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Background and Justification

Studies on the rural press in Asia (e.g., Ingles and Maceda, Maslog) have isolated the factors that contribute either to the continued viability or demise of provincial or rural-based community newspapers. They have provided valuable information and insights on the needs and problems of small, struggling newspapers and how sound management and financing principles, manpower training, and investment in communication technology, among others, have spelled the difference between closure or survival.

Many success stories have been documented on how small, rural newspaper operations have been able to flourish despite tremendous odds. The majority of rural newspapers, however, still remain struggling to keep publishing.

Observational data seem to indicate that despite the odds, many rural newspapers continue to struggle to establish viable institutions that will provide rural communities with sources of news for provincial folk and villagers to keep abreast with what is happening around them, and with information to help them adjust their economic activities to the market. Many other data seem to indicate that community-based or rural newspapers have started innovative practices to maximise scarce resources, enabling them to continue publishing the news, e.g., collaborative tie-ups with other community-based media for sharing facilities and equipment, sharing of news sources, adaptation of information from other media sources, etc.

There is also growing realization among the rural media that they can remain viable, and more importantly perhaps, relevant, if the public, or the target audience, is allowed greater access to and participation in the operations of the media in their community. Slowly, media owners and practitioners are realising the advisability and feasibility of public access and participation in media processes. To what extent has the rural press in Asia allowed this access and participation?

In order to document and assess these developments in the rural press, the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) proposed to conduct a seminar on "Developments and Trends in the Rural Mass Media in Asia."

This report summarises the seminar held in Singapore on 16-18 January 1989.

(See Appendix 1 for Programme.)
OBJECTIVES OF THE SEMINAR

The principal objective of the seminar was to build knowledge on effort towards greater viability of the rural media, through documentation and assessment of developments in the rural mass media in Asia, and to disseminate this knowledge to planners and operators of rural media that they might benefit from it.

Specifically, the seminar sought to:

1. Highlight recent developments in the rural media via the presentation of specially-commissioned papers focusing on specific regions/countries in Asia;
2. Review innovative strategies to promote continued viability of rural mass media in Asia;
3. Assess the extent of public access and participation in the operations of the rural media in Asia, and how it contributes to the survival of newspapers and other related media;
4. Assess the extent/impact of use of new technology, if any, in the rural mass media of Asia; and
5. Discuss other strategies for expanding the audience reach and use of the rural media as channel for news and development information in Asia.

SUMMARY OF SEMINAR PROCEEDINGS

Eleven researchers, media scholars and mass media practitioners from Asia and the Pacific convened at AMIC on 16 January 1989 and for three days presented papers and conducted discussions on the various aspects of the seminar topic. Five senior staff of AMIC also participated as coordinators, discussion leaders and facilitators.

The participants came from the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia in South East Asia; India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka in South Asia; Australia, Tonga, and the Solomon Islands in Oceania.

The two participants from the Pacific Islands represented the umbrella organization of newspapers in the region, the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA), which is currently engaged in various activities geared towards development of local papers into more professional and economically viable enterprises, and the umbrella organisation of Pacific radio stations, the Pacific Islands Broadcasting Association (PIBA).

(See Appendix 2 for List of Participants.)
Opening Session

At the Opening session of the seminar, Mr. Vijay Menon, AMIC Secretary General, welcomed the participants. In his speech, Mr. Menon cited encouraging trends relating to the rural media in Asia; among them, the growth in number of newspapers reaching the peasants in China, the experimental programme to encourage more rural newspapers in Indonesia, and the community radio projects in Sri Lanka.

Discussion Session

Instead of a series of paper presentations by the various participants, the programme was divided into discussion sessions focused on specific topics covered by the papers. The participants were allowed only a short time to highlight the more relevant points in their papers as these came up during the discussion sessions. Copies of the papers were distributed, however. This allowed for more time the for exchange of ideas and opinions as well as experiences among the participants.

(See Appendix 3 for Seminar Papers prepared by the participants.)

