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A lesson on how the media works

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PARTICIPANTS, including heads of states and governments, were given a "lesson" on how the media works by a CPTM (Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management) networker.

British Member of Parliament Richard Ottaway, speaking on "Living with the Media and Globalisation", said governments who did not know how to handle the media would never be winners.

No one in the conference room, he said, could be in any doubt that they were living in a global village.

It was Harold Wilson, the British Prime Minister, who said in the mid 70s "a week is a long time in politics".

In those days, Ottaway said, a story would kick around for a few days, gather a little momentum, reach a crisis and fade away.

Today, a journalist picks up a story in the morning and it's around the world by lunchtime.

By the next morning, there would have been 101 different angles reported, each citing a new "exclusive" information source.

"Today, seven hours or even seven minutes is a long time in politics. Information management is the pivotal central feature of any government programme," said Ottaway.

"Whether it is trying to get out a simple message or get re-elected, whether the intended audience is the national electorate or the global international audience, unless it gets the message out, it has failed.

"It has failed to engage with other people and is just talking to itself."

The British MP said a government or political party which did not know how to interact with media outlets and handle their reporters and political editors were not going to be winners.

"And they are not going to govern their countries successfully."

Ottaway said State-run media organisations providing uncritical coverage were rapidly becoming a thing of the past.

"The media is a natural source and it has no recognition in any constitution.

"They are hard-nosed business organisations which want your story before anybody else and they want it while it's still hot news. I counted 12 cameras covering Dr Mahathir Mohamad's keynote address on the opening night.

"How you react to this is critical to your success. Abraham Lincoln said: 'You can fool some of the people all of the time, and all of the people some of the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time'."

Ottaway said most journalists' objective was to ensure that no one was fooled at any time.

"Most people believe what they read in the newspapers, hear over the radio or see on television," he said, citing an example of Romanian President Nicolae Ceausescu.

The Romanian President was worried about energy supply to the population. In an attempt to cut down on national consumption, he instructed the local television station to always report the weather as a few degrees warmer than it really was, in the hope that people would turn down their heating or not switch it on at all.

After he was deposed, and the media started reporting accurate weather

forecasts, it was quite remarkable how many people said the weather had gotten worse.

Ottaway told governments that it was essential to have specialists in their teams who could identify and encapsulate the message they wanted to communicate and then work with the media to get it out.

He highlighted some fairly obvious golden rules for effective management.

Among them, keep the message short and simple, present news in a digestible way, be proactive and don't try to manipulate the media.

Ottaway said managing the media in a global village was a tricky and complex business.

"Once the message is out, you have to control it as best as you are able to. Be proactive, not reactive.

"Rebut attacks against you quickly. Never stay silent and saying something once is not enough. Repeat, repeat, repeat," he said.

He also said governments needed to have the highest quality staff involved.

"For your national audiences, you need to have spokesmen who are not patronising or snooty, but chatty and friendly whom the audience can warm to.

"Remember, most viewers see television as a personal conversation between them and the broadcaster."

On the international stage, Ottaway said, "look hard at the audience they are addressing".

"Whether it is the English, Spanish or Mandarin-speaking world, they must have presentable, articulate people with a first-class command of the language."

As communism collapsed in Europe a decade ago, Ottaway said, one of the most noticeable feature was that all those involved in the uprisings had good English-speaking spokesmen to influence public opinion around the world.

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