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International TV News In the Post Cold War Era:
A Third World Perspective

By

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1991 INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE OF COMMUNICATIONS CONFERENCE

International TV News in the Post Cold War Era

A Third World Perspective

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International TV News in the Post Cold War Era

A Third World Perspective

It has become a tradition for IIC Conferences to be preceded by a seminar of delegates from developing countries in which matters of their particular concern are discussed and for a report on these concerns to be made to the IIC.

On Monday and Tuesday of this week, delegates from 12 developing countries in Asia, Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific and South America met to exchange experiences.

We shared the relief of our northern hemisphere colleagues that they are now in the "Post Cold War Era", but we are here to remind you that the cold war was a northern hemisphere creation. The end of the cold war does little to solve the problems many of us face in the southern hemisphere. We still have wars to face in the south. Hot wars, small perhaps, but destructive, demoralising and destabilising. We have wars to fight against poverty, against injustice, against unequal trade. Some of us have battles to win in the field of human rights, to strengthen fragile democracies, or to secure more democratic institutions. All of us have to battle to reduce the disparity between the south and the north in access to and ownership of information services, and of communications technology. Above all, we

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communicators have to continue the fight to redress the imbalance of information flow between the north and the south, to remind the north that we exist, that our economic and social achievements are as newsworthy as our politics and our national disasters.

One of the speakers at our seminar quoted the US newscaster David Brinkley's definition of news: "News is what I say it is". We also have our own definition of news. In many respects, it is no different from a western concept. But for many of us, there are tensions in defining the role of a journalist that journalists in developed, industrialised countries do not face. Most developing countries see the news media as an essential element of the overall thrust towards modernization and national development. Rightly or wrongly, governments expect the news media to be supportive of government policies rather than being critical or destructive. In the west, governments hope the media will be supportive, but the Gulf War has shown how easily the western media can be manipulated. Or hijacked, as one western reporter put it.

Our seminar discussed at length the role of journalists in what has become known as 'development communication'. That is a western term, by the way. The Third World did not invent it, and I wish we could think of a better description of what it involves. "Development Communication" is seen as suspect by some.

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western journalists, who tend to see it as little more than government propaganda. In some cases, this may be true. However, development communication has a well-defined role in developing countries. It has to do with vital information on the health and welfare of people, with improved agricultural practices, with family planning, with preservation of tradition and culture. Does that not sound familiar? Think about your own media. Are not your anti-AIDS campaigns, your farming features, your health departments' anti-smoking campaigns really development communication, or whatever else you wish to call it.

Nevertheless, our seminar agreed that development journalism needs special skills and a strong sense of responsibility. It needs professional reporters, able to distinguish the borderline between propaganda and journalistic credibility. It needs reporters who are able to recognise for themselves development stories that are of interest and are worth reporting, and not to rely solely on the wish of officials to have particular activities reported. In the west, of course, you have ministerial press secretaries and lobbyists to persuade journalists to report what government officials wish to see reported.

There is a great need felt in developing countries to assert their individuality, to give expression to their national character, to gain pride in their achievements. In many
developing countries, with large ethnic minorities, there is a constant struggle for national unity, a problem which affects equally many western countries. In all of these areas, the media can either be a constructive or destructive force. For many of us journalists in the developing world, "print and be damned" is too simple a philosophy. We sometimes have to weigh carefully the implications of what we print or broadcast. In my country, the Philippines, the journalists have to grapple with the problem of being a journalist in a country that is deceptively western, and espouses western values, but is saddled with Third World problems of economics and the threat of political instability. Journalists in many developing countries are at risk if somebody does not like what they say.

In spite of the problems we face, our seminar highlighted many positive achievements. Within the last few years, regional television news exchanges have been set up by broadcasters in Asia, Africa, the Arab States, the Caribbean and in South America. Its participants are predominantly broadcasters in developing countries. Their aim is to reduce reliance on western news agencies and to ensure that they are able to report events in their own countries from their own perspective.

Their success is measured through their cooperative agreements with Eurovision, the world's first and largest news exchange, which distributes their news materials through much of the world.

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The existence of these news exchanges does not appear to be widely known outside of foreign news desks. However, many of the pictures you see in your nightly television newscasts on events in the south will have come from one or another of the regional exchanges. For those who are interested, information on them and a summary of all papers presented at our seminar are available in the conference hall.

The whole subject of news exchange, both by news agencies and the broadcasters' exchange mechanisms, was discussed at the 5th World Broadcast News Conference in Toronto in June. This was a useful exchange between broadcasters, PTTs and equipment manufacturers.

A highly effective radio news exchange, PACNEWS, now operates between 13 countries in the Pacific. Participants fax local news items daily to the PACNEWS headquarters in the Solomon Islands, where they are edited into a comprehensive, Pacific Islands news service for distribution. Radio Australia and Radio New Zealand, previously the chief sources of island information in the Pacific, now subscribe to PACNEWS -- an example not only of developing countries covering their own news events in their own way, but of this news then being broadcast over much of the world on the shortwave services of developed countries.

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All of these regional exchanges owe a great deal to the assistance of the Friedrich-Ebert Foundation of Germany and its highly professional news consultants. The FES provided training for hundreds of journalists in technical and editorial skills, before the exchanges began, and continues to assist them in maintaining and improving overall standards.

While these are positive developments, our seminar recorded that government sensitivities and restrictions on news coverage remained a major obstacle to overcome before the news exchanges can achieve their full potential. Another obstacle, equally serious, is the high cost of satellite tariffs, which prevents many countries from participating. It is a sad irony that, in many cases, the poorer the country the higher are the satellite charges. We urge Intelsat and the national PTTs to give special consideration to this problem, which is within their capacity to solve.

You will have gathered that our seminar did not confine itself to discussion of television news in the post-cold war era. That will be a particular pre-occupation for the countries of western and eastern Europe, as they examine how and what they report in their new political and economic relationships, and how they deal with the nationalistic and ethnic upheavals that have replaced the cold war.

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Foreign correspondents are rightly critical of the home-based reporter or anchorman who flies into his territory, does a quick and often superficial story, and flies out again. We in the south are equally critical of those TV journalists who do the same thing in our countries, often with little or no understanding of the cultural framework which influences the events they report. Our seminar believes there is a need for greater international effort to bring journalists from the north and the south together, and in their own separate environments, to help in the understanding of each other's perspective. No doubt this process is going on right now with journalists from east and west Europe.

There is an immense gap between the journalistic resources of the north and the south. There is an equal gap between the resources and the opportunities of training for journalists between the north and the south. We believe it is in the interest of the north to ensure that developing countries are given substantial and sustained assistance in reducing those gaps.

We understand that international cooperation is being given to journalists in eastern Europe to assist in the development of journalistic standards appropriate to their new political realities. We commend this initiative. But at the same time, Mr. Chairman, we hope the south will not be forgotten.

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