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Welcome Address

By

Vijay Menon
Welcome Address: Communication Education and Asia

Mr. Vijay Menon
Secretary-General, AMIC
Singapore

Honourable Chief Guest, distinguished guests and participants, ladies and gentlemen:

Revolution is a word that often provokes alarm. Yet "revolution" is the word favoured by communication scholars to describe the upheaval caused by the accelerating pace of innovation in the information industry. But this is a benevolent revolution that we in Asia must welcome and foster. The facts brook no delay.

When we compare Asia with North America, for instance, we see the enormity of the social and economic gap that has to be bridged. Asian life expectancy at birth is 58 years compared with 74 in North America; Asia's infant mortality is 91 per thousand births compared with 12; Asia's adult literacy is 67 percent as against 99 percent, and Asia's per capita GNP is US$920 as against US$11,240. The picture would be bleaker if we were to leave out the more advanced Asian countries.

Yet a case study in Malaysia has shown that the output gain of a farmer with access to information, as well as complementary inputs, can be as much as 20 percent. The diffusion of innovation that scholars talk of depends on the dissemination of information. That is why this Seminar on Communication Training and the Needs of Mass Media Organisations is both urgent and significant. The need today is for media professionals who are not only able and qualified, but also trained in the latest available technology. But teaching institutions are not, unfortunately, in the forefront of change. They often struggle along at the rear.

Let me cite a short quotation:

"The melancholy truth is that journalism education is sunk in the morass of demolarisation, low standards and self-contempt. It inhabits the poverty sector of the academia. And this at a
time when communications—not only nationally but internationally—have reached a new peak of urgency and complexity."

And another, a shorter one:

"With a few notable exceptions, standards of journalism have been in the decline for many years now. It is possible to suggest various causes, among them poor applicant material, ineffective procedures, differing entry methods...." and so on.

The first quotation referred to the United States and the second to the United Kingdom. So we are in good company. But that is doubtful consolation.

Yet the realisation that we must relate training to the needs does not represent the dawning of a new wisdom. Over 12 years ago, in 1972, when AMIC first embarked on its programme of seminars, one of the earliest themes selected was communication and training. In the intervening years, we have organised almost 90 seminars and workshops, and many of them have been on the theme of mass communication and mass communication education.

We are glad that the Malaysian Press Institute readily agreed to co-sponsor this seminar. I would like to thank Haji Hashim Hassan for the interest and enthusiasm he has brought to bear on this project.

For the benefit of those who are not familiar with our organisation, I might explain that AMIC is a non-profit mass communication organisation serving Asia from its headquarters in Singapore. We started as a regional documentation centre, on a suggestion made by UNESCO. Today, we function as an independent foundation, charged with the responsibility of raising the standards of teaching, training, research and the practice of mass communication in the region.

What is most gratifying is the support that we have been privileged to receive from so many institutions and individuals. This workshop has received generous assistance from The Asia Foundation whose representative, Mr. Jon Summers, and his staff have consistently displayed admirable understanding and served as a source of encouragement, strength and support.

To the World Association for Christian Communication and its research director Mr. Neville Jayaweera—who will be with us tomorrow—we owe a special debt of thanks for the material and moral support provided to this project. No less encouraging is the response of our participants who have travelled long and far to give us the benefit of their experience and expertise so that this may be a fruitful meeting.
We are specially gratified, Honorable Chief Guest, by your presence here today, testifying as it does to your interest in this important theme.

We are confident that the deliberations over the next few days will help to build bridges of understanding between the media and the training institutions—thereby benefiting the region and the institutions within it.