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PM: Media reports must be fair, factual

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I WOULD like to thank the organisers of the 22nd Conference of the Commonwealth Press Union (CPU) for the honour of addressing this distinguished international gathering of newsmen and newswomen. It is certainly a pleasure to welcome so many prominent editors and writers from the Commonwealth countries.

I am happy to note that your Editors' Forum in Penang last week was successful. I hope, since your arrival here, you have seen something of what is really happening in Malaysia.

By choosing to travel from Penang to Kuala Lumpur by road, you must have seen something more of our country and hopefully experienced the warm hospitality of Malaysians.

The Press, as you know, is a very powerful institution. It is not called the Fourth Estate for nothing.

It is one of the powers which determines the fate of human society. And it is more so now because your reach has become global and, more significantly, it has overcome distance and time completely.

You can actually report events across the whole world and throughout the world as they happen. Nothing, or almost nothing, is left to the imagination.

Such power is frightening. As always such power can be a force for enormous good. You can awaken the conscience of the world as you report graphically the tragedies in different corners of the world.

The stories about how the financial turmoil in Asia has resulted in children being abandoned by their parents and how they are forced to scrounge for food in rubbish heaps are heart-rending.

Then there are those macabre reports of bodies being dug from mass graves in Bosnia. One cannot help but feel involved in these tragedies.

The human race felt elated as the first man stepped on the moon. Elsewhere there are reports of more great human achievements.

The Nobel laureates who discovered the remedies for all kinds of previously incurable diseases, those who bravely stood up against injustice and those who devise diabolical formulas for making money perpetually, without limits. We hear and see them and feel the effects of their achievements almost as if we are standing next to them, hearing them and feeling them.

Some stories spread through the media are heartwarming. Some are true and some are false. Some really happened and some are figments of the fertile human imagination.

I have been reading a book by my favourite author, Jeffrey Archer, called The Eleventh Commandment. I crave your indulgence to relate a small part of the book because it illustrates both the power of the media and the good it can do.

It is fictional of course but it is nevertheless credible and may happen in real life.

In this book, the head of the CIA, one tough lady who used to order the assassination of an embarrassing foreign politician without bothering to inform the President, was castigated by the latter for the alleged CIA killing of a presidential candidate in Columbia.

The director calmly denied that the assassination was by one of her boys. She then decided that the CIA hitman must be liquidated.

The man was sent to Russia to kill another presidential candidate, a

particularly obnoxious ex-Communist. The CIA network then arranged for the hitman to be arrested by the Russians for attempted killing of the candidate who later won the election.

The hitman will of course be executed since this is Russia, a country that has not yet heard about human rights and the cruelty of legitimately taking human lives.

In the meantime the wife of the hitman contacted his secretary to find out where he is. The secretary, being infatuated with our hero, finally discovered that he is the man reported by a Turkish newspaper to have been arrested in Leningrad for attempted assassination of the Communist presidential candidate.

On her way to inform the wife she was killed through a road accident arranged by the CIA.

When the wife finally discovered the fate of her friend, she rang up the deputy director of the CIA who promptly denied that he knew any such person as the husband of the caller or the secretary of the husband.

When the wife pointed out that he was actually at her party recently and had talked to the secretary concerned, he told her that she must be imagining as he does not know her or had been to her house.

At this stage she came up with her trump card. It seemed her daughter had video-taped the party and there was a scene of him talking to the secretary.

For good measure she said that the conversation she was having with the deputy director was being recorded and if he tried to dispose her off or to search for the tapes, the TV networks would receive full copies of the video-tape of the party and the telephone conversation.

At the mention of the TV networks getting the tapes the attitude of the deputy director changed completely.

Now you can see how the media can play a powerful role in ensuring that justice will be done and the miscreants prevented from misusing their power.

Unfortunately the media itself is often tempted to misuse power. I am not a fan of President Bill Clinton but I do sympathise with him. He only hugged Monica Lewinsky once, at least in public. He may have hugged her more times in private, that we don't have any pictures of.

But that one hug has prefaced every report on President Clinton whether the subject matter had anything to do with his single instance of discretion or not.

If the CNN is to be believed, Bill Clinton has hugged Monica a thousand times, 12 times a day ever since CNN resurrected that particular episode among the file pictures.

With the passage of time the hug has improved in terms of clarity and vividness. There is no mistaking the look of adoration in Monica's eyes and the body language of the President of the United States.

The viewers, Americans and others must assume that the President must really know Monica intimately and all those stories about the phone-calls to the Senators even while he dallied with Monica must be the truth, the absolute truth and nothing but the truth.

As I said, I am not a fan of President Clinton but I do feel that kind of presentation via television is not quite fair to the President. There is no one in the United States who has not seen it and been influenced by it.

How can anyone sit in judgement over him without being biased, without preconception? How can the impeachment of the President be fair and just?

In Malaysia we are experiencing something similar. We have a serious political problem made more serious by the manner the problem is being presented to the whole world by the all-powerful international media.

All over the world Ministers are dismissed and they normally pack their bags and go off. Ministers have also been charged in courts even in this country, have been found guilty and in at least one case have been sentenced to death.

There was no demonstration and charges that the courts will be biased.

A Malaysian court once declared that the ruling party was illegal and there was nothing the Government of the party concerned could do about it.

But unfortunately one Minister refused to go quietly and to be tried in the normal manner. The international media sensed an enduring scoop. After all this is one of those backward Asian countries whose understanding of justice and fair play is quite limited.

