<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Title</strong></th>
<th>Press freedom and responsibility in a developing society.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Idid, Syed Arabi.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Date</strong></td>
<td>1996</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>URL</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2549">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2549</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rights</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Press Freedom and Responsibility in a Developing Society

by

Dr. Syed Arabi Idid
Department of Communications
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia/
Malaysian Communications Educators' Association

Presented at the Seminar on Press Freedom and Responsibility Organised by the Asian Mass Communications Research and Information Centre (AMIC), in Kuala Lumpur, 16-18 May, 1996
Press Freedom and Responsibility in a Developing Society

Introduction

A scholar once described the idea of freedom as a "legacy of antiquity." (Hardt, 1983: 291). Press freedom and press responsibility have been discussed often enough in forums and seminars both in Asia and in the West. The idea of press freedom and press responsibility has also been debated in Latin America and in the Middle East. Both issues will continue to be raised in future forums as they are of concern to the press, the government, the opposition parties, informed citizens, including Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and academicians because of the differences found between the normative and the reality role and the prescribed and actual responsibility shouldered by the press.

Press freedom is considered important for a number of reasons. The Freedom of Information Center, for one, believes that the press is not only an index but a predictor of political change in the nations of the world. Others say that freedom of the press means that the information received is not distorted and thus allow for proper decisions to be made. Alongside the discussion on press freedom is the concept of press responsibility. Questions are posed whether press responsibilities differ in different political situations, and systems or whether there are similarities that cut across national boundaries.

Freedom of information and expression has been one of the first resolutions adopted by the United Nations Assembly in 1946. The General Conference of UNESCO at its 26 Session in 1991 also recognised a free, pluralistic and independent press as an essential component of any democratic society. Toward this end UNESCO and United Nations agencies have sponsored seminars in Toronto (1995), Santiago (1994) and Central Asia (1992) to discuss various issues relating to press freedom, pluralistic and independent media.
Any discussion on press freedom would also have to recognise the impact of technologies and changes occurring in society as these would have profound effects on press role, press freedom and responsibility in the future. This paper examines the constituents of press freedom by examining the role and responsibility of the press within the context of a fast developing plural society. We might perhaps come out with certain postulates on press freedom by linking the concept with the other variables identified as the constituent factors.

Constituents of Press Freedom

The press is an institution that matters to informed citizens for a number of reasons, among them are the need to be kept continually informed of events, current thinking and incidents in society. As informed people obtain their information from the press (which is meant all forms of mass media), then the credibility of the press in providing information is important. Perceptions on press credibility is important to informed citizens who feel uneasy with a press system that only toes one line of thought, namely the ideas of the party or the government in power. Once informed people perceive the press has not been providing correct information, then they will withdraw from subscribing to these information sources and seek alternative sources of information. In developed and developing societies there exist alternative media as people want a different view from the dominant press that are seen to subscribe to a certain line of thought (Lewis, 1993).

We have identified some elements involved in the issue, namely the concept of press freedom, responsibility, credibility, government institutions and informed citizenship. Informed citizens want information. Not all citizens however, have the same degree to being kept informed. Some are prepared to pay for information, and perhaps demand that information be provided while other citizens are contented to receive whatever information is provided and from sources that are made available to them. Citizens in the second category either believe the information given or just accept information with an element of incredulity.
The third group of citizens does not care much for information, unless the information impinge on their personal lives. It is to the first and second group of citizens that the question of press freedom and responsibility matters most. The first and second group of citizens are normally better educated and are in the mainstream of society that, being in the forefront, means having access to information.

Press freedom conveys varying meanings. One could view press freedom as any form or degree of curtailment from government institutions, laws and regulations imposed by the government, actions taken by the police or the military against journalists constitute an infringement on press freedom. (Freedom of Information Center Report, 1967).