Three discussion sessions were held during the first day of the seminar. The first focused on trends in the rural press. It was noted that in many parts of Asia, as well as the Pacific, the rural sector was not well reached by newspapers, journals and magazines, for several reasons. Among these were the still high illiteracy rate in some countries, the lack of a reading tradition among rural peoples, the lack of buying power among rural-based readers, the high costs of production and distribution of usually-low circulation rural or provincial newspapers, and poor transportation facilities for speedier and cheaper transport of newspapers. Encouraging developments highlighted, however, were the earlier mentioned programme to develop more rural newspapers in Indonesia, the wall newspapers in Nepal and the Philippines, the road-building and the computerisation programmes in Malaysia that affects newspaper distribution, and the potentials for desk-top publishing of regional and provincial newspapers.

The discussion on developments in rural broadcasting highlighted a recent Australian Government policy decision changing the system of broadcasting that services the rural population, the expanded uses of satellite communications for radio as well as TV broadcasting in India and Indonesia, the institutionalisation of community radio programming in Sri Lanka, the increasing use of FM transmission in the Pacific Islands, the introduction of television in Nepal, the difficulties in reaching rural audiences with development-oriented programmes through broadcasting, and the introduction of commercial radio and television in some countries where broadcasting used to be mainly state-operated.
The session on the growth and development of other rural media drew extensive discussions on the inroads of commercial cinema and pornography into the rural areas via the videocassette. Likewise, the session generated much experience-sharing on the utilisation of traditional or folk media to reach rural-based audiences, e.g., the use of folk comic theatre, musical drama and folk debates in verse in environmental communication campaigns in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines, the use of village agricultural fairs and festivals and their combination with modern communication tools like public address systems, films, and videocassettes to promote commercial products and services in India, the mounting of folk plays with developmental messages in federal land resettlement areas in Malaysia, etc.

In all three discussion sessions, one running theme was that with the exception of the folk or traditional media, the other mass media were not really reaching as much of the rural audiences which they ought to. Even radio, touted to be the ideal medium for the rural areas, has not really been successful in reaching rural listeners with the more relevant communication messages that should change their lives for the better, according to the participants. One reason being, that for the most part, media planning and programme production are usually centralised in the more urban areas.

Three other discussion sessions more focused on major concerns of media planners and operators were held on the second day of the seminar. The first tackled the issue of new technology and the rural media. Malaysia has computerised the operations of its national news agency, BERNAMA, and can potentially reach a large sector of Peninsular Malaysia, even its rural areas. Nepal, with recently-introduced television, is experimenting with community viewing groups to ensure wider public access to the medium. India and Indonesia have taken the lead in using satellite communications in South and South East Asia, respectively, and they continue to experiment with ways to reach their vast rural audiences with developmental messages. An issue that continues to vex users of satellite communications is the high cost, however.

The Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) is looking into the possibility of desk-top publishing and related computer technology to upgrade the quality of their newspapers; they have to tackle the problem of compatibility, however. The Pacific Islands Broadcasting Association, (PIBA), on the other hand, has been using telex, telephone and telefax for the operations of their news exchange, PACNEWS. They still face the problem of high telephone costs.

The second session on the subject of sustaining the economic viability of the rural mass media again drew much experience-sharing among the participants. According to Tavake Fusimalohi, General Manager of Tonga Broadcasting Commission and Chairman of PIBA, Radio Tonga also operates an appliance store that sells radio sets; the store also has a repair workshop that gives priority for radio sets that are bought from the store. John
Lamani, Editor of The Solomon Star, in Honiara, Solomon Islands, said that his paper relies on advertisements, but also derives additional revenue from special supplements, donations, and other fund-raisers.

A.B.M. Musa, a journalist from Bangladesh, said that rural newspapers make money from government advertisements and from reselling their unused newsprint quota at a margin. He added that some are not above accepting "contributions" from local politicians. According to Mohd. Hamdan Adnan, Senior Lecturer at Institut Teknologi Mara, Malaysia, rural newspapers in Borneo and Sarawak increase the viability of their operations by using their printing facilities to do contracts for journals, supplements, calendars, programmes, invitation cards, and similar printing projects.