This particular country had in the past dared to challenge the West and its media, its values and its economic and financial theories and practices.

I cannot help but feel that the international or, more precisely, the Western media, would like to teach Malaysia a lesson, to pull it down a few pegs more.

Malaysia has never had a good Press. None of the positive things we have achieved have been reported. A multi-racial country that is stable and economically successful is not a subject of interest to the powerful among the international media. But a failure of any kind makes good copy.

And so every time Malaysia appears on the TV screen for whatever reason, the pictures of rioting and the famous black eye are shown. Unflattering comments invariably precede any mention of the word Malaysia.

The impression given to people all over the world is that Malaysia is in a state of perpetual turmoil, a police state where police brutality is a daily, or even an hourly occurrence.

Occasionally pictures of armoured cars manned by African blacks are shown when reporting about the demonstrations without explaining how these Africans came to be driving armoured cars in Malaysia.

The viewers cannot be blamed if they assume that Malaysia is in Africa or Malaysia is in the habit of employing African mercenaries to do the dirty work.

I am not denying that the black eye is real. I regret it and I am concerned about it. There is a full investigation being made.

There will be no cover-up and the guilty party will be punished. I must be crazy if I wanted the black eye which the police then paraded before the world through the media, print and electronic.

Yet the media implied that the Malaysian dictator is presiding over a police state where giving black-eyes to prisoners is common practice.

Indeed one writer said that the subject was beaten to a pulp. His book is being sold outside.

I am not denying that there has been some rioting and breaking into the buildings by the rioters.

The police may have been rough but you can compare their handling of the demonstrators with the handling by the European and American law enforcement officers. Invariably the latter are more brutal.

But of course the Governments of these highly civilized countries are not described as dictatorial and condoning police brutality. Nor are the video clips shown every time there is mention of the country concerned.

I am not asking that the media report only the good things. I am asking that the media be fair, be balanced, be factual. It is not necessary to preface every mention of the name Clinton with his hugging of Lewinsky. Maybe a few times for viewers who have poor memory. By now there is no one in the world who has not seen it. So it is no longer necessary.

If the media must report on all those agitating against the Governments of these developing countries, at least give the Government side a fair

exposure as well.

The media accuses the Malaysian Government and those of other developing countries of controlling the Press. But isn't the media doing the same?

The international media never give the Government side an airing. In fact, they distort reports about the Government and go so far as to fabricate unflattering stories about the Government.

The Government of the country is elected by the people in fair elections. Presently, an attempt is being made to topple the Government through street demonstrations and other undemocratic ways.

How can the media support this attempt and at the same time talk about democracy?

Support the opponents of the Governments by all means but the media must not advocate an undemocratic overthrow of the Governments.

I don't know about other countries but in Malaysia the Opposition can win elections and even form Governments. I myself have lost an election before. I am perhaps the only dictator who has to stand for elections before dictating.

In making slanted and distorted reports, the media is doing a disservice to their clients. This is especially so with economic reports and magazines.

The analysis made is based usually on the agenda of the media concerned. If it is not in favour of a country for whatever reason, disinformation is used to blight the country.

Tourists and investors will then shun the country. At times, as a result of this, the economy of the country fails and the prediction of instability and turmoil becomes true.

We are living in a shrinking world. We are all close neighbours in a global village. We should take this closeness to develop good neighbourliness, the kind that is usually found in villages. Only good can come out of this.

We shouldn't beggar our neighbour. We should prosper them instead. We should prosper them not at our expense but by mutual help where wealth can expand and be shared by all. There is really no need for a zero sum game.

You don't have to win by causing others to lose. That is what the currency traders believe in; impoverish others in order to make money for themselves. It is not a very considerate way of doing things, especially when being considerate and caring would cost them nothing.

The media has a role to play here. It can promote a positive concept of neighbourliness. It can help in the shaping of a new world culture, a culture of sharing, a culture that will make this global village a village of good caring neighbours. The media can help to bring about peace.

Yes, there should be the right to know but knowing the inner thoughts of parties in conflict, airing them worldwide will not promote peace and

We all know that we do have nasty thoughts even about our best friends but we remain best friends by not telling explicitly about what we really think about them. There is no need to know. A little hypocrisy perhaps but it is all in the interest of something good.

So do we really want to know about everything? Is there really this need to know? Has not the media invented this need in order to justify a lot of conflict provoking stories?

Let us think again. We had thought that the Internet would enable everyone to correct the untruths in the media reports. But now we are seeing lies being spread through the Internet. Again the gifts that we receive from the development of new technologies are being abused. Do we ever learn?

It is easy to become frustrated. We are not approaching the new century, the new millennium, in the correct way.

We appear to be carrying the baggage of past misdeeds and misconceptions along with us.

The new century is apparently not going to be any better than the century we are leaving, the century which saw two world wars, 200 million people killed, poverty and starvation on an unprecedented scale.

The technological advances we have made have only improved our capacity to destroy. Nuclear bombs and chemical weapons are supposed to make wars no longer a way of solving the disputes between nations.

But we have very cleverly made these devices "safe", it seems. In the meantime we invent better weapons for more effective killing.

With all these, what is the role of the media? Merely to report, perhaps to incite, to make conflicts worse or to work for a better world. The media is powerful, in most instances more powerful than Governments and politicians like me. You can make or break anyone and anything.

We have seen you at work. I have described some of this to you. You should rethink your role.

You have the power. Please use it well for the future of mankind.