

Development Communication: Standing of the Asian Media

Reviewed by Ali Wahed

THE "Development" world is realising with increasing intensity that service delivery without communication components doesn't deliver any development at all. Communication makes the proverbial horse of development standing reluctant at the water trough having been dragged there, ultimately drink from it; in the last few years it has grown as a subject in scope and technique more than other sector of the total development package. It has definitely gone beyond the ancient practices of haranguing the crowd to take malaria pills or something equally fruitless to a concept where behaviour alteration is a science which requires perfecting everyday and in so many ways.

These questions and many that run with them have not been answered yet sufficiently and even the skylines can start becoming visible only when the issue of development from

Press Foundation of Asia for long and subsequent service with UNESCO along with his stints in various South East Asian countries, Ali speaks with an assured sense of authority.

His article in the Journal is a sober recounting of what went by the name of development journalism in the seventies and the eighties rather than the news desk recounting sort which would have made "lighter" reading. He is not talking about what is

sounds like the baby didn't exactly run around and sing happily.

"How has the Asia-Pacific region fared... I believe that our overall performance has been generally mixed and on closer scrutiny, we may find more failures than gains at the end of our balance sheet."

It is a sobering and even a pessimistic assessment. It is also a courageous one because along with a handful of believers he himself had a big part to play in trying to make the Asian media more relevant to its own people. He was part of the team of birth attendants who tried to usher in the infant of hope which we think never happened. But where is the child now?

Not as robust as Ali would want it to be but definitely not as unhealthy either as he says.

This is because there are some points that development activists involved with the media can discern in the evolving pattern of Asian media. That obviously countries with healthy economies are producing competent media. They are cases of star-crossed nations with rapid economic development not keeping pace with political freedom but the inexorable demands of a sophisticated global economy is creating greater space for the media even within fully or semi-autocratic political structures. The shout or even the grasp of the Censor can only do so much when the pressure on autocratic governments to further liberate the market is often packaged with demands for liberation of the press by global market forces. If China has been forced to allow "freer" breathing how can others deny and for how long?

For once history has taken charge leaving political and development scientist behind. But obviously the foundation was laid in the principles and ideas which Ali and some others first articulated for a meaningful Asian press.

One also notices in his article the ideological stance of UNESCO the organisation he served. Ali served in the UNESCO jingoistic days of its counterproductive DG M'bow which although promised great

BOOK REVIEW

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bottom above or sideways become more meaningfully defined. But in the interregnum as we wait, few are more able to ask the right questions about the media in general and the print media in particular than one of the contributors in the number two issue of the Journal who also is the Editor of Daily Star of Bangladesh. S M Ali has a background which qualifies him to look at the rise of what could be broadly lumped as the Asian media sans Japan. This could perhaps be labelled as the Pacific basin media about which as the helmsman of the

meant to run this or that paper in some distant location but of the initiatives that were taken to bring the Asian media at par with the rest of the "world."

Understandably it reads like a report but unlike the sorts many UN staffers and consultants prepare it is written with a flair and what one would say naturally professional. The fact that it doesn't run into too many pages help of course and the other contributors and the Editor of the journal could well take a lesson from Ali's piece and learn that most of the other contributions may go unread bar a few dedicated professionals because they have not been "shaped" and packaged for the consumer. A professional publication doesn't surely have to be rather stodgy and academic pieces don't have to be dull either.

All concentrates on the great gust of optimism which swept the Third World when the New World Communication and Information Order (NWICO) was midwived into being. The child brought high hopes. It was supposed to develop information infrastructures, organise better training for journalists, pay more attention to issues of development, ensure press freedom in a meaningful manner and so on. But the balance sheet in 1990



A NAP IN THE LATE AFTERNOON: A tired woman who makes a living by collecting scraps takes a nap on the bed of grass in Ramna Park to rest her weary limbs. —Star Photo

going ultimately didn't achieve much beyond alienating the North from the South. The ideas of a local regional media, development journalism and the other agendas on UNESCO's menu perhaps didn't fare so well because they were to some extent removed from the felt needs of the community. In other words, the issues of community media, development journalism and other members of the information tribe which wanted to be something beyond being the provider of printed words with the morning tea became a part of Third World rhetoric and programmes funded by First world money, however "dyed" it may have been with UN colours. The principles were right but the strategy was not only wrong but destructive.

