REPORTING RELIGION

Report religion sensitively, not sensationally

By RICHARD PHILIP

2011 Fellow Arba'iyah Satriani (Indonesia) speaking from the floor at the Reporting Religion conference. In the background are Jajati Karan (India) and Li Jun (China).

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 2009 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.

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 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. 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 master 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 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 ▶

SINGAPORE UPDATE

Presidential election in August

Singapore will hold Presidential Elections on 27 August. The Presidency was turned 20 years ago into a directly elected position with certain executive powers – mainly veto powers over any government plan to spend the country's huge reserves. Previous Presidential Elections were largely non-events, since most powers remain with the Prime Minister and Cabinet, decided through Parliamentary Elections. This year's Presidential contest, though, is much more dramatic than usual. There are four candidates, three of whom are promising a more activist Presidency to check on the People's Action Party government.

In May, Singapore's Parliamentary Election was won by the ruling PAP, but with a record low popular vote of 60 percent after an unusually heated campaign. Will voters use the Presidential Election to put still more pressure on the government? The Presidency is supposed to be non-partisan and above politics. But since there is no real precedent to go by, it is difficult to predict whether the fires lit in the recent General Election will consume the Presidential poll, or whether Singaporeans will prefer to stick with a more traditional and uncontroversial Head of State.

▶ 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 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 Prangtip, who is a member of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, a project by the Center for Public Integrity based in Washington DC.

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 ▶

AJF Fellows and other conference participants visiting the Sri Sivan Temple, one of many Hindu temples in Singapore. The participants were hosted to a vegetarian dinner prepared by the temple's kitchen.

Asia's religious groups become their own media

By RICHARD PHILIP

Religious groups not content with vying for coverage in the mainstream media have invested heavily in their own platforms.

Examples range from Malaysia's opposition party, Parti Islam Semalaysia (PAS) and its Harakah Daily website, to several Indian television channels set up by Pentacostal Christian groups. Some, like the Islamist political group Hizbut Tahrir in Indonesia, have ideologies that are opposed to modern ways, but have nonetheless embraced the latest media technologies to spread their ideas.

This overview of religious media was provided by two researchers at the Temasek Foundation Asia Journalism Forum conference on Reporting Religion.

Mohamed Nawab Bin Mohamed Osman, an expert in Islamic social movements in South and Southeast Asia, noted that some traditionalists frowned on the use of photography in media coverage of Islam, seeing them as counterfeit images of God's creations. This has not stopped groups such as PAS and Hizbut Tahir Indonesia from using modern media tools to further their causes.

After repeatedly being denied access to Malaysia's mainstream press, PAS started its first newspaper, Suara Islam, as early as 1956. Its current newspaper, Harakah, was launched in 1987. In 1992, PAS launched its Harakah Daily website.

Hizbut Tahrir's online platforms such as Hizbuttahrir.or.id provide audio and video streaming, live screening of talk shows, forums and blogs. Their reach is as large as some commercial media companies, noted Nawab, who is based at the S.

Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU.

Pradip Thomas, of the University of Queensland in Australia, said that India's Pentecostal Christian groups have been especially active in developing their own media platforms, because of their belief that each new communication tool is a gift from God that can be used to spread the gospel.

Religious media had been kept at bay for decades by India's highly regulated broadcast industry and its commitment to secularism. But media deregulation over the last 10-15 years has allowed religious broadcasting to proliferate, said Thomas, who is co-director of the Centre for Communication and Social Change. Blessing TV, Shalom TV and prayertoweronline are examples of such media efforts. "Christian broadcasting is a multi-million dollar industry," said Thomas.

▶ 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 Darshana, 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, 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 such that 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," 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 versions lacking in variety of topic strains.

"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, Cherian George 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 George, of NTU's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information.

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.

Virtual choir: AJF 2011 Fellows demonstrated their vocal as well as digital abilities at their farewell party. They surprised their hosts by singing Singapore's national anthem, Majulah Singapura. They had downloaded the Malay lyrics onto their mobile devices. The Singaporeans present were very touched – but advised the visitors not to quit their journalism jobs to enter showbiz!

CATCHING UP WITH PAST FELLOWS

**Munima Sultana
(Class of 2009)**
Awarded the BWCCI-EBL Progressive Award for outstanding contributions to the development of women entrepreneurs in Bangladesh.

**Madhumita Datta
(Class of 2010)**
Has embarked on a PhD in International Conflict Management at Kennesaw State University, Georgia, USA.

**Imelda Abano
(Class of 2011)**
Won a Holcim Journalism Award for Sustainable Construction for her article on indigenous housing. The prize includes a three-day stay in Singapore in November.

**Niki Cheong
(Class of 2011)**
On his way to London for a one-year Masters in Digital Culture and Society at King's College, under the Chevening Scholarship.

Taoist, Malay and Hindu shrines side by side at Loyang Tua Pek Kong.

COMMENTARY

Miracles we miss

By RICHARD PHILIP

The extraordinariness of ordinary things becomes immediately apparent when you see them through fresh eyes. I recently had the privilege of appraising Singapore's religious diversity from the vantage points of journalists from different parts of Asia.

As part of their conference on Reporting Religion, the visiting journalists were taken on a tour of religious places conducted by Geoffrey Benjamin, an eminent sociologist. I helped to organise the tour.

The highlight of the tour was probably our visit to the Loyang Tua Pek Kong temple, where the Taoist deity Tua Pek Kong (God of Prosperity) co-exists with Hindu and Buddhist statues and a Muslim shrine. We watched Singaporean devotees walking seamlessly from one altar to another.

All this probably looked like nothing short of a miracle in the eyes of journalists from societies where religious differences have been extremely politicised, making it hard to share space and build bridges.