Press freedom also means freedom to exercise the right to report without any control from management, the advertisers or any market forces that contribute toward the existence of the individual newspaper. To the individual reporter, freedom means having the right to report within the norms of professional dictates any piece of event without being told otherwise by the editor. Some journalists, however, mentioned the curtailment of reporting by editors and senior journalists themselves (Sultan Ahmed, 1995).
There are, therefore, various shades of meanings on press freedom, although nearly all scholars and practitioners would admit that there is no such thing as an absolute freedom of the press. We have freedom at the level of society, at the level of media organization, and at the level of content (McQuail, 1987). We will discuss some facets of press freedom and later go on to discuss the concept of the role and responsibility of the press.

Discussing the values of Asian press freedom and responsibility means discussing the overall concept, the components of the value and the factors that influence the overall value. At the onset it would be better to acknowledge that values are intangibles but they could be recognised to exist. Whatever the questions on press freedom, such freedom should bring benefits to society and to the audience and not imply an institution that is isolated and insulated from society (McQuail, 1987).

There are therefore constituent factors contributing and nurturing the value of press freedom and providing benefits to society. The following could be considered, among others, as contributing to press freedom in a plural but fast developing society like Malaysia. These factors could be applied with varying degrees as pertinent to Asian values. The contributors are:

1. The system of government;
2. The make-up of society;
3. The history of the press and the press (including ownership) itself; and
4. The country's economic level.

Discussion will be made on the various factors on press freedom. This will be followed by a discussion on the responsibility of the press and how both are interlinked.
1. The System of Government

The degree of relationship between the press and government has been closely associated with press freedom. The larger the freedom the press is from the exercise of government, the more free the press is said to be in operation. What is meant as press freedom is distance from government control. If there is government interference in the form of laws and regulations, then it is said that there is less press freedom. But there is no one country that does not have any law that affects directly or indirectly the operation of the press.

The concept of press freedom is therefore connected with the system of government. In the early (and present) studies on journalism, the degree of freedom is seen within the context of the system of government and the role of the press operating within such a system. Thus Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956) said that there were categories of press freedom within four systems of governmental control namely the Communist type, the Authoritarian type, Libertarian type and the Social Responsibility type. The Communist and Authoritarian types saw heavy interference from government or the party in power dictating the role of the press. While the Libertarian type lacked social conscience, the Social Responsibility type was a press system that was sensitive to the needs of society. A difference stood between Social Responsibility and Libertarian type; the latter stood for the rights of individuals to exist in society while the Social Responsibility determines the right of the community for individuals to exist. While the former views the individual as the centre of society, the latter sees society as being central.

The Four Theories of the Press of Siebert, Peterson and Schramm (1956), although classic in argument, have been overtaken by events. The system of communism has faded. The breakdown in the communist system of government in Soviet Union and the other East European countries have placed into question the entire concept of the Communist press system. It is not entirely dead though. Communist China is still in existence and the tenets of what were propounded as characteristics of a Communist press system still prevails in China, perhaps with modifications.

Other scholars have come forward with their versions of press freedom as seen within the various political systems of
government. McQuail's idea that the press exist for mobilisation takes away the system of press from the system of government. We are placed in the question on the role of the press across varying political systems, although admittedly McQuail would propound that the more controlled the press the greater its mobilisation role than what is required by society as seen in the government system in China. Mobilisation means the extensive use of the press to mount campaigns and programmes aimed to change the attitudes and habits of the population.

Democracies are also practiced differently. India is a democratic society. So is Malaysia, Indonesia and France. But democratic countries allow the practice of press to operate differently. Some democratic countries tolerate a far degree of press freedom than others. Rugh (1979) discusses how the practice of press freedom differs in the Middle East where a similar form of government is assumed.

Rules and Regulations

There are various rules and regulations governing the operation of the press in the country. Mohd. Hamdan Adnan (1988 ) listed 47 pieces of legislations and ordinances that affected press freedom in Malaysia but in review, some of the laws were common to other countries. Thus Defamation and Criminal laws are to protect the individuals rather than to regulate the operation of the press. Such laws also exist in other countries.

