



Media NGOs from Asia unite to promote open media systems and quality standards in new media

Press freedom, freedom of information and opening up restrictive media systems are the main concerns for media assistance groups in Asia. Representatives from almost 40 media development organizations gathered at the first Asia Regional Forum for Media Development in Colombo on July 4-5 to agree common priorities for future work. The 40 participants from 17 countries of Asia established the Asia regional network of the Global Forum for Media Development. The network, which will organize exchange of best practice in media development, will be hosted by the South East Asia Press Alliance and will have a dedicated web and discussion platform.

One focus of debate at the conference was how the internet and use of mobile technologies, blogging and citizen journalism change the media landscape in Asia and influence the work of media assistance groups. Sam Hui of Shantou University in Hong Kong described how internet networks and blogging communities create space for more open debate in China. Sanjana Hattotuwa, editor of Groundviews, a citizen journalism web-site in Sri Lanka, showed how the site offered a space for people from all over the country to publish their views freely while adhering to standards of quality of information.

“It would be wrong to say that citizen journalism does not have standards,” said Sanjana Hattatuwa. “As the editor of the site I established a clear set of rules on what type of material may be posted and these standards are similar to the codes of conduct established by journalists’ organizations.”

Addressing the question of how to open up closed media systems, participants shared a range of experiences of how media assistance groups and media professionals are testing the boundaries set by restrictive governments. Not just bloggers but also traditional media such as, for instance, the privately-owned Burmese magazines are finding ways around censorship.

“We should not underestimate the value of small steps” said Roby Alampay of the South East Asian Press Alliance. “Low-key journalism training programmes focusing on non-controversial issues, organizing fellowships that bring take journalists out of the country make an important contribution towards opening up restrictive media systems.”

Media support groups recognized that they have to work more closely together, try to avoid unnecessary competition between different projects and build expertise in monitoring the impact of their work. A. S. Panneerselvan of Panos South Asia presented a new approach to monitoring and evaluation to the conference. The Panos South Asia model focuses on defining spheres of influence to measure the impact of media development work. Media development programmes can influence members of the media community, as a result, issues raised by media and behavior of media professionals can change; media can act as a catalyst to address pressing social issues but there are other actors – government, municipalities, industry etc – that may or may not make improvements as a result of the media reports. Whether the parliament changes the law is outside of the influence of media development; it can influence media professionals and media structures to promote social change and evaluation of the success of media development should focus on this area of work.

The event was hosted by Free Media Movement, Sri Lanka and organized in cooperation with GFMD and the South East Asia Press Alliance. The UNDP and the Norwegian Foreign Ministry provided financial assistance.

The Asia Regional Forum for Media Development is an initiative that emerged within the scope of the *Global Forum for Media Development* (GFMD), a collaborative process that brings together media assistance organizations from over 100 countries and aims at bringing coherence, community and advocacy to the worldwide movement working towards the development of the independent media sector, a cornerstone of democratic and sustainable development.

The Asia Forum mobilized local media NGOs ahead of the GFMD's second world conference that will take place in Athens on December 7-10, 2008. The network created at the meeting in Colombo will prepare the contributions from Asia to the GFMD world conference.

The meeting also selected two representatives from the region to be members of the GFMD's global Steering Committee. They are Roby Alampay of the South East Asia Press Alliance, based in Thailand and A.S. Panneerselvan of Panos South Asia, based in India.

Participants agreed that in order to increase their say in decisions by donors on what type of media programmes to support, they have to define common priorities and lobby jointly for the recognition of media development as a key sector of development work. This will be done within the framework of the Global Forum for Media Development.

Background documents for the conference can be obtained at www.gfmd.info.

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