This was probably the basic problem of promoting development journalism from above which UNESCO more than any other agency espoused in the last couple of decades. But while the NWIO may onto have come into existence, many of the programmes which people like Ali propounded have taken

a firm root in many and varied soils. It has not grown within the media as an end in itself, with the press changing robes and all but issues and concerns have created demands albeit limited ones which the press has now got to fulfill whether any "idealist" agency is funding it or not. A communication and information bang (however) has taken place.

There is now even a community press whose growth is perhaps known better to field level advocates of development than policy makers like Ali because they have to deal with on a regular basis. Even training and orientation, still miles away from what it should be is on its way up. And some would say that in each level, national or regional, there is a growing but small band of journalists, who would rather chase the grass roots development worker than the fire-engine of sensationalism.

But this too must be recognised that the principle problem of what to print at the cost of what is centrally rests on what the readership wants and its as simple as that. Analogies

from real life are the most apt. Who would want to eat boiled spinach however nutritious it is if one can chew a glorious hamburger? The junk food will always prevail and no newspaper which hopefully is always a commercial proposition can ignore junk news and go for the development one. At least until the readers themselves demand that. Which is what is happening in many parts of the world including the West because such issues have relegated itself to relevance having climbed down from moral and just towers of funded development. Newspapers surely can't operate outside the laws of demand and supply.

Development journalism will find its place only if development itself starts taking place. If there is no improvement in the socio-economic sector no matter how much there is prodding from whatever plan or agency, it will simply become an useless and easy way for some to make hacks some money while he waits for the scoop about the king who never sat on the throne and the crown which

he never owned. That news not be true but it would make good copy.

S M Ali and those who with him dreamt of a new order should be told that they have earned the right to be congratulated.

Much of what is happening, its million faults notwithstanding, grew out of the perceptions they forged and the good luck they had to plan and implement something based on that. It may not have come about in the quantum they wished and the way they hoped but despite falling standards in some countries or zones, Asian media is far ahead from the point when it was not just a poor cousin but a distant and impoverished relative of the Western Press. And in earning that terribly difficult place that sweat of the collective brows of the men who toiled in is evident and obvious.

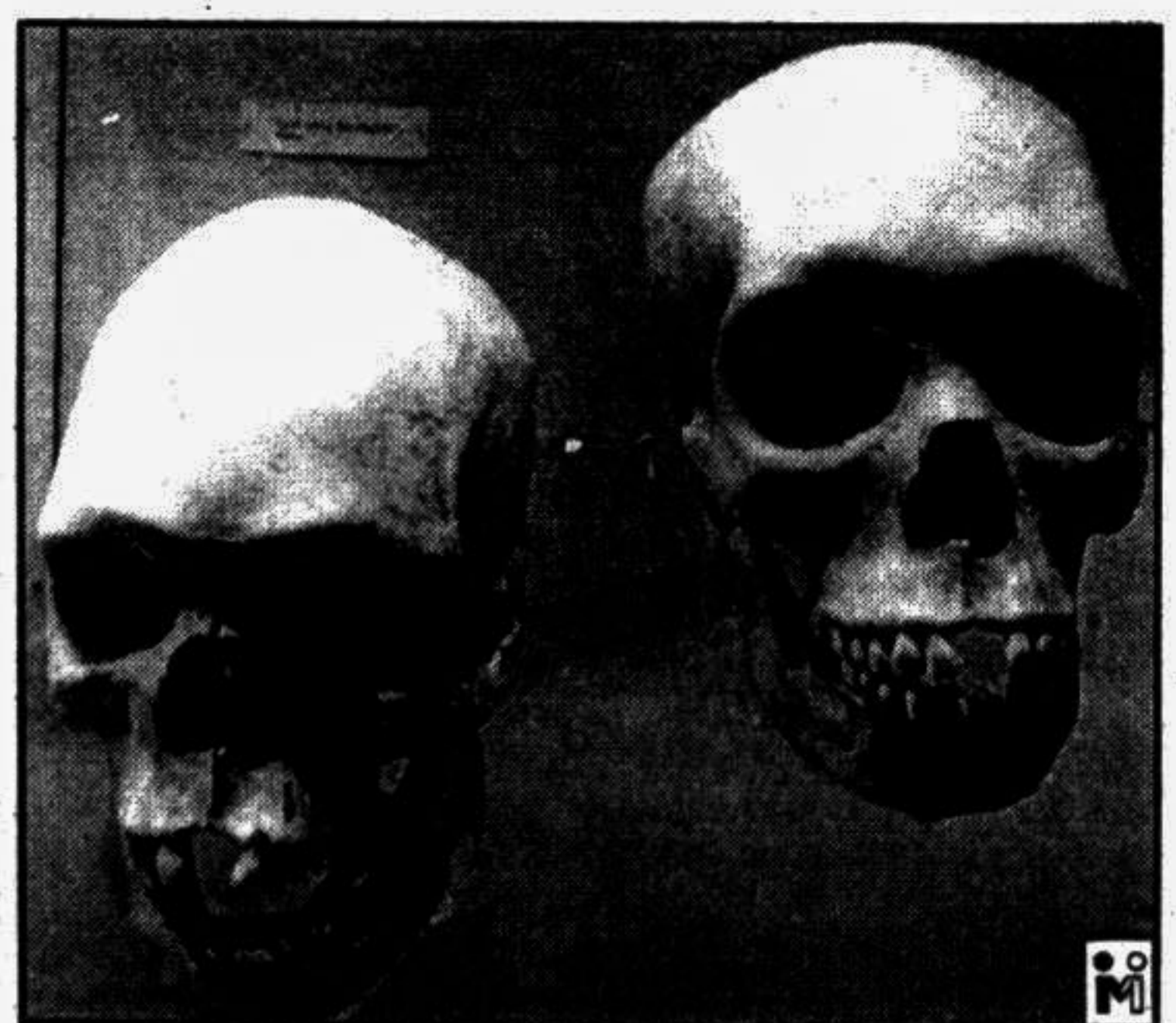
Never mind if that news misses their own slightly battle weary eyes.

