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When absolute truth is a journalist's hypothesis

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WITH news originating from the word "new", media practitioners are constantly under scrutiny. Not generally realised by others, is that they work long hours and have to endure intense time pressures.

At the same time, journalists are sometimes unclear about policy objectives, especially about politics, or about cows which are sacred.

Nor will they know for sure where their stories will appear, whether on the front-page or as a "filler". Or if the stories will be "spiked".

Ever so often, journalists are enjoined to tell the truth.

For this scribe is the reminder once given by Will Irwin - a respected American writer - sometime in 1911 that goes thus:

"Truth, absolute truth is a hypothesis. No man, from a cub reporter writing a dog-fight to a star writing a political convention, but puts into his work a point of view."

It could have been composed last night, another journalist wrote later. It remains true today.

So it is that the role of journalists has now been discussed again in the South Africa International Dialogue in Maputo, Mozambique and in the Confederation of Asean Journalists seminar in Kuala Lumpur.

In the Mozambique dialogue session, heads of State and Government, selected media practitioners, business and labour leaders debated at length on ways and means to fight the Western media's misrepresentation of the developing world.

An example of it was the torrent of critical reports about the President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe, over the issue of fertile lands owned by the minority white farmers.

Attacks on him continued till Zimbabwe's national election and "observers" from several Western countries took it upon themselves to monitor things.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had earlier suggested the creation of a news network to enable Africa and Asia to exchange news to counter the misreporting of the Western media.

Mentioned by Malaysian officials was the establishment of the Asia News Network, established in early 1999 by several Asian newspapers, to provide the exchange of same day's news and photos.

If and when the Africa-Asia news network is established, member countries would do well to remember what happened to the International Islamic News Agency set up in the 1970s and based in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia.

It was active for a while but withered over the last decade, following the eight-year Iran-Iraq war.

After some time, certain member countries failed to pay their dues.

Among its founder members was Bernama, the Malaysian national news agency which continued to pay its dues.

Contributions stopped when IINA failed to operate as it should, and so the exchange of news between Islamic countries came to nought.

Meanwhile in Kuala Lumpur, a proposal for the establishment of a Press Council has been revived and debated in the Asean Journalists seminar.

It would be similar to those set up in Britain, Australia, New Zealand, India, Thailand and Indonesia.

It will be noted that in Britain, the name has been changed to Press Complaints Commission.

It denotes the real state of things following a spate of complaints over

distortion, misreporting and invasion of privacy.

A complaint by Peter Mandelson, a Cabinet minister, helps to explain things as when he wrote:

"In recent weeks, I have opened newspapers to discover sentiments and views attributed to me that I have never expressed. Other ministers have had similar experiences."

This complaint was made in July this year. President Mugabe is thus not the only complainant.

In Indonesia during the days of President Suharto's administration, the Press Council was headed by the Information Minister who later closed down three news weekly magazines, including the highest selling Tempo.

A new Press Council has been set up in Jakarta. In the meantime though, a newspaper in East Java was raided by supporters of a political party. One journalist had his finger cut off.

Several others covering the signing ceremony between the International Monetary Fund and the Government found the Press room shunted to the back of the palace.

Yet others at a political party convention were asked to pay for use of the computers in the Press room.

Still active is the Organisation of Asia Pacific News and its membership has in fact grown to 30 countries.

Among its members are Bernama, Antara from Indonesia, the Press Trust of India, Yonhap of South Korea, Xinhua of China, Irna of Iran and Itar-Tass of Russia.

Bernama has been elected President of OANA for the 2003-2006 term.

To all this should be added a footnote about the "Declaration of Windhoek on Promoting an Independent and Pluralistic African Press" which was announced after a major conference of African media practitioners in Windhoek, Namibia from April 29 to 3 May 1991.

This was followed a year later - Oct 5-9 1992 - by the "Declaration of Alma Ata on Promoting Independent and Pluralistic Asian Media", following a conference of Asian journalists in Alma Ata, Kazakhstan.

The dominance of the Western media nonetheless continues unabated, courtesy of the "parachute journalist", among others, who drop in for a two or three-day visit to a developing country and then pass his judgment.

Published in the London Spectator magazine sometime back was a cartoon showing a couple getting ready for a trip somewhere.

There was the husband asking then: "Well, have we got everything? Maps, tickets, passports, vitriol?"

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