

Reporting the news from Asia

As if to highlight the Communications Law Centre's seminar News From The East Indonesia's President Soeharto resigned only minutes before the CLC event began

Obstacles to the truth are often casually thrown in front of journalists working on routine stories in some southeast Asian countries, as a recent one day Communications Law Centre (CLC) seminar discovered. The event on May 19, News from The East, was a joint initiative of the CLC, the Centre for Asia Pacific Studies (CAPS) and the Victoria University Faculty of Arts.

Dewi Anggaraeni, Australian correspondent for the Jakarta Post, spoke of the importance of accurate reporting of newsworthy events in any nation. She said that this was particularly important when overseas coverage concerned those political or other people reported as "missing". Accurate reportage vastly increases the chance that they will eventually be seen again.

She discussed her general coverage of Australia for the Jakarta Post.. This included such topics as Pauline Hanson, multiculturalism, the Racial Hatred Act, Native Title, theatre and the arts.

In relation to Indonesian news supplied to Australia, Dewi was complimentary about several Australian journalists. But after praising the Australian media, Dewi went on to bury them, saying that while reporting in general has been good, often important nuances have been missed. She cited the appointment of an ethnic Chinese Indonesian to the cabinet which was perceived as a positive step for a minority group by the Australian media. In fact, the individual appointed was seen as neither appropriate nor suitable by the ethnic Chinese community.

Peter Mares, former Hanoi-based correspondent for the ABC and now host of Asia-Pacific for Radio National, discussed the difficulties of reporting from Vietnam. There, foreign journalists are required to work in "mutual cooperation" with the Press and Information Department at the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs. This means that the more politically important or sensitive an issue becomes, the more bureaucratic hurdles are placed in the path of journalists.

In one example, Peter said that a correspondent who travelled without permission to cover regional unrest in Thai Binh province was immediately spotted and invited to "drink tea" by the Press Department. This involved a reprimand and an official warning.

Peter was invited to "drink tea" with the Press Department when he investigated villagers protesting against a golf course being built on their paddy fields at Kim No village. He was told that he breached regulations in not having permission to carry out journalistic activities there and that the department could only assist foreign journalists who obeyed Vietnamese laws.

But Peter found that as a radio journalist he was far freer from direct censorship than television journalists because he could file reports directly over a standard telephone line. Film or video footage must be cleared by the Foreign Ministry before leaving Vietnam or being transmitted by satellite.

For newsmagazines such as *Time* and the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, stories that are seen as controversial or critical are often blacked out in copies being distributed in that country. The Singapore government is renowned for having frequently taken this action or banning a publication's distribution altogether. Newspapers and wire services also receive close attention.

John Crone, former Manager (Asia) Radio Australia, discussed Radio Australia's distinguished history in Asia commencing with its first broadcast concerning the Pacific theatre of the Second World War. Over the years, Radio Australia has gained a reputation for accurately sourced, reliable and balanced news. This proved to be essential in the coverage of major events such as the death of Chairman Mao Tse-Tung in 1976 and the Tiananmen Square Massacre in 1989 where the stories were initially unconfirmed but interest was intense.

John said that some stories on Radio Australia have been criticised for being overly negative in concentrating on ferry, rail or mine disasters but added that this mostly depended on the efforts of correspondents concerned.

The final speaker was Peter Ellingsen, former *Age* correspondent in Beijing. Peter was particularly concerned about overtly positive reporting in the media which fails to sufficiently challenge the subject matter. He objected to events such as Tiananmen Square being subsequently described as an "incident" when it was a massacre. But journalists are encouraged to tiptoe over cultural sensitivities. In Peter's view, values cannot be compromised in this manner. <<<

Bruce Shearer