Proponents of press freedom would point out to the Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984 requiring an annual state license to operate a newspaper as an Act that prescribes the degree of press freedom in Malaysia. The second law that provides a parameter on what should and should not be possibly reported in the press is the Internal Security Act 1960. The basic taboos are:

1. The position of rulers
2. The position of the Malays and natives
3. The status of Malay as the national language
4. Citizenship rights

Another guideline is the Official Secrets Act, 1972 which states the areas that are [first gazetted and hence] should not be reported.
One should also note that the forms of the Internal Security Act, and the Printing Presses Act are also found in other countries such as in Brunei and in Singapore.

One might also recognise the paradoxical role of rules and regulations in society. On one hand the press needs rules and regulations to determine its existence and safeguarding its freedom. yet on the other hand the existence of such rules and regulations may be aimed to curtail the activities of the press itself.

2. The Make up of Society Itself

Many countries in Asia have plural societies. Malaysia is no exception. The Malays and Bumiputras in Malaysia constitute slightly over 60 percent of the population. the Chinese over 35 percent with Indians and others constituting the balance. There is also plurality among the Bumiputras in Sabah and Sarawak. The May 13 1969 civil riots has always been uppermost in the minds of government leaders when they relate race and sensitive issues.

Elsewhere we have discussed the role of press, ethnicity and national unity (Idid and Latiffah Pawanteh. 1989) and the press system existing in Malaysia (Idid, 1989) and would not like to repeat here what were said in those articles. Suffice it if it were summarised by saying that the press contributed toward national unity but this role was affected a great deal by the pulls and pulls of ethnic appeals.

The communal make up of society is also evident in many Asian countries. Communal identities mean that communities are keen to preserve their sense of belongings. Communal and religious riots have seen their worse in parts of Asia. AMIC itself has found it appropriate to organise several sessions to discuss on how media should report and address racial, religious or sensitive issues. (AMIC, 1993; Media Asia. Vol. 16. 1989). There is therefore a curtailment of press freedom when sensitive issues occur and journalists have to exercise their utmost care in the interests of society. In such a given situation, journalists have often said that their writings should not inflame sensitive feelings during racial strife nor should they contribute to inflame the amber of hate among the diverse ethnic groups.

The reports of sensitive events in plural societies must be done with care. The system of government and the population
mix have made governments to be extra cautious to allow for full reportage of sensitive issues. The government gets jittery when racial issues are raised. Admittedly race issues cover a large terrain. In a study during the promotion of Mandarin teachers in 1987 in Malaysia, the issue became emotive as the Chinese teachers assumed that the government (that was seen as Malay dominated) were bent to wipe out Chinese education. [Idid. 1991]

In another instance, when a vernacular language daily printed a picture of the like of prophet Mohammed, the government, acting on the pressure of the Muslim community, withdrew the license of the publication.

India is a country that has not been noted in several instances to ban its newspapers for writing sensitive issues, despite the riots and strife that are in the country. The Indonesian, Malaysian and Singapore governments take a more serious view when issues related to religion are reported in the media. The banning of several newspapers in Indonesia several years ago is an instance of such an action.

If called upon to postulate a hypothesis, one would say that the more sensitive the issue the less freedom the press has to report on them.


The press in Asia was introduced during the colonial era. The history of the press in Malaysia and Singapore was British originated. The British introduced the first newspaper, the first wireless, and the first radio station (TV and Internet were introduced by Malaysians). The press were first introduced by the Dutch in Indonesia and the Spaniards and the Americans in the Philippines. To a certain extent the initial values on press freedom or values to that effect were nurtured during the colonial era.
It was interesting to note that the early press had specific missions of their own. For example when the Romanised Malay weekly Bintang Peranakan was set up by the Baba (Chinese) community, the objectives were to promote a sense of unity among the Peranakan and to show and maintain their loyalty to the Government (Oong, 1995).