Early Australians Returned for Burial

FOR almost a decade, Aboriginal Australians have campaigned for the return of their ancestors' remains from museums and colleges worldwide. The remains were taken during the 19th Century and kept as exotic specimens of a race which was labelled by white settlers as "primitive". They continue to be kept still, by scientists who maintain that they are important to anatomy research. But the Aborigines insist that they should never have been taken in the first place.

Between 1800 and 1945 the practice of body-snatching flourished in Australia. 19th Century scientists sought to prove Darwin's theory of evolution and advertised for Aboriginal bodies to experiment on. By offering financial rewards, they encouraged bounty hunters to rob graves and even kill. Fresh specimens and racial pedigree were highly prized and there was no code of ethics to restrict the methods used to acquire human specimens. There were no legal sanctions.

Aborigines were considered to be less than human and their bodies were exhibited in displays as examples of Australian animal life which was said to range from wallabies to Aborigines. Paul Turnbull, from the James Cook Museum in Queensland, has researched 19th Century body-snatching in Australia. He says: "In a lot of cases you would stumble across skulls and bodies where people had been shot by the native police."



TOP: Aboriginal rights activist Rikki Shields (left) in London with didgeridoo player Richard Whalley—Some of these remains are our heroes and warriors. BOTTOM: Aboriginal skulls, male and female, in London's Horniman Museum. The museum would consider returning them if requested.

FIAP Distinction for 3 Bangladeshi Photographers

International Federation of Photographic Art in Belgium recently.

FIAP, comprising of about 60 national Photographic Federations of the world has given these honours for the photographic excellence and achievements of the three Bangladeshi artists of the gelatin art.

So far, Bangladeshi photographers have received about 300 international awards in photography, out of which 70 laurels were obtained by Anwar, Chandan and Shuvro.



The winners: (L to R) Dr Rashid-Un-Nabi Shuvro, Anwar Hossain and Hasan Saifuddin Chandan.

WRITE TO MITA

Dear Mita,
I was brought up to believe that marriage is forever and therefore tried for 12 years to live with my husband. He has humiliated and hurt me in all possible ways. I tolerated everything but when he tried to beat me I left him 3 months ago. Now he begs me to go back and forgive him. I am confused and afraid he might beat me again. What should I do? As a wife is it my duty to forgive and go back? Please help me.
Selina, Eskaton, Dhaka.

