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21st century 'information mess' poser

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NOT long ago a panel discussion took place in the Philippines on the topic of media and politics. Mentioned then was the difference between President Ferdinand Marcos and President Corazon Aquino in their dealings with the media. One was said to be like Machiavelli and the other like Joan of Arc.

The difference in attitude was explained by Adrian Cristobal from the Philippine Daily Inquirer: "Marcos took a lot of time talking to newspapermen probably to convince them about the indefensible. But he did talk to them, he did explain everything to make sure that his story comes across. But you have Joan of Arc who believes that everything she does is right...there is an impatience about explaining because it might be misinterpreted as trying to kowtow to the press, as trying to buy them with charm".

Noted thereafter by another Filipino journalist was the difficulty in getting an exclusive interview with Aquino. After waiting for five months he was at last granted one, but together with an American husband and wife team just in from Hawaii. And it lasted only thirty minutes.

In contrast, he added, Marcos used to grant one to two-hour interviews, and even three hours at times.

With all the talk these days about politics and the media being inseparable this story came to mind in the course of a recent conference on the training of journalists in Asean countries. Among speakers was Abdul Razak, Secretary of the Confederation of Asean Journalists in Jakarta.

Reference was later made to "ambush interviews", a common practice in Malaysia as repeatedly shown on television, the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad especially was not spared wherever he might be. And whenever.

Perhaps prescient was Razak's view that the 21st century could be an era of "information mess". This, he deduced, would be the likely outcome of the converging and advancing of telecom and information technology that multiplies the capacity to produce and disseminate information throughout a borderless world.

In his view Asean journalists should, therefore, deepen their understanding of other countries' problems and successes. One who confines himself to his or her own country's boundary and interests would not be able to perform credibly.

There was reference to the past on literary talent as being innate and the saying then that "journalists are born, not made". This was no longer sufficient and it must now go in tandem with a wide-ranging intellect and acquired expertise in specific fields such as economics, science and the arts.

Several proposals were made at the conference attended by academicians from Asean countries. They include the following:

- * In order to increase the media's awareness and understanding of all Asean countries and so journalists can benefit from the diversity of political and social systems in the region, it is recommended that media organisations widen opportunities for student internships, with priority to students from Asean countries.

- * That media organisations widen the opportunities for exchange of working journalists.

- * That a series of travelling workshops be organised to provide

information on specific issues for selected groups of journalists.

* That universities structure their programmes so that students specialise in one area in addition to journalism.

* In order to raise the standards of journalism education in the region and to foster the Asean spirit there be created a framework for a common journalism curriculum that will include specific instruction about Asean.

The conference was organised by the Asian Institute for Development Communications in conjunction with the Konrad Adenauer Foundation of Germany. The keynote address came from Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Minister of Education.

The emphasis on Asean solidarity is surely welcomed in view of the economic turmoil affecting some member countries. That said one aspect of things not specified in the proposed curriculum is that of attitude among media practitioners themselves. It has to do with what Germans term as "schadenfreude".

The word has been used on a number of occasions by government leaders, including Lee Kuan Yew when he was Prime Minister of Singapore. He was referring then to the Western media's propensity for pronouncing judgments on Asian and African difficulties even as their own countries face numerous and serious problems. "It means," he once said, "someone doing worse than you, you feel happier".

In effect such journalists try to inject their own prejudices on to their readers, television viewers and radio listeners. More reprehensible it would be for media practitioners who are also neighbours to indulge in such a practice.

The mutual understanding, solidarity and cohesiveness built over the years, some with painstaking efforts could be endangered if not not undone in a matter of days. To them would be the reminder: what can not be done in one's own backyard shouldn't be practised on someone else's porch.

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