One would debate on the existence of an Asian value for press freedom or Asian value for writing of news because journalism has been said to be an alien introduction from the West, not an indigenous Eastern culture or Asian culture. It was only later than the locals or other Asian communities started publishing and printing the newspapers. Although originally introduced by the West, the existence of the press institution in Asia over the past couple of decades had allowed for the development and inculcation of Asian values.

After so many decades of independence India, Indonesia, the Philippines and Malaysia must be able to distinguish values of journalism that cut across national borders and values that are inherent and peculiar to their own respective societies. Placed in such a position, the Asia values on press freedom was bound to be dictated by the values in their own society and the universal values on press freedom itself.

On another level of analysis, the existence of media in Third World Countries has been alleged to make the countries dependent on industrialised Countries. British sociologist, Jeremy Tunstall, said that the popular press, feature films, hit parades and commercial televisions were all introduced by the West. The McBride Commission also confirmed the Western domination of the world media. The controversy that took place in UNESCO debates over the New World Information and Communication Order saw Third World Countries trying to redress the imbalance in the flow of news, but Western nations saw this as an attempt by the governments in Third World countries to curtail the freedom of the press.

The debate over the flow of news across borders within the context of the New World Information and Communication Order has been overtaken by events but the concern on the uneven flow of information and its implications is still a serious consideration in Third World Countries. The debate on Western domination of news flow is not only taken by Third World countries. The Chinese media had also discussed attempts to break the Western monopoly of news flow [SUN 4 Dec. 1993].
All in all the history of press development is important. The institution can gauge itself whether people are in support of the level of press freedom or not. The ideas of opinion leaders on press freedom over period of time are good indicators as to the position of press freedom in the country. Above all the level of commitment of press freedom by the journalists, editors, and press associations are also a barometer of the commitment that the professionals dedicate themselves to the concept and ideals of press freedom in society. Indeed the introduction of press ethics, and the stand taken on certain issues by the press associations such as the Confederation of ASEAN Journalists on issues related to the operation and freedom of the press augurs well, but many other issues remained silent. It is to the journalist associations that people place their faith in the workings of the press in the country.

5. The Economic Level of the Country

Some countries allow for more access to information for their own citizens than others. Other countries do not think that their citizens need to know that much. There are other countries that cherish the belief that the less the citizens know the better it would be for the governance of the country. Compare this to societies whose citizens hold to the belief that they have the right to information as the government is always held accountable to them.

The first group of countries have certain characteristics that distinguish them apart from others. The wealth of the country, as measured by per capita income of its citizens, and the literacy level provide indicators that the country enjoys more freedom than another country that is poorer and the citizens not well endowed with education. It is often said that once man has satisfied his stomach than only can he able to discuss the idea of freedom. This makes us to postulate that the richer the country the higher is the level of press freedom in that country. It also leads us to believe that countries with less press freedom are inclined to have a low level of economic growth.
In this context press freedom is indeed considered a luxury that poor countries can ill afford for the time being. In the eyes of the poor countries, press freedom is therefore a luxury that only the rich countries can afford. If we were to postulate a hypothesis that the higher the wealth the higher the probability of press freedom in society, we should also be cautious as wealth alone does not determine the degree of press freedom. Hachten says that Singapore, a country of certain level of wealth over other countries, does not exhibit a degree of press freedom that is found in the Philippines, a country of less wealth. Even Lee Kuan Yew acknowledges this situation during his visit to the Philippines in 1995. Aquino (1990) said that media were able to play their role in portraying the truth of the situation prevailing in the country so much so that it gave the impetus for the people to raise up against the Marcos government. Wealth is therefore a necessary condition but not necessarily a sufficient condition for the existence of press freedom.

One also sees an irony when press freedom is related to the economic wealth of the country. The press flourishes well in a society where the readership is large and thus enables circulation to be maintained. On the other hand, it is not a secret that the press needs high capital investment for its operations, and to pay well the of good journalists. This high capital investment required for the production of the press in industrialised countries allows for the monopoly of the press, which may, in the long run, means a monopoly of ideas and hence a restriction in the overall press freedom.

