by the industry itself and that the Government is kept out. In other words, the industry has realised that the invasion of privacy has gone too far and that restrictions have become inevitable. Many newspapers have appointed their own ombudsmen. Pressures and counter-pressures of this kind can be seen in every Asian country. Sometimes the press gains, sometimes it loses. It can win its points only if it gives more attention to the
responsibilities that go with its rights. Many of our countries are facing critical situations on account of religious fundamentalism and secessionist extremists. If the media were to inflame passions in such situations - a very easy thing to do - it will be an act of extreme irresponsibility. Yet, it happens. It happened in India with consequences that were so alarming that a national debate followed. For the time being the situation appears under control, but the danger lurks.

Mr. Chairman,

I referred to the not-so-healthy limits put on press freedom by the growth of monopoly power and internal vested interests. Some of the world's biggest companies today are media companies. They control everything, from producing raw materials to final delivery systems. The estimate is that by the year 2000, only four years away, five to ten giant corporations will control the world's important newspapers, magazines, books, broadcast stations, cable channels, music recordings, movies and video-audio businesses. These five to ten giants will decide what we read, see, watch or hear. As one American commentator put it, "Neither Caesar, nor Hitler, neither Roosevelt nor any Pope, has commanded such powers".
Why is such awesome power a threat to press freedom? Because freedom comes from choice. When there is no choice, there is no freedom. A small number of companies controlling the world media is a denial of freedom to readers, viewers and listeners. To understand how serious this can be, we only have to look for a moment at the inherent chauvinism of a country's - any country's - media. The Falklands war became notorious because the British press willingly abandoned its right to do independent reporting. The Gulf war became even more notorious because it witnessed the biggest information manipulation exercise ever attempted by man. Yet, the otherwise hyperactive American press, accepted the manipulation in good humour. When America invaded Grenada in 1983, the US press again was happy to accept the government version in the name of patriotism. There were a few casual references after which silence prevailed, as though the fate of a tiny nation was completely inconsequential. But we are yet to hear the last of Indonesia "annexing" West Irian. The lesson is clear: if a monopoly of power develops on the world media front, it will mean one or two countries manipulating the flow of global information at the expense of all other countries. Thought control will become fact, not fiction. Every country represented here will be among the victims.
Obviously this is something that must be resisted. But can we? On the one hand, the potential thought controllers have both the ability and the willingness to bully others into submission. On the other, the potential victims are yet to develop the will, not to mention the wherewithal, to stand up to bullying. The Prime Minister of this country where we are meeting has consistently and very boldly, stood up to bullying. But he is a solitary exception. In this aggressive age, exceptions will not do. We need an Asia that can say no.

Unfortunately, the media in Asia seems unable to play a leadership role in this area. Even our most resourceful newspapers and magazines have failed to develop a pan-Asia relevance. Ideas like a common news pool and collaborative programme development in broadcasting have not taken off. Professionalised training facilities are woefully inadequate in our countries with the result that the high standards we all want seem out of reach. Above all, the canker of corruption has started eating into the journalistic profession in a manner that is truly alarming. A major topic of discussion in India today is bribery among financial journalists. It ranges from editors receiving preferential shares in companies to gifts and cash
envelopes openly handed out at press conferences. The Press Council of India felt that the malpractices had become serious enough for it to take cognizance. It has come out with various guidelines aimed at preventing corruption. Those of us who hope for its success are worried when we come across what can only be described as cynicism on the part of journalists. At one press conference a textile company presented attending reporters with expensive suiting material. The reporters asked that the company take care of tailoring as well. The company had to agree.

Is there any hope for us?