

THE ROLE OF NEWS AGENCIES IN A GLOBALISED WORLD AND FOSTERING SOUTH-SOUTH NETWORKING – THE BERNAMA EXPERIENCE

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BERNAMA

Introduction

Bernama began to establish the links for news exchanges with foreign national news agencies soon after its birth in 1968. Over the years, Bernama's experience with multilateral news exchange programmes has been varied and tangible.

Organization of Asia Pacific News Agencies (OANA)

The first such exchange came through the Organisation of Asia-Pacific News Agencies (OANA) which was formed in December 1961 and which Bernama became a member in 1968 itself.

Sponsored by UNESCO, nine Asian news agencies signed on the dotted line to create OANA to "express their deep conviction that the new organisation, by promoting cooperation among the new agencies of Asia, will increase the flow of information and thus help to create the enlightened public opinion essential to peace."

UNESCO initiated many other regional news exchanges like the Central African News Agencies Development Project (CANAD), the Pan African News Agencies (PANA), the Caribbean News Agencies (CANA).

Bernama hosted the Fifth Assembly of OANA in Kuala Lumpur in 1981, some 20 years after OANA's birth. The Assembly adopted five resolutions, the chief of which was the establishment of the Asian News Network (ANN) which has since been disbanded, and secondly was increasing the flow of news materials. The telex and satellite links crossing the continent from Qatar News Agency (QNA) in Doha to Tass in Moscow, PTI in New Delhi to ANTARA in Jakarta, IRNA in Teheran to Vietnam News Agency in Hanoi, many of them acting as redistribution centres.

Given the momentum of the OANA news exchange, Bernama as the President of OANA then moved the tie-up to some 50 countries in Africa grouped under the umbrella of the Pan African News Agency (PANA) and 14 in Latin America and the Caribbean in their outfit called Asin, the Latin American Group of News Agencies. In the same year of 1982, when Qatar News Agency joined OANA, the

Asia-Pacific family of news agencies automatically teamed up with the Federation of Arab News Agencies (FANA) and the International Islamic News Agency (IINA). This was because QNA disseminated the news of IINA as well as FANA. In effect, OANA had enabled news and information to flow across the continents and the impact was seen in the newspapers which carried these stories.

Bernama has yet again been given the trust to lead OANA for a three-year term from 2004. The organization now boasts of 37 members from 33 countries.

Bilateral Ties

With the network of news exchanges, Bernama established numerous bilateral exchanges with other national news agencies. Among them was Ansa, the Italian news agency, VNA, IRNA, APP, Kyodo News and BSS of Bangladesh.

Till today, Bernama has inked many other pacts for bilateral news exchanges with fellow national news agencies. Among them are Itar-Tass and RIA Novosti of Russia, KazAAG of Kazakhstan, the Hungarian news Agency MTL, the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN), MENA of Egypt, AGP of the Republic of Guinea, the SABA news agency of Yemen, TAP of Tunisia and MAP of Morocco.

Financial Strain

In the heydays of OANA when news stories flew across the continent through telexes and satellite radio transmissions, finance was a major problem. The links were costly, while national news agencies were strapped for funds.

Decision-makers of the national agencies had the "political will" to make the organisation an alternative source of news and information but they lacked the finance. They were people fired by the vision of a New World Information Order, of the need to balance the news flow, but unfortunately, they were let down by the huge costs of telecommunication.

Internet and E-Mails

The advent of Internet and the e-mails have, almost in the blink of an eye, melted away the telecommunication obstacles of OANA, Anex, and the other regional groupings of news agencies. Except for a small start-up costs, the Internet and e-mail have eased the news exchanges between the mass media, making the mode of delivery efficient and very cost-effective.

For this reason, OANA is very much alive today through the OANA News Wire which was developed by IRNA with inputs by

Kyodo News when the Iranian news agency was president of the organisation. But it was Itar-Tass, the former president of OANA, that implemented the OANA News Wire in the year 2000. An Internet web site, the news wire, a closed service, allows the member agencies to post their news while downloading whatever they want to use.

The Oana news wire can be considered as the organisation's lifeline. While it has created a free exchange of information, the news wire has to a larger extent keep the people in the Asia Pacific region informed of developments taking place in their area.

Bernamea took over the management of the Oana news wire from Itar-Tass on October 8 last year. A total of 55,252 news items was posted by member agencies on the wire from Oct 2004 to August this year.

This means an average of 150 news reports are collectively filed daily by member-agencies.

As the news items that appear on the Oana news wire are in their original form submitted by the respective agencies, they are indeed first-hand information.

The e-mail too has enabled Bernamea to keep its bilateral exchanges going, without running into huge telecommunication costs after the start-up.