Similar strategies for income-generation were cited by the other participants. They also added the following: legal notices, paid political advertisements and/or statements from organised groups, and selling of unsold newspapers for recycling purposes.

The electronic media in most Asian countries being state-run, rely heavily on government subsidy for their finances. Some, however, gain additional revenues from limited commercial advertisements, institutional sponsorship of programmes, and more aggressive collection of license fees.

The topic of professionalising the staff and management of rural-oriented media was the focus of the third discussion session. There was consensus among the participants that many of the staff and managers of rural based newspapers and local radio stations were not professionals and could do with some training or another to upgrade their skills, and consequently the quality of their media outputs. It was noted, however, that training opportunities are available in the region and that they should be taken advantage of. For example, workshops in rural journalism, community press, newspaper management and other journalistic skills are offered by regional organisations like AMIC and the Press Foundation of Asia. Similar programmes may be availed of at national press institutes in some South and South East Asian countries. PINA has started a series of training workshops for its members and is due to come out with its own manual on newspaper management. PACBROAD, or the Pacific Broadcasting Training and Development Scheme, also conducts a series of programme and technical development training workshops for the Pacific Islands.

Working Group Sessions

Late afternoon of the second day and morning of the third were devoted to working group sessions. The participants were divided into three small groups to discuss in greater detail some ways and means of increasing the economic viability of the rural media.
The first group tackled the subject in terms of a trained and more professional staff and management who can increase the community's awareness of the influence of media in their lives as well as open their minds to more innovative strategies related to profitability, production and distribution. The group emphasised that a socially and morally responsible management promotes media credibility, and consequently public or community support for the media.

The second group looked at the problem in terms of public access and participation in the media. The group recognised the low purchasing capacity of newspaper readers and suggested government and non-government subsidies, private marketing efforts and improved marketing strategies, regional editions and specialised markets to promote availability. To increase access to newspapers, the group suggested letters to the editor, hot lines, action lines, writing competitions, inviting readers to send local views, and publishing locally relevant stories. To increase participation in the media, the group suggested sponsoring special events, public shareholding, feedback forums, feedback surveys, encouraging local writing and the institutionalisation of an ombudsman.

In terms of the broadcast media, the group suggested the following measures to increase availability: expanding the reach of radio broadcasting, developing low-cost radio sets, lowering import tariffs on receiving sets, and setting up radio community centres. To promote access, the group suggested: local productions, appropriate timing of broadcasts and development of community radio. They suggested talent scouting to promote participation. The group felt that these measures should help in generating public support towards greater viability of the media.

The third group focused on adapting new technology to the rural media. For the print media, the group suggested the following to accelerate the development of rural newspapers and magazines: establishing a desk top publishing centre where rural newspaper groups can share the resources available; establishing a central printing centre compatible to the DTP technology; providing VCR fax facilities in the DTP centre so that rural print media can take/copy relevant photographs to make their publications attractive and interesting; providing fax facility where possible.

The group recognised that in nearly all developing countries, radio and television are state-owned, and said that where possible, governments should improve the quality of their broadcasting, especially for radio. To improve the quality of reception, and consequently increase listenership, the governments should change to FM, where possible.

(For more details on the working group reports, see Appendix 4.)
Recommendations

At the closing of the seminar, the working group reports were presented before the entire participants for comments and discussion. These discussions resulted in some other suggestions and recommendations, including the following:

1. Institutionalise an Award for Outstanding Community/Rural Newspaper through an endowment fund;

2. Involve awardees in AMIC journalism training seminars/workshops to inspire/influence other rural media practitioners;

3. Conduct research on the constraints to and opportunities for advertising in rural media;

4. Conduct and evaluative study on the Indonesian experiment on government subsidies to local newspapers; and

5. Set up a training programme on the use of new technology appropriate for the rural media.

Closing Session

Mr. Vijay Menon, AMIC Secretary General, expressed his appreciation for the active involvement of the participants in the seminar. He also thanked, in particular, the Commonwealth Secretariat for making possible the participation of the PINA and PIRA representatives, and the University of Sydney for the participation of Mr. Neville Petersen, the University's Director of Information Services.

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