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<th>Regional Seminar on Media Ethics in Asia : September 11-13, 2000 Malaysia : [summary report]</th>
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Regional Seminar on Media Ethics
September 11-13, 2000
Malaysia

SUMMARY REPORT
REGIONAL SEMINAR ON MEDIA ETHICS  
September 11-13, 2000  
Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Summary Report

Some 25 delegates from media, government, NGOs and academe in Asia participated in the three-day conference. They came from Bangladesh, India, Japan, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and United Kingdom. The three-day seminar highlighted country presentations on self-regulation vs. statutory regulation, content and sanctions, promoting ethical standards from the perspective of regulatory and consumer bodies, press councils, ombudsmen and academics, content and sanctions.

The National Press Club of Malaysia was AMIC’s co-partner in organizing for the event. The seminar was sponsored by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA).

Mr. Vijay Menon, Secretary-General of AMIC welcomed the delegates. In his remarks, he said that there is a greater need in for ethical standards in Asian media. There should be more discussion of reporters’ tasks and their sources; of deception and misinterpretation; and of incompetence and irresponsibility. He urged delegates to provide useful insights and practical recommendations to address ethical considerations in the Asian press.

Dr. Venkat Iyer of the University of Jordanstown, UK, said that media is more concerned with presenting a good story than how they get the facts, arguing that it is the responsibility of media to practice self-regulation. However such self-regulation only offers media greater leeway for irresponsible behavior. For self-regulation to be effective, the society should have a culture of freedom, media must be willing to heed criticism, the public must be neither apathetic nor overly litigious and must have confidence in such a system.

Professor John C. Merrill from the School of Communication Studies, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, also felt that ethics is not law but self-regulation which means self-censorship and self-control. Thus it varies amongst journalists and cannot be punished by external forces. He said that an ethical system determined by the government or social authority, by the profession itself or voluntary ethical sensitivity system are three possible ways to work towards common ethics.

The publisher of The Philippine Daily Inquirer, Mr. Isagani Yambot, discussed the elements of media ethics, namely, accuracy in reporting, fairness, protection of privacy, sensitivity, preservation of anonymity, avoidance of intimidation or persistence and seduction and corruption of media. He stated that the responsibility of being ethical has to be shared by everyone who has an interest in an ethical press.

Mr. Azman Ujang from Bernama Malaysia argues that media ethics is universal regardless of political and social values. He said that the media practice in Malaysia is “dispensing press freedom with responsibility”. He confirms that the government does have a control over media, but this is to ensure racial harmony.

Mr. Gengo Nakajima of Nihon Shinbun Kupkai, Japan, listed the 5 pillars of a media code adopted by the Canon of Journalism. They are freedom and responsibility, accuracy and fairness, independence and tolerance, respect for human rights and decency and moderation. He felt that issues such as news sources, the right to counter argue, daily work of media staff and code of behavior in daily professional activities to accomplish their mission are factors that need to be considered in media ethics.

Mr. Syed Kamaluddin from the Far Eastern Economic Review in Bangladesh said that violation of media ethics is common in the country and is mainly baseless accusations and news. To tackle this problem, he suggested that an effective quasi-judicial body with adequate authority to bring in the delinquent media to task has to be formed.
Mr. Venkat Narayan, a syndicated journalist from India, stressed that a large number of journalists tend to exercise self-restraint. They play by the rules and are conservative and conventional. However, when reports on corruption and bribery are highlighted, the Press Council does not restrain them. Thus statutory and voluntary regulations co-exist in promoting ethics in Indian journalism.

Ms Teo Yi Ling from Ngee Ann Polytechnic, Singapore, said that Singapore is seen to favor self-regulation as the government realizes that Singaporeans do know how to make choices. Though basic infrastructures of regulation exist, there is still room for self-determination and personal responsibility within those structures.

Dr Ijaz Shafi Gilani from Gallop Pakistan said that the importance for non-state institutions for defining and regulating media ethics has increased. However, there is a need to establish standards councils under the government-statue mainly to phase out government rule in media. It is necessary to note the importance of mass media and information technology and how they shape the lives of the people as an evolving framework for media ethics.

Mr. Bhag Singh from Bhag, Sulaiman & Com, Malaysia, said that media in Malaysia operates and is restrained and restricted by provisions which are created by the Federal Constitution, Acts of Parliament and Subsidiary Legislative, Guidelines and Codes of Ethics.

Ms Chay Florentino-Hofilena from the Philippines Centre for Investigative Journalism said that bribery is a norm in the Philippine media industry. The cynicism of the media is perhaps the biggest obstacle to self-regulation, making it difficult to create and enforce a national code of ethics, she pointed out.

Ms Reva Khetrapal from the Press Institute of India pointed out that the social, economic and cultural history of each country would be the determinant factor that moulds ethical standards. She feels that media ethics can be ensured by upgrading the skills of journalists, paying journalists a good salary and publicizing issues on corruption. Support from the society and interference of international funding agencies when dealing with corruption cases can also help.

Mr. Inderjit Banerjee said that many journalists in Malaysia report events “inaccurately, without consulting a diversity of reliable sources and manipulating through their bases or those of their institution”. Also they do not practice the principles of human rights, exploiting the privacy of individuals. He feels that there is a need for a strong public demand for press councils and commissions to monitor the practice of media ethics.

The delegates approved a resolution on the third day which recommended a set of principles that should govern a Code of Ethics and how these principles could be implemented.
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DAY ONE
September 11, 2000