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Subject: The Media and a Culture of Peace: A Journalist's View

Date: Thu, 30 Nov 2000 23:01:52 -0800 (PST)
From: kathirasen kathirasen <kathirasen@yahoo.com>
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hi, Miss Alice Simons,

Since the fax was not clear, I am sending it by e-mail. tks. and take care.

THE MEDIA AND A CULTURE OF PEACE: A JOURNALIST’S VIEW

by A Kathirasen

INTRODUCTION:
The movie Predator was a hit in Malaysia. So was First Blood. But Gandhi did not fare well.

And from the time of Muhammad Ali, television stations and sponsors have rushed to ensure Malaysians enjoy live telecasts of world boxing title matches. Quite a number take leave from work just to sit in front of the box to watch two men pummel each other.

Newspaper headlines such as Standard tow charges or Flood waters recede do not have as much impact as Plane crashes during take-off. And on Nov 28, one tabloid’s lead story – the only story on the front page – was headlined: "Titans for KL" with the subhead "Tyson and Lewis to slug it out in mid-year".

There is something about disaster and violence that attracts. Even in today’s 'civilised' world.

In an era of fast-speed information available all the time, there is tremendous pressure on the media to give readers or viewers what they want in order to stay competitive.

Reports have to be more compelling and immediate for a time-sensitive public. And people seem to prefer the stories that grab their attention, that shout out.

In such a situation, it is no wonder that stories about peace and tolerance often find themselves lower down the scale of importance – towards the end of the broadcast or in the Lifestyle sections of newspapers.

THE MALAYSIAN SITUATION:

But, a few Malaysian newspapers do make an attempt to give some prominence to stories that have an air of positivity about them, the heart-stories, the spirit-moving stories.

In another area, however, they do better. The Malaysian media tread very cautiously where issues of race relations and religious differences are concerned.

Being a multi-racial, multi-religious country has its advantages and disadvantages. Perhaps the greatest challenge is learning to live together well enough to move as one nation.

The Malaysian media, and their owners, subscribe to the belief that the media have a role to play in a country’s development. Anything therefore that ensures development and brings the people closer must be encouraged.

Of course, this position has also been moulded by the existence of stringent Press laws that pronounce heavy penalties for publication of incidents likely to inflame communal feelings or prejudice the security of the country.

The Government issues an annual renewable permit to publish, and anyone running foul of the law may find himself without a permit the following year.
THE NEW STRAITS TIMES:
As a journalist with the New Straits Times, I would like to discuss some of the ways this national daily goes about tackling issues related to peace and race relations.

The NST gives good coverage to the major festivals of the main communities, especially the open houses during the Muslim Hari Raya Puasa, Chinese New Year, Deepavali and Christmas celebrations where people of different faiths converge on the houses of those celebrating the festival.

Even on normal days, photographs of inter-racial mixing get prominence but on these four festival days, the front page lead picture is invariably of open houses held by the leaders of the community concerned. During National Day celebrations too, NST photographers keep a lookout for pictures which depict the harmony that exists.

In the Lifestyle section, the NST frequently carries articles on the art and culture of the various communities.

Statements by politicians that can stir racial or religious misunderstanding are religiously weeded out. NST reports never mention the race or religion of a person. For instance, if three men are arrested for drug trafficking, we do not say whether they are Malays, Chinese or Indians. The same treatment is given if some people get involved in a fight.

When they are charged in court, of course, we print their names and their racial or religious identities may be known.

If there is a clash that has some communal or religious tone to it, the NST prints only the official statements, usually from the police or a government spokesman. There is no speculation, no eyewitness account or quotes from parties involved in the conflict.

THE KAMPUNG RAWA INCIDENT:
I wish to quote an incident which could have become a nationwide conflagration if it had not been handled right.

On March 27 1998, there were fights between groups of Muslims and Hindus in Kampung Rawa, Penang. The tension had been building up much earlier over the close proximity of a small Hindu temple to a Muslim surau. There were complaints that the bells rung at the temple disturbed the Muslims at prayer.

There were gatherings at the surau urging that the temple be demolished or moved. The State Government started discussions between the temple and surau committees.