NANAP

Bernamea is also a member of NANAP, the Non-Aligned News Agencies Pool. IRNA, the news agency of Iran, is currently the chairman of NANAP.

The International Islamic News Agency (IINA)

Given the objectives of the International Islamic News Agency (IINA) as a specialised organ of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC), it is no surprise that it not the usual run-of-the-mill type of a news set-up. Established in 1972 in accordance to a resolution by the Third Islamic Conference of Foreign Ministers with its headquarters in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, IINA's three-prong objectives are to enhance and preserve the huge Islamic cultural heritage, to strengthen ties among Muslims all over the world and to increase understanding (about) them, and to work for the unification of the objectives of the Islamic world.

Bernamea, by virtue of Malaysia being a member of the OIC, is a member of IINA. Bernamea has been contributing its stories to IINA through e-mail, and receives the newcast of the organisation in return. The Malaysian news agency was appointed to the Executive Board of IINA during the organisation's general assembly in Tunis in 1982, along with the Associated Press of Pakistan (APP) and the Bangladesh Sangbad Sangstha (BSS), both fellow members of OANA.

The high point in Bernama's relationship came in the form of a satellite link from Kuala Lumpur (and Jakarta) to Jeddah on December 6, 1982. The 24-hour link-up, through a computer terminal in Rome, allowed Bernama and ANTARA to send and receive news from IINA.

The satellite link however was severed towards the late 1980s because of the huge costs involved but since then the two agencies began exchanging news through the e-mail.

The budget of IINA depends on the contributions by the member countries of OIC and Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Pakistan, Kuwait, Indonesia, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia are reported to be the most committed counties to the support and finance of the Islamic news organisation.

Distributing its news and reports daily via Qatar News Agency (QNA), IINA writes in Arabic, English, Portuguese and French to 700 points in the Arab world, Asia, Europe, America and the African countries, the latter through the Pan-African News Agency (PANA). Apart from inputs from the member agencies, IINA has its own corps of correspondents in various countries. It also sends its journalist to Islamic nations to collect reports and news.

While the Islamic news agency usually reports on Islamic affairs around the world, its correspondents had been active in West Asia, filing situational reports on the atrocities committed by the Israeli Forces against the Palestinians in the occupied territories.

The Smart News Network International (SNNi)

A project conceived by the Langkawi International Dialogue (LID) and the Southern African International Dialogue (SAID), the Smart News Network International (SNNi) was launched in Kampala on August, 2001. The launching was officiated by President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda, Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia and President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique.

An Internet web site, the SNNi portal allows 15 media organizations from 10 Southern African nations and Malaysia to post and download news stories on a daily basis. Among the active players are Botswana Press Agency (BOPA), the Namibia weekly "Namibia Today" and the Namibian Press Agency (NAMPA), the "New Vision" daily of Uganda, the Ghana News Agency (GNA), the "New Straits Times" daily, the "Star" newspaper, the "Utusan Malaysia" daily and the Malaysian news agency Bernama of Malaysia, the Agence Guineenne de Presse (AGP) of the Republic of Guinea, the "Herald" newspaper of Zimbabwe, the Mozambique news agency AIM, and BuaNews agency of South Africa.

The Arabic Language News Service

The newest addition to Bernama's foreign links, the Arab language service was launched in October 2002 and was introduced on the realization that the mass media in the Arab World want to know more about Malaysia but they were not getting enough information about the country. What's worst, the news and information that they were getting from the multi-national media were biased and slanted if not "judgmental" with the full force of their Western values and approaches to life and nationhood. There were also times when media executives of the Arab countries asked for the speeches and statements of Malaysian leaders, notably Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Under this service, Bernama undertakes to translate news, features, special reports, analyses and editorials — all gleaned from its coverage and the Malaysian media — into Arabic and send them by e-mails to the media in 18 Arab countries. The Arab media on the Bernama mailing list are SABA news agency of Yemen, the Jeddah-based IINA, the Iraqi news agency INA, the Jordanian news agency Petra, the Saudi Press Agency (SPA), the Kuwaiti news agency KUNA, the Oman News Agency (ONA), the Syrian news agency SANA, the Lebanon's news agency, the Egyptian news agency MENA, the Tunisian news agency TAP, the Moroccan news agency MAP, the Algerian news agency APS, the Palestinian news agency WAFA, the Sudanese news agency SUNA, the United Arab Emirates news agency WAM, the Qatar news agency QNA and the Libyan news agency.

The impact of the service though new has been very encouraging. From the usage of the Bernama items monitored and the feedback received, the Arab language service has made it easier for the Arab media to pick up the Bernama news directly instead of having to translate the English copies into Arabic on their own.