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Bringing The Mass Media To Water

By

Narciso G Reyes
BRINGING THE MASS MEDIA TO WATER

Statement by Ambassador Narciso G. Reyes
at the Round Table on "Increasing Media Capacity to
Promote Public Health and Nutrition in ASEAN,"

I am pleased and honored to participate in this Round Table meeting on the need to involve the mass media in promoting public health and nutrition in the ASEAN countries. I would like to thank the sponsors of the Round Table — the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Center, UNESCO and the World Health Organization — for the privilege of being with you this morning. The sponsors should be commended for having taken a timely and significant initiative in support of an important aspect of social development in South-East Asia.

I should also compliment Mr. Ronald C. Israel, Senior Associate for Development in the Education Development Center, for his useful and illuminating background paper, "Health Education Needs the Media," which will serve as a basis for the ensuing discussions.

My own assigned part is a modest one. It is to ring a bell, as it were, to signal the beginning of our deliberations, to strike a "keynote" which will, hopefully, help the discussions to proceed on an orderly course.
Nevertheless, I approach my task with considerable trepidation. I find that it is not as easy as it seemed when Mr. Jack Ling, the distinguished WHO Director of Public Information, telephoned me from New York and, taking advantage of the softening influence of an old friendship, talked me against my better judgment into accepting this assignment.

Keynote speakers are usually self-assured creatures. They have all the answers; they know precisely where and what the keynote is, and they strike it without hesitation, loud and clear. In my case, I might as well confess to you that, at this moment, I am completely lacking in this type of self-confidence. And the reason is, that I don't have the answers to some of the key questions confronting us at this meeting. In fact, upon reflection, I realize that I may have more questions than answers to offer you.

We have, fortunately, no problem about our goals. First of all, we are all agreed, I take it, that it would be useful, desirable and urgently necessary for the mass media to play a more effective role in promoting public health and nutrition. And it is understood, I hope, for purposes of our discussion, that by mass media we mean those newspapers, radio and television stations that are privately owned and more or less independent of government control, as distinguished from government-owned or state-controlled mass media.
No one questions the far-reaching benefits that could accrue from more active media support of public health and nutrition projects, benefits which are summed up succinctly in Mr. Israel's background paper. The problem, to which there are no simple solutions or easy answers, is how to secure the desired degree of mass media involvement.

Bringing about closer cooperation between governments and mass media could be a complex and difficult feat of matchmaking, with government as the prospective bridegroom and mass media the bride-to-be. We may all be convinced that they would make a good match, but how do we bring them to the altar, to the point of actually saying "I do"?

There are serious constraints on both sides. Governments are usually wary of a free press, which for its part cherishes its traditional role of objective reporter and, whenever necessary, zealous critic and uncompromising fiscalizer of government actions. The mass media, on the other hand, are normally suspicious of government advances, afraid of being unduly influenced, of compromising its impartiality or jeopardizing its jealously guarded independence.

Periodic dialogues may provide one of the means for bringing governments and mass media closer together. In frank and friendly exchanges of views, important new policies, or major shifts of emphasis in existing ones could be explained. The media's awareness of its growing responsibility as an instrument of social change could be fostered.
Whenever appropriate, the participation of WHO, UNESCO, UNICEF and concerned civic organizations could be solicited. The cooperation resulting from such dialogues would be particularly useful in the case of programs which require the understanding, acceptance or voluntary compliance of the public.

Could such confidence-building dialogues induce the mass media to become progressively involved in helping to plan and implement information campaigns in support of urgently needed public health and nutrition programs? Could dialogues of this kind nurture a common concern for the well-being of the people and thus serve as a catalyst for increasingly fruitful consultations leading eventually to the establishment of institutional linkages that would strengthen the framework of government-media cooperation? Could these dialogues, finally, inspire a deeper and more lasting sense of commitment?

These are some of the questions to which I have no ready answers. Like the proverbial horse, we can bring the mass media to water, but can we make them drink?

Much would depend, I should think, on the sincerity, good will and open-mindedness of both sides. Governments should not be too proud to recognize and rectify their own shortcomings. Many leaders of developing countries, for instance, are content to pay lip service to the principle of unified, integrated development which gives equal attention to its economic and social components. At budget time, however, their
real priorities emerge: economic requirements first; social needs, a poor second. The mass media take note of this pronounced economic bias and reflect it in their coverage of the nation's affairs.

The mass media, on the other hand, seldom make a serious effort to correct their ingrained Western bias in the evaluation and treatment of information. They tend to cater to sensational news that "sell the papers", turning a blind eye on the drama of development and social change taking place all around them.

On both sides, fresh vision and a change of heart are clearly in order. Governments should lead by example in focusing public attention on the importance of the social factor in national development. Short of co-opting the press, for instance, a national leader could make news and inspire comments about major health and nutrition projects by mentioning them in some of his press conferences; visiting them during his field trips; or underlining their significance in state-of-the-nation reports. We should take the lead in demonstrating that social transformation gives rise to new values, new perspectives, and new responsibilities.