Responsibility

Two Approaches: There are several approaches in studying and understanding the concept of press freedom and responsibility. One is to study the rationale provided for by philosophers of why there is a need for freedom of the press and the role the press should play in society. This is the normative approach often enough echoed by scholars. Pye, for one, describes the role of the press as an "inspector-general" in society so as ensure they report against abuses. Hence Lasswell provides three functions of the press by viewing them from the institutional perspective. Lasswell (1971) says the functions of the press are (I) surveillance of the environment, (ii) correlation of the components of society, and finally, (iii) transmission of social inheritance. Put it in another way, these roles are prescribed by Lasswell as the functions that the press should play in society.
The Lasswellian function of the press has been accepted by scholars and students over the past several years and this has fit well with the sender-oriented communications paradigm that has dominated the studying of communication and the mass media.

The other approach is to take it from the perspective of the audience and find out what they (audience) attribute to be the functions, roles and responsibilities of the media. Often enough the audience-oriented or the receiver perspective does not match the Lasswellian sender-oriented perspective. Some of the examples of the audience-oriented approach are the Uses and Gratification's, the Agenda-setting and, in a limited way, the diffusion studies on news.

The two different perspectives of studying communication have bearing on how the role and functions of the press are perceived to be in society. The sender-oriented approach views communication or the mass media to be very potent that whatever is transmitted by the mass media has effects on the audience or society. Given the assumption of media potency, societal leaders are concerned that there should be proper guidance and channeling so as to control the effects of the mass media or to curtail the potency of the mass media. Society would have to take steps that the effects of the mass are to benefit to society not the reverse.

The audience-oriented approach sees the effects of the media in a different light. The approach is seen to be potent only to the extent that is permitted by the audience. The audience members being too powerful are able to take care of themselves and minimize whatever effects that are transmitted by the mass media.

A society that subscribes to the sender-oriented approach values a more circumscribed role of the media. It calls for regulations of the media lest harmful effects fall on the audience. The second approach of an audience-oriented approach allows leeway for the media to operate as the premise is based on the activeness of the audience rather than on the potency of the media.

What people say on press freedom: I would like to carry through the concept of the press freedom and role by analysing what others say are the proper roles and functions of the press in the Malaysian society. I shall quote politicians, civil servants, the
academicians and also the journalists themselves. Here we are discussing the benefits that press freedom mean to society which we had touched upon earlier.

There are two sides to the story. The government or those allied to the government sector say that there is ample freedom of the press in Malaysia and in so saying defines the role that media and the journalists should play. The opposite is also true. The opposition, the press and some non-governmental organizations bemoan that there is less press freedom because of the legal, extra-legal and political control.

To many Malaysian leaders, the government mass media is assigned to explain government policies and programmes and to ensure racial harmony. It may provide feedback occasionally but its main thrust is to articulate the views of the government.

The Minister of Health, Chua Jui Meng, sees the press as a link between the government and the people. "It was through newspaper reports that the people knew and understood government policies and local and international events and happenings." (NST, April 28, 1996). The press shapes and moulds public opinion.

Chua acknowledges that there exists ample press freedom in Malaysia although not on the basis of the freedom as advocated in the West.

An academician, Zaharom Nairn, (1996) says there is little genuine attempt to develop the press (the much-needed television) to the principles of democracy and justice that would make the media more accountable to the Malaysian public. Zaharom sees television (and other mass media forms) as still being under the control of government or those closely allied to the authorities. They, therefore, do not have much accountability to the people.

The views of Chua and Zaharom differ. Chua sees the press playing its proper role within the existing parameter. Nevertheless he says that the press had the freedom to point out to the government where it erred as this was an important channel to prevent abuse of power. Zaharom's view contains the role of the press not within the existing parameter. In fact to Zaharom the role of the press under tight government control does not allow for the proper role of the press for nation-building or for the democratization of the country.
The multi-racial character of Malaysian society has made government leaders very concerned that the press would report sensitive issues and hence inflame racial feelings. The then Minister of Health, Lee Kim Sai, said press freedom was to be supported as long as newspapers maintained factual reporting and did not sensationalise or go abroad. It was for the sake of unity and harmony in a multi-racial society that all quarters, including politicians and the mass media should exercise discipline and restraint (NST, 27 Jan. 1992). The concern of the ministers is that the reporters should not be carried away that they report news that would hurt communal sensitivities.