Dear Selina,
This is a very difficult decision especially in our culture where women are expected to forgive and adjust. I would suggest that you don't rush into anything but rather use this period of separation to analyse the problem in your marriage and try to find out what makes your husband behave this way. Perhaps he needs professional help or even to talk to someone he trusts. Perhaps he has taken you for granted since you tolerated his behaviour for so long. He has become unnerve by your duration of independence. These people are bullies but basically very insecure. Before you break off give it one more try. If possible make him realize that marriage is based on mutual love, respect and trust and that he too has a responsibility to make it work.

Dear Mita,
Getting children admitted into a good school has become a big problem. Even though there are many schools only few have a good reputation and everyone tries to get in. My 5-year-old daughter failed admission test last year and I had to put her behind. The schools keep on raising their standards and children have a difficult time keeping up. What can we do?
Saïqa, Malibagh, Dhaka.

Dear Saïqa,
Yes, this has become a common complaint among parents. The way to counter this is to be vocal. Yet your grievances need be known to school authorities. Writing letters to editor of daily newspapers is also another way of raising public consciousness regarding this problem. There are very few places in the world where a 5-year-old has to know the meaning of failure.

Dear Mita,
You give good advice so I want you to solve my problem also. I married my husband 8 years ago. It was a love marriage and we were sure that our life would be a very happy one but unfortunately it did not happen that way. Only after one year

we started arguing and fighting about little things. As a husband he seemed different from the man I had fallen in love with. He also complains that I have changed a lot. What do you think has happened to us? We don't talk much to each other anymore. Please help me as I am very unhappy.
Nina, Maghbar, Dhaka.

Dear Nina,
Marriage essentially means adjusting — whether it is love marriage or arranged. You both might have had certain illusions about marriage and were disappointed when things did not happen that way. What has happened in your case is common among couples who come into marriage thinking it will be similar to the courtship.

First, both of you must admit frankly to each other that there is a problem which has to be solved and that needs mutual cooperation. Go back to the beginning and start from where the first problems began. Remember, communication is probably the only way to get started. Keepings things bottled up inside does not solve anything, nor make the problem disappear.

WRITE TO MITA

Run by a trained and experienced Family and Marriage counsellor, assisted by a professional team of doctor, psychologist and lawyer, this column will answer questions relating to family, marriage, health, family laws, and social and interpersonal relationships. Please address letters to Mita, The Daily Star, GPO Box 3257 or to 28/1, Toynbee Circular Road, Motijheel, Dhaka-1000.

Eventually, the demise in the credibility of racial science led to a demise in the collecting of human specimens. Social anthropologists today have a different philosophy regarding indigenous culture, and the complexities of Aboriginal society would no longer be labelled primitive.

However, anatomists and medical researchers insist that any remains acquired during the years of colonial rule are the property of the institutions they were donated or sold to. They maintain that Aboriginal communities in years to come may regret the reburial of their ancestors' remains which would have been of interest to future generations of scientists.

Dr Chris Stringer, head of anthropology at the Natural

History Museum in London: "We are researching the origin of modern people and the origin of races...if we didn't have the Australians then we wouldn't know whether we are measuring variation which covers the whole present range of modern humans."

Aborigines are adamant that they want the remains back. Rikki Shields: "They were stolen under white man's law not ours. Some of these remains are our heroes and warriors and we are entitled to choose to give them a burial."

In a significant case in 1986, the Victoria and National Museum in Australia bowed to public pressure and returned 1,600 remains known as the "Murray Black" collection to the Murray River community.

Government has announced a programme of reconciliation with its indigenous people with the aim of promoting a deeper understanding of their culture, their dispossession and their continued disadvantage. A government task force of both tribal and state representatives is being set up to locate collections of Aboriginal remains and artefacts held worldwide, and formulate a strategy for their return.

The Minister for Aboriginal Affairs, Robert Tickner, has said: "It is shameful that Aboriginal human remains, including heads and other body parts, have been removed and preserved, essentially as curiosities."

Attention has focused on Britain because of the vast amounts of human material accumulated and stored there. Australian scientists have written to the British government urging them not to return remains held in the 11 national museums. The policy of the British government's office for Arts and Libraries is that museums concerned must decide whether to restitute specific items or collections.

Under the 1963 British Museums Act, however, it is illegal for a national museum to disperse any items which they consider may be of future interest to students.