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***The Changing Role of the Media in Asia***

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen:

I am delighted to be here today. Thank you Hitachi, "Inspire the Next". Let me presume not to talk about the media here in Singapore, about the voyeurism of reality TV or the noise of programme radio, but of what moves my heart and exercises my brain: newspapers. The newspaper is the first thing I pick up each morning; it sets up my day, it tells me about my city, about my country, the region and the world and my own little place in it.

My relationship with the newspapers is not just a matter of habit or necessity. It is a relationship based on, well, love. I have no better word to describe it, since I both read and write for the newspapers.

Call me old-school, but I sincerely believe that that role of the media in Asia or specifically the role of newspapers will be formed by that love - by how they endear themselves to readers, and by the passion with which the practitioners perform their craft. And make no mistake about it, make no mistake about it. Journalism is a higher calling. It is not where bright, talented people get rich. If you want to be rich, join the Banyan Tree. But it is a calling, journalism is a calling where what you do truly matters. Journalism is a calling that is essential to preserving participatory democracy. It is a calling that, at the end of the day, at the end of your career and at the end of your life, you can be proud to have been part of. It is a calling that matters.

The Press was at one time the fourth estate. The others being the King, the clergy (in Christian countries) and the people - all powers whose agreement was necessary for legislation. Perhaps it is no longer so now, though it is still crucial.

Now the clergy and people don't matter anymore. Government legislates whatever it feels is good for the nation. Under Malaysian Islamic opposition party PAS, however, the clergy or ulama (or mullah), must approve all laws and orders.

In the global picture, the ideal of journalism is in danger of being corrupted by the likes of Rupert Murdoch and other newspaper barons, with their eye on the bottom line, on profits and shareholder value. They must be doing something very right for themselves, since they have become fabulously rich.

But in my opinion, the value of newspapers lies in the heart - of the reader and the journalist. And what is the condition of the heart in Malaysia and most of the region? If you miss any part of my speech, get a copy of the Straits Times tomorrow. I mean the New Straits Times (NST). It is published in full. Not very good, I'm afraid. It has gone slightly cold. Like lovers who have had a falling out, it will be hard work to regain their love. This work will pose the main challenge for newspapers in my country, indeed in the region and the world.

Relationships evolve in time. Readers' demands for information, erudition and entertainment grow and change and newspapers must keep up, not just in parlaying news, but in how this impacts on the reader. So, the changing role of the media consists of two equal parts - readers and their societies, and the industry itself.

Asian societies have changed dramatically since I first started as a cub reporter in 1957, the year of Malaysian independence. I was eighteen then. You can guess my age now. Literacy levels have increased substantially and the newspaper market in individual countries have grown large and variegated.

The last decade or two has seen exciting times. Autocratic governments in Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines have fallen, official Press controls have receded, and the media has rushed to fill in the vacuum. For national media pursuing the new freedoms, there were and will be hits and misses. They will have to learn to disprove the critic H.L. Mencken's sardonic remark that newspapers make 'the ignorant more ignorant and the crazy crazier'.

But as long as newspapers get it right, by knowing who they are writing for and why, they will evolve together with their readers.

But there are issues, of course. Chief among them is competition, not just among newspapers themselves but between them and other media, in particular the Internet. I

remember that at the height of the dotcom bubble, all newspapers felt threatened by Internet news websites. I was not. I am not an Internet user, and never will be. At my age, I learn nothing. This is a good example in my case, of 'ignorance is bliss.'

In retrospect, I think that the Internet challenge, although real, was overblown, along with the rest of the dotcom hype. It certainly hasn't put newspapers out of business. Not my newspaper, anyway. It is now an established fact that people still rely on newspapers for the stories beyond the news and headlines, for in-depth reporting, analysis and commentary.

That puts even more pressure on newspapers to 'get it right'. Love can be a fickle thing and its nurturing requires dedication, judgement and care. In Malaysia, that nurture covers the function of giving the reader what he wants and the obligation of telling him what he needs to know, should and must know.

For a century and fifty-seven years, to be exact, my newspaper, the New Straits Times, was married to the Straits Times here but we parted in early '72. The New Straits Times, like the Straits Times here, has led. The NST must continue to lead, not by the numbers or popularity contests but by the authority it commands. It must not merely reflect public opinion, it must shape it.

For me, the changing role of the media rests on how it handles and articulates public opinion, and how this will contribute to democracy and strengthen its institutions. That is a very big responsibility, especially in a developing nation like mine.

I believe that the expanding public space created by political liberalisation must not be taken as mere opportunities to make money. Money is important as someone said just now. I never found money important. Not yet. From my standpoint therefore, much more will depend on the owners, practitioners and journalists within the industry than those outside it.

Responsibility means that we must beware of fancy western notions. We are easily taken by these western notions. We must beware of the wolf of exploitation hiding under the sheep's clothing of 'Press Freedom'. The freedom to broaden the rainbow of journalism must not be allowed to descend into deep shades of yellow.

People always ask for the media to be responsible. But along with responsible newspapers, there must be responsible readers and credible governments.

Keep reading between the lines, especially in developing countries. The indispensable requirement for a good newspaper, according to Norman Mailer, is that it must be as eager to tell a lie as the truth. And in some nations, the editor's main job is just to fill the pages!

I say these things from the perspective of my own newspaper, and the central role it plays in my country's history and development. Let me assert that there is real press freedom in Malaysia - just take a look at any newsstand in any part of Malaysia. There are the livid opposition newspapers such as The Harakah, the mouthpiece of opposition Islamic party, and The Rocket, the sensationalist and highly competitive Chinese media. And let's not talk about the gossip and scandal in the Internet.

There are hundreds and perhaps thousands of licensed and unlicensed publications covering a highly diverse multi-lingual, multi-cultural market. How many of them, of what we call the "mosquito newspapers", survive remains a mystery to me. I don't know how they can continue living. They publish very small numbers. There must be some godfather somewhere, a sugar daddy. But what is important is that our market is extremely vibrant, not always in the right ways, in my view. But that's the thing about press freedom and the freedom of expression: you don't always like what you see, you don't always agree with what you hear.

Malaysia's press freedom is not just the freedom to conform as in some countries, but the freedom to criticise. I have done this many times in my writings and columns, in my editorials. I haven't, so far that is, receive any ear-bending phone calls as a result.

As a newspaper editor, columnist and frequent critic, I can take as much as I can give. Press freedom is a burden not to be taken lightly - it is not the freedom to throw stones in glass houses, pardon my reporter's language, to piss in anyone's garden.

Newspapers must respect the society, the culture and sensibilities, in which they operate. Call it nation building or development, journalism or whatever you like. Journalism, wherever it is practised, East or West, North or South, Left or Right, forms an institutional part of civil society, and therefore has a duty to keep that society civil.

These ideas are fixed in my mind, whatever the social climate or the journalistic flavour of the day. Their interpretations will move with the times, but I do not expect the biggest changes in the role of the media to come from politics but from demographics.

Here, we are in uncharted history. Major newspapers are still groping to seduce and engage the young. We, in Malaysia as much as the rest of the region, have not been doing a very good job about or of it. The love of newspapers is being lost by a lack of labour. The young will no doubt get things to their tastes in the end. But for the dramatist, Arthur Miller, as well as for me, 'a good newspaper must always remain a nation talking to itself.' My aim and my main job is to keep that dialogue going. With the candour, good manners, sensitivity and concern deserving of a dearly beloved.

Terima Kaseh / Thank you.