IPS Institute of Policy Studies

IPS-Asia Journalism Fellowship Conference, 6-7 April 2011: "Reporting Religion: Dilemmas of Public Discourse"

*By Richard Philip

We thank the Asia Journalism Fellowship (AJF) for contributing this article to the IPS newsletter. Mr Richard Philip was invited to by AJF to cover the conference.

When outraged Muslim residents in Malaysia protested against the relocation of a Hindu temple into their neighbourhood, they brandished a severed cow's head before the cameras. The stunt was designed to offend Hindus, who consider cows to be sacred.

A graphic video clip of the protest, recorded by political news website Malaysiakini, sparked a lively discussion among journalists, media experts and representatives of religious groups who were gathered for a conference on Reporting Religion: Dilemmas of Public Discourse, on 6-7 April 2011.

Even seasoned media professionals among the participants felt uneasy and questioned the wisdom of giving publicity to such intolerant acts.

"Take the side of common decency when reporting such events," advised Dr Eric Loo, a senior lecturer in the School of Journalism and Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong, Australia.

The conference, an event of the Temasek Foundation (TF) Asia Journalism Forum, was organised by Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and the Institute of Policy Studies. Dr Loo was one of several experts and practitioners who addressed the question of how best to report on the sensitive topic of religion.

He said that journalists should use their powers of observation, analysis and reflection to report events within their context in order to edify the public. They should be mastering the issues related to religious conflict in their respective countries and anticipate how certain events may unfold, he added.

This kind of "proactive journalism" would be better than "reactive journalism" in which journalists snatch the most sensational elements of an event to produce a story that is bound to misinform people and aggravate tensions, he said.

Other speakers highlighted instances from across the region where irresponsible reporting has worsened conflicts.

During violent clashes between Christians and Muslims on the Indonesian island of Ambon in 1999, two newspapers owned by the same media conglomerate championed opposite sides of the conflict

and stoked the fire. "These newspapers took sides," said Dr. Rachmah Ida, a lecturer in communications at Airlangga University in Surabaya, Indonesia. "Suara Maluku called Muslims terrorists and Ambon Express called Christians troublemakers. The use of labeling and provocative terms for parties involved in conflicts remains the typical way interfaith conflicts tend to be covered in Indonesia."

Pakistani journalist Imtiaz Alam said that the battle for ratings and readers was one factor that made media susceptible to the draw of extremist views. Besides, media people may be influenced by their allegiance to a particular ethnicity, religion or ideology, said Dr Alam, who is the secretary general of the South Asian Free Media Association.

He also noted that media coverage is usually circumscribed by its dependence on the local market and the nation state. Media may therefore fail to report fairly the interests of minority groups. It is difficult to push for equitable treatment of a story that involves unequal parties to begin with, he said.

Thai journalist Prangtip Daorueng said that the media in Thailand, which is predominantly Buddhist, had a lack of understanding of Islamic perspectives. This has become an urgent problem, with intermittent violence against both Buddhist and Muslim civilians living in Thailand's southern provinces – Pattani, Yala, Songhkla and Narathiwat.

"We suffer insufficient knowledge of other religions. We just leave them alone. But with events in Southern Thailand we cannot continue not knowing anymore," said Ms Daorueng, who is a member of the International Consortium of

Investigative Journalists, a project by the Center for Public Integrity based in Washington DC.

Ms Paromita Pain from India urged the media to cover all dimensions of a conflict. "A characteristic of long lasting conflicts is that at different points different views dominate the debate. Journalists should ensure that all sides of the matter are heard," added Ms Pain, a journalist with the Women's Feature Service, an international news agency based in New Delhi.

Radio journalist Darshana Ashoka Kumara from Sri Lanka related the problems of building peace after decades of conflict between Buddhist Sinhalese and Hindu Tamils. The media needed to build a shared space for peaceful dialogue and reconciliation, he said.

"Practicing journalism based on the Hindu and Buddhist definition of communication as an inward search for meaning – a process that leads to self-awareness, freedom and finally truth – will be useful in the context of Sri Lanka," said Kumara, a 2011 Fellow of the TF-NTU Asia Journalism Fellowship programme.

The speakers did not believe that censorship was the solution. Nor should journalists automatically avoid religion for fear of stirring trouble, Dr Loo said. Although many Asian societies regarded religion as a divisive force, journalists should not "use that as an excuse to refrain from pushing the boundaries of discussion", he stressed.

In fact, restricting discussion and debate on contentious issues would only conceal tensions where they are freer to foment and surface at a later stage in more lethal

forms.

Roby Alampay, a Filipino journalist who previously served as the head of the Southeast Asian Press Alliance, warned that suppressing an open debate on critical issues ran the risk of pushing that debate underground and breaking it up into polarised discussion groups.

Such clustering would make it easier for bigoted ideas to gain momentum, grow in power and eventually become a threat. "When you balkanize discourse you risk radicalizing thought," Mr Alampay said.

He noted that the Thai authorities' move to shut down online forums, during the height of the red shirts versus yellow shirts protests, owing to concerns that some of the discussions would cause more harm, led to the splintering of large and diverse online forums into smaller online clusters unable to support a variety of topics and viewpoints.

"Censorship forces people out of a richer environment of discussion," said Alampay. In open discourse all views including those of the extremists, the bigoted and the ignorant would be given a chance to contest their merit. Weak ideas can therefore be exposed and tested, he said.

Closing the conference, NTU Associate Professor Cherian George and head of the TF Asia Journalism Forum noted that there are "major historical and philosophical blind spots in the media's relationship to religion."

"We have people in the newsrooms who understand the difference between K-pop and J-pop but we may not have people who understand the differences between religious denominations," said Dr George, who is also an adjunct senior research fellow of the Institute of Policy Studies.

He urged journalists to provide sustained coverage of religion, and not only when it makes bad news. "We should look closely at the role we play in giving people misperceptions for framing debates in unhelpful ways," he said.

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