

FEATURE

A monthly features service on scientific, technical, and educational subjects pertinent to development.

Words: 930 approx.

SCIENCE NEWS THAT'S FIT TO PRINT

by ROWAN SHIRKIE

What do reincarnation, leprosy, nuclear energy, fruit trees, daylight saving time, bullock carts, water hyacinth, and electric cars have in common? Well, nothing actually, except they were all subjects of stories written for Asian newspapers as part of a 2-year science news feature service project.

The project was initiated in 1977 by the Press Foundation of Asia (PFA) in the form of an airmailed news feature service focused on science and technology as they related to development in Asia. The PFA felt that there were many weaknesses in Asian media coverage of technological development and science-related issues. In this, the organization echoed a need expressed by Asian science writers for more background material, more models of good science writing, and for reports and analyses of science and technology not usually available through the news and feature agencies then serving Asia.

The Press Foundation of Asia itself had been created in 1968 for similar reasons. Journalists were concerned that media in Asia did not truly reflect or serve Asian needs, that it often had a foreign bias toward the superficially dramatic or simply entertaining. The PFA was established to upgrade professionalism among Asian media personnel, orient Asian media more toward their role in development, and offer training opportunities. According to the founding journalists, development required that many people be informed about, and motivated to accept and use, a sizeable body of previously unfamiliar ideas and skills in a lot less time than the process would normally take. In short, they saw that communication was the essential spring release for the "great leap forward" into modernization.

Part of the PFA activities was the production of DEPTHnews Asia, a news service that offered Asian media a different perspective on development and news, one that dealt...as the name implied...with Asian issues in depth. DEPTHnews Asia was published in English, Bahasa, Melayu, Hindi, Korean, Mandarin, and Thai, and distributed weekly to about 230 media outlets in 23 countries.

The PFA proposed the addition of a science component to DEPTHnews Asia that would help increase "science literacy" -- public understanding of the role science and technology play in development.

The science service began in 1977 with assistance from Canada's International Development Research Centre. In evaluating the first two years of the service, its former editor, Mack Laing, said: "The experiment was a 50-50 success, or a 50-50 failure, depending on how you want to look at it. We had about 300 stories in the pipeline to a network of 200 Asian papers during the two years. The stories were printed widely, and regularly. The failure lay simply in the fact that, while the Asian newspapers used the science stories, they would not buy the service." It had been hoped that the service would become self-supporting during the second year through sales to subscribers.

Although the service did not set out to become a profit-making operation, it would have certainly helped the nonprofit PFA to move away from dependence on grant money and the operational uncertainty that goes with it. Because the science service was initially included free of charge in the regular DEPTHnews Asia package, publishers and editors took it for granted that the service was a bonus. An informal market poll in which newspaper editors in the region were asked outright "How much can you pay for this service?", brought "only groans and tales of economic woes and cutbacks".

Still, the strength of the service was evident in the widespread and frequent use made of the science stories. In a hardnosed and market-oriented press where "brief is better", science features of 1000-1500 words -- usually considered more suitable for a magazine format -- regularly "got ink". One outstanding example was a 3000-word state-of-the-art story on leprosy that was

printed by a Manila, Philippines, evening tabloid. It covered three newspaper pages! The science stories got wide distribution as material printed by the larger subscribers was picked up and republished by smaller regional papers. Because of this sort of news pyramid, science and development news was able to reach into smaller urban centres and rural areas that might otherwise never be able to obtain it.

And was it read? In journalism you never know, Mr Laing said, until you stop providing a service and unhappy readers begin to demand it. Other media, such as radio which reaches the masses through the everpresent transistor set, might be more effective in delivering news to populations with low literacy levels. But radio is bound by specifics of time and space -- a radio program cannot be stopped to review the difficult parts, or saved for later reference. The written word is the cheapest, most durable, and most accessible medium of indirect communication. And as literacy grows -- virtually every national development campaign has mass literacy as one of its goals -- the demand for relevant reading matter grows with it.

The newspaper is very much alive and well in Asia.

Science writing is showing signs of life, too. An Asian science writer's association has been established and a number of professional and academic organizations in Asia now offer prizes for science writing. Although cash and recognition are favourites with any journalist, the network of peers and editors that is developing to give Asian science writers feedback and critical reviews of their work is an important strengthening agent as well. DEPTHnews Asia Science Service continues under the guidance of a young Filipino editor, Paul Icamina.

In the search for "all the news that's fit to print" journalists in Asia are discovering that when it comes to science and technology, everything from reincarnation to electric cars, fits.

END

IDRC-F105e

April-May 1979