The numerous acts and regulations have turned the newspapers in Malaysia to function like Government gazettes, said opposition leader, Dr. Tan Chee Khoon. He added that the acts and regulations have curbed the freedom of information and freedom of speech in Malaysia. (STAR, Oct. 29, 1986).

The prime minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, has spoken on numerous occasions on the role and responsibility of the press. He sees the press as operating within the concept of social responsibility meaning that the press as an institution must function for the well-being of society. "...the mass media plays its role as disseminator of information for the benefit of Malaysians," he said (NST, 28 Oct., 1991).

The prime minister is sensitive to charges that the government controls the press in Malaysia. He is of the opinion that the press as a powerful institution must carry a heavy burden in reporting factual information. "With the increasingly powerful weapons at the disposal of the press, it is entirely possible for the press not only to create totally erroneous views and opinions, but actually to undermine the stability and even the economy of countries." (NST 2 Aug. 1991).

We have again two versions on the role of the press. One version is that their role as being critical of the government is called for but such reports must be seen to be factual, well written and well meant. Such reports should not be to bring about racial discord. The other version is that all reports written are for the well being of those in power with little regard for the information needs of informed citizens.
Another approach discusses press freedom and the failings of the press. Kann (1996) said it succinctly when he listed some failings of the press (media), among them being:

* Worrisome blending of the lines between journalism and entertainment

* A blurring of lines between news and opinion

* Pack journalism where the reporting of news is seen in terms of group thinking.

* Standard of reporting drops with distance of event; and

* Finally, attention span. There is little sustained press focus

To Kann (1996), the responsibility of the press is for accuracy, a maximum attempt to get things right, fairness, diversity of points of view. Journalists must have a sense of satisfaction of carrying out their functions, rather being crusaders, ideologues, partisans or prosecutors. Kann calls for a free flow of goods and services, capital, human skills and, of course, information but this is something that the press has not been able to respond well.

Kann says press freedom conveys also the responsibility to act according to the dictates of its ethics and the profession of journalism. Like Aquino, Kann wants the press to live up to the expectations of society because less than that its role in society can be prescribed to the benefit of the authorities that be.

What Price for Freedom?

The Philippines are a nation proud of the press freedom that exist in their country; freedom that they drew from their own philosophy, history and way of life. On one hand Aquino (1990) took pride on the role the press had mobilised the people to rise against the Marcos government, but she also had reservations on the meaning derived from such a high freedom. She said that the media should review their role as the government, on its own, would not be in a position to do so. Areas that should be of concern to the media are in the reporting of conflicts, questionable ethical standards of reporters and their lack of experience (Guimary, 1989). Given such a situation, we can postulate the higher the commitment toward press freedom, the high would there be press freedom in society.
Lee Kuan Yew, the elder statesman from Singapore, had also some words on the meaning of press freedom. He was quoted that the people must decide whether they would prefer more freedom and less economic gains or more economic gains and less press freedom. One could also point to rich nations enjoying press freedom and poor nations with little press freedom. Hence Lee Kuan Yew’s dictum that the more freedom the less the economic gains is not applicable across cultures. The postulate is that the higher the economic gain the less the freedom of the press. Alternatively one can also postulate that there is no significant relationship between the wealth of country and freedom of the press.

The Malaysian prime minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, believes in the social responsibility of the press. He acknowledges the might of the press institution, but wants it to be an ally or subservient to the wants of society.

The deputy prime minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, says that freedom of the press is the basis of democracy that Malaysia practiced. (NST 22 Jan. 1992). We see here that the type of government determines freedom of press. The higher the level of democratic practice,(against other forms of government), the higher the probability of press freedom.