It was then agreed that the temple would be relocated to another plot of land nearby which would be donated by the municipal council. The State Government sealed off the temple - zinc sheets enclosed it completely and nothing was visible - a few days before the relocation.

There were all manner of rumours too - that the temple had been razed, that the surau had been burnt.

The media did not mention any of this.

The only news items carried were two official statements by the Chief Minister of Penang saying that there was a problem in the area and that the government was trying to resolve it; that people should not listen to rumours but maintain calm and that all parties had agreed to the relocation of the
But the rumours spread, leading to an extremely large crowd gathering at the surau on Friday March 27. A group of them later surged towards the new site of the temple where a group of Hindus had gathered. And fights began. The official position is that at least four persons were injured in the clashes.

Police acted fast. They used tear-gas and water cannons on demonstrators and those who refused to budge from the area and managed to wrap-up the situation in two hours or so.

The then Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim arrived some minutes after police halted the clashes. After consulting Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Dr Koh Tsu Koon and Penang Chief Police Officer Datuk Abdul Hamid Mustapha, Anwar met representatives of the surau and the temple. The secretaries of the surau and temple shook hands and Anwar announced that the matter was resolved.

The media immediately flashed the picture of the hand-shake and Anwar's statement that the matter was closed.

The NST used it on the front page but not as the lead story, trying to give the impression that it was not a major clash or something to be worried about.

The media also described what happened as 'skirmishes' in a deliberate attempt at downplaying the issue.

Over the next few days, the media ran statements from Muslim and Hindu leaders urging for calm and how the situation was returning, and had returned, to normal.

QUESTIONS REMAIN:
Malaysia had suffered as a consequence of the May 13 1969 tragedy in which racial clashes - mainly between the Malays and Chinese - had left more than 100 dead and 1,000-plus injured. They were not willing to face another such dark incident, and therefore cool heads prevailed.

In the Kampung Rawa incident, it is clear that the role played by the local media had helped contain the spread of the clashes. There were no pictures of the injured or the clash itself. No blame was apportioned to anyone. The emphasis was on the need to calm down and respect each other's religious beliefs.

Could the media have helped avert the clash if they had reported the growing problem three weeks earlier?

It is difficult to answer. Articulating problems often brings some good but sometimes, it worsens the situation. Especially in matters where emotions, rather than rational thought, hold sway. And in the Kampung Rawa case, emotion was king.

THE FUTURE:
Malaysians are peace-loving people regardless of which community they are from. But when it comes to questions of race and especially religion, some elements become too emotional. But this is not a peculiarity of Malaysians, it is quite universal.

How can the media help to ensure that continued peace prevails? One area would be to encourage and offer space for constructive dialogue between the religions.

Another would be by carrying articles on various religions and religious beliefs and traditions.

The Malaysian media have failed somewhat in this aspect. While there have been articles about...
particular festivals and practices, there has not been any concerted effort to educate the public on the principles and core values of the various religions. But, here, the English media have fared slightly better than the vernacular media. The vernacular Press concentrates solely on the religion of a particular community. For instance, the Malay Press writes extensively on Islam but has never carried articles on, say, the core principles of Buddhism.

What is needed is more articles that spell out the essence of the various religions so that people can have a better understanding of each other's beliefs. But even this can be fraught with danger. The Sunday Mail had an excellent weekly column called Inter-Faith several years ago in which articles on the principles of the various traditions were carried. But the series was discontinued, apparently because the guardians of some of the faiths or denominations were upset.

But unless people are willing to learn and understand the beliefs and traditions of others, unless they are willing to respect the practices of others, peace will not prevail.

The media can play a role by laying emphasis on the common principles in all religions. They can compare the essence of the various religions and discover that, as Swami Vivekananda said: "This is the gist of all worship - to be pure and to do good to others."

The media should telecast or carry more articles that show people of different faiths working together, laughing together and living together more regularly and not just after some clash or problem.

And while stories about air crashes and Middle-East clashes can continue to hog the limelight, the media should also be on the lookout for heart-warming stories and provide write-ups on people who, like Gandhi, work for a culture of peace."

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