The challenge to the mass media is to reflect, and re-examine their position. The quantum advances of the past three decades in the technology of mass communications have greatly increased the power of the mass media to reach and to influence the thinking and the life-styles of people.
Does it not stand to reason that such immense power should be tempered by a higher sense of social responsibility and new standards of evaluating and imparting information? Isn't it time to shift mass media emphasis from the traditional one-way flow of information to communication, which connotes the give and take of dialogue? To put it another way, should the mass media be content to remain as spectators or should they now become active participants in social change? These are questions which the mass media themselves will have to answer...

Permit me now to turn from the quicksands of government-mass media relations to the safer ground of ASEAN cooperation in the field of health. The broad framework for such cooperation is already in place. The ASEAN Ministers of Health, meeting for the first time in Manila in July 1980, adopted a Declaration on Collaboration in Health which envisages the "sharing of the benefits of each country's experiences, expertise and resources," with the aim of "making health care accessible to the total population, with priority being given to the underserved and depressed areas."

While there is no reference to cooperation with the mass media in this particular Declaration, linkage could be established with the ASEAN Agreement for the Promotion of Cooperation in Mass Media and Cultural Activities, which was adopted by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers in December 1969.
The Agreement provides that "the Contracting Parties shall promote mass media activities by:

"(a) Broadcasting regular programs to reflect the aims, purposes and activities of ASEAN by the Radio and Television Services of each member country;

"(b) Organizing film festivals;

"(c) Encouraging the exchange of film artists and the undertaking of joint film productions; and

"(d) Organizing seminar and other activities on mass media."

These provisions of the ASEAN Agreement for the Promotion of Cooperation in Mass Media and Cultural Activities, taken together with the ASEAN Declaration on Collaboration in Health, offer ample scope for implementing the second goal of this Round Table meeting: "to initiate a dialogue, building on successful experience to date of participating countries, aimed at strengthening institutional relationships between decision-makers in media and public health."

An added advantage of this ASEAN framework for regional cooperation in the fields of health and the mass media is the opportunity afforded for exploring the tremendous potential of linkages with popular entertainment programs in radio, television and films. Mr. Jack Ling, in his perceptive article The "Firework Syndrome", calls attention to this untapped potential and suggests "a more systematic and wider use of the entertainment medium...that can exercise a powerful influence on social norms."
The most meaningful and promising feature of ASEAN cooperation, however, is not contained in declarations and formal agreements. It is to be found in the steadily growing ASEAN spirit of community. ASEAN has developed modes and habits of consultation and accommodation on the entire spectrum of their social, economic and political problems that greatly facilitate the sharing of knowledge and experience among the member countries.

It is significant, and a good augury of ASEAN's future, that ASEAN cooperation is not limited to the government level. It extends to nearly every sector of ASEAN society, including parliamentarians, lawyers, doctors and nurses, nutritionists, journalists, public relations and advertising representatives, businessmen, artists and writers, women and youth. The most heartening aspect of ASEAN cooperation at this stage of its development is the growing sense of identity, of shared purpose and common destiny of the ASEAN peoples.

The third goal of this Round Table meeting is "to plan a series of new public health/mass media projects that will be implemented at the national level, with training support for interested countries available through WHO, UNESCO and the Asian Mass Communication and Research Center (AMIC)."

I would suggest for your consideration three such projects:

1. A project on the health aspects of drug abuse. There is a
growing problem of drug addiction among the youth in several ASEAN countries from which parents, and society as a whole, tend to avert their faces. The problem poses a formidable challenge to health and mass media decision makers.

In this case, a framework for ASEAN cooperation already exists. The ASEAN Declaration of Principles to Combat the Abuse of Narcotic Drugs was adopted by the ASEAN Foreign Ministers in June 1976. It provides, inter alia, for "cooperation in the fields of drug research and education," and for "exchanges of information and experiences in community education and information" and "in treatment and rehabilitation."

Liaison arrangements with the Colombo Plan Bureau, the United Nations and UN specialized agencies are also provided for. What is needed now is to activate and begin implementing these provisions.

2. A project on the health and nutritional effects of the massive deforestation now occurring in several ASEAN countries, which would result in progressive aridity from soil erosion, the periodic destruction of food crops by uncontrollable floods, and the erosion of dam sites, reservoirs and other sources of water supply.

The problem is no longer long-term. In the case of at least one ASEAN country, deforestation will become critical problem by the turn of the century, which is barely 15 years from now. Here is a situation
fraught with the kind of drama which should appeal to the mass media.

3. A project on the health implications of the urban congestion that is rapidly becoming an explosive social problem in some ASEAN cities. This problem lies right at the doorstep of the mass media, the head offices and facilities of which are usually located in the capital cities. Whether or not this physical proximity to the problem will facilitate their cooperation in the project, however, is an open question which I shall leave to the Round Table to answer.