A Discussion

Earlier we began with the premise that many factors contribute toward press freedom in society. We instanced four factors, namely the system of government, the type of society, the economic level of the country and the history of the press itself. We also touched on the irony of law and the economic level of the country when these are related to press freedom. Laws are said to safeguard press freedom but they can also be used to curb press freedom. Likewise, the wealth of the country may allow for media access and growth of the media, yet it would also pave the way for press monopoly.

Press freedom becomes a topic of discussion between several interested parties, the politicians, the journalists, the academicians and the well-informed citizenry. The discussion starts with an institution to disseminate information and the well informed citizenry believes that there is more to what is being produced suspecting that government interference may reduce the amount and correctness of the information.
Press freedom and responsibility and roles of the press are interlinked. The prescribed roles of the press and the presumed effects have made policy planners to be concerned at the power that is inherent in the institution. In a plural society when sensitive issues bring reactions among various ethnic groups, government leaders are quick to take action to prevent any threat toward societal well being. Press functions that bring about socio and economic development are indeed welcome but this is always sceptically questioned by the informed citizenry who suspect that the press has been manipulated to disseminate information for the powers that be.

In several seminars in the past (Mehra 1989) scholars and practitioners have come to accept that the press operates within the confines of the law and the dictates of society. The role and the responsibility of the press in ASEAN is seen to help in nation-building and to be sensitive to communal and religious issues in society.

Government leaders in many Asian countries view the institution of press to be subservient or at the most as allies to the other institutions in society. The watchdog role attributed to the press in a detective manner of the press checking and surveilling the government to curb abuses is a concept that is hardly accepted by the government or the party in power.

On the other hand the press associations and several NGOs has come to accept, at times with great reluctance, of the overpowerful legislative dominance over the Fourth Estate. The watchdog is free to bark but so long as it knows its role, and does not bite hard it is allowed to roam around the compound of the house.

The advent of technology allowing information to be made available through internet may reduce somewhat the question of the freedom of the press. Everyone will be affected by the developments that are now taking place on the information superhighway (Communique, April 1994). If the discussions in the past on the role of the media centred on accuracy, privacy, fairness and deception, new technologies will also focus discussions into media’s social responsibilities and acting as the alternative channel.
If anyone can establish a home page on the Worldwide Web, society has found that the alternative press will flourish as never before. (Voakes, 1996). The press will inevitably take up the challenge, but the future press will be more interactive and allow constant feedback from readers.

Government control becomes less effective and the well-informed citizenry has now better access to more information channels. Sensitive issues that are spread across the internet will become more difficult for the government to interfere.

On the other hand there would be so much freedom for anyone to air out his or her views to the attention of others without any need to be correct or accurate that one might also find in the new technology more access to information but less shouldered responsibility. We would also be entering the arena of freedom without much issue on responsibility.

Future forums will continue to discuss the concept of press freedom and responsibility, with participants looking at the role and relationship with government institutions, the various systems and ideas of society. One difference that now stands against the discussion today with the discussion held decades ago is the advent of the information superhighway. This new communication technology has posed several challenges and opportunities to the idea of press freedom as an ability for informed citizens to obtain information from the channels that they are capable of reaching.

The press becomes one of the institutions that can contribute to information dissemination. To informed citizenry the information superhighway is a challenger to the press in providing information. With responsibility information technology can open the channels to more information and help widen press freedom, but without responsibility it will do harm by providing ill intentioned information. It will add little to the question of press freedom because freedom also means responsibility. We leave it to future forums to debate the issue.
REFERENCES


Daunting Task for Men at the Helm.' NST 2 Aug. 1991


Media Development and Democracy in Latin America and the Caribbean. (2-6 May. 1994). Santiago, Chile.


"Minister : We do enjoy Press Freedom." NST, April 28, 1996: 7


Zaharom Nairn (16/2, 1996) "Commercialisation with a conscience?" *Aliran*: 2/4-10.