The visitors peppered the temple officials with questions about how the temple came about and how it was managed. We were informed that it started as an organic and unplanned village phenomenon. Nowadays, however, the management is very conscious about the temple's unique place on Singapore's religious landscape. The temple is committed to respecting the different traditions represented and celebrating the various holy days in style. As a relatively wealthy institution, the temple also donates money to less well-off religious institutions.

Loyang Tua Pek Kong isn't the only institution with a firm belief in inter-faith cooperation. The visitors were also welcomed by Jamiyah, the Muslim Missionary Society of Singapore. Over a sumptuous lunch, they were briefed about Jamiyah's almost 80-year history of cooperation with other religious communities in Singapore.

The journalists' curiosity about these groups was like a prism through which I, as a Singaporean, was able to break the light of Singapore's religious harmony into its spectral components. It made me think about the different factors behind my country's religious peace.

Perhaps the most important one is the government's firm stand that Singapore is a secular state where people of various religious persuasions can live their highest principles without colliding with one another.

Another key factor could be the government's leadership in promoting a culture of tolerance. For example, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has pushed a "live and let live" approach.

Former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong promoted the idea of people's identities as overlapping circles – while not giving up our unique identities, Singaporeans should try to cultivate common spaces as well.

Structures such as the Inter-Religious Organisation (the world's oldest existing inter-faith NGO) and the government-initiated Inter-Racial Confidence Circles have helped to promote dialogue among Singaporeans of different beliefs.

In fact, reminders about the importance of religious harmony are so incessant that they can start to sound like a meaningless drone to Singaporeans. Our religious peace is sometimes taken for granted, brushed off as a cliché by those who have been lulled by decades of calm.

The visiting journalists' curiosity about Singapore's diversity made me realise that such peace is precious. It may go unnoticed when present, but would be sorely missed once lost.

Richard Philip is a Singaporean freelance journalist.

TECHNOLOGY
A call for diminished reality

By JEREMY WAGSTAFF

I was walking the infant the other day, when I saw a vision of my future. A mother and father, out with their son and dog. The mother sat on a park bench, dog sitting obediently at her feet as she flicked absent-mindedly at her iPhone.

In the playground, the boy wove his way through a tunnel, across some ropes, down a slide--the father nearby, lost in his own iPhone. Occasionally he would waken from his 3G trance and, without looking up, point the phone at his son as if scanning him for radiation. The resulting photo probably went straight to his Facebook page. Ah, happy families, connected by place but detached by devices.

It's a familiar lament. Our devices distract so much we can't ignore them. We ignore our kith and kin but obey their beeps, walk into traffic or drive into pedestrians to heed their call. And the solutions are usually less than imaginative, or practical: holidays where you check them in at the gate, where you put them in a glove compartment, or (shock), leave them at home entirely.

I have tried all these and they don't work. Which is why I fear I will be that family. Perhaps I already am; desperate to catch my infant's first steps, words, or symphony, I think it more important that my cellphone camera is there, somehow, than I am. This is silly. But I think I have found the answer in something called augmented reality.

Augmented reality is where our devices use their camera and positioning capability to add layers of information to what is in front of us: little pointers appear on the screen detailing where the nearest ATM is, or Chinese restaurant, or how far away and in what direction the nearest Twitter user is. The reality is the scene in front of us viewed through our camera, the augmented bit are these layers of extra information.

This is not new, but it's becoming more popular. And it's kind of fun. It is related to another technology that adds a layer onto what we see—so-called heads-up displays, that project information onto the windscreen of our airplane, or car, or goggles, that help us identify a target, a runway, an obstacle in the road.

Interesting, but I think they've got it all backwards. Our problem is not that we need more information overlain on the world, we need to have the world overlain on the screens that command us. We spend so little time interacting with the world now that we need technology to help us reintroduce the real world back into our lives.

I don't think handing over our devices to well-intentioned guards at hotel gates is going to do it. I think we need to find a way to fit the real world into our device.

Which is why, two years ago, I got very excited about an application for the iPhone called Email n Walk. This was a simple application that overlays a simple email interface on top of whatever is in front of you. The iPhone's camera sees that for you, but instead of putting lots of pins about ATMs, Chinese restaurants and twitter users on the image, it puts the bare bones of whatever email you're typing. You can type away as you're walking, while also seeing where you're going.

Brilliant. And of course, as with all brilliant things, it got lots of media attention and promptly disappeared. The app is still there on Apple's software shop, but the company's home page makes no mention of it. I tried to reach the developers but have yet to hear back.

They're careful not to claim too much for the software. We can't take any responsibility for your stupidity, so please don't go walking into traffic, off of cliffs, or into the middle of gunfights while emailing, they say. But it's an excellent solution to our problem of not being able to drag our eyes from our screens, even to watch our son clambering over a climbing frame.

It's not augmented reality, which purports to enrich our lives by adding information to it. It's a recognition that our reality is already pretty hemmed in, squeezed into a 7 by 5 cm frame, and so tries to bring a touch of the real world to that zone. I believe that this kind of innovation should be built into every device, allowing us to at least get a glimmer of the real world.

Indeed, there are signs that we're closer to this than we might expect. In March, Samsung unveiled what may be the world's first transparent laptop display, meaning you can see through it when it's turned on, and when it's turned off. I don't pretend that it's a good solution to the growing impoverishment of our lives, which is why I have no hesitation to call this inversion of augmented reality 'diminished reality.'

And now, if you'll excuse me, my daughter is making funny faces at me through the screen so I better grab a photo of it for my Facebook page.

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We also have a Facebook group specially for Fellows. If you're not on it yet, please contact **news@ajf.sg**