International Media and Environment Summit

Spotlight on eco-journalism

By Alan Williams

The rewards and pitfalls of environmental journalism have come under the spotlight during a three-day international conference in the Malaysian city of Kuching.

The Media and Environment Summit on 30 November-2 December brought together about 250 media people, wildlife experts, conservation campaigners, academics, politicians and others from about 40 countries.

The discussions were lively and sometimes heated as they delved into a range of environmental issues – everything from global warming to the dwindling tropical rainforests – and how the media should cover them.

At times the media came under fire. The Secretary-General of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, Ong Keng Yong, told the conference that the media was sometimes too negative in its reporting of environmental issues.

"Coverage should not be limited to highlighting environmental problems," he said.

"Is the media doing enough? Largely reactive stories on the environment do not grab the public in the way that political or economic stories do, unless they are controversial and negative."

But he had praise as well, saying there had been many useful media reports educating people about the tsunami and how it happened.

Well-known environmental filmmaker David Suzuki also felt the media was part of the problem. The global crisis was getting worse and



worse but people did not want to hear about it any more, he said.

"The problem is this: the media has the concentration span of a hummingbird."

The Chief Minister of host state Sarawak, Abdul Taib Mahmud, hit out at "armchair journalists" whom he accused of writing stories about threats to the state's orangutans without taking the trouble to visit Sarawak.

> The problem is this: the media has the concentration span of a hummingbird.

– David Suzuki

Many participants from the media pointed a finger elsewhere – at governments and companies which they said exploited the environment and failed to care for it properly.

Wildlife biologist Ian Redmond said no company set out deliberately to destroy the environment. But in their pursuit of profit, their concern for the environment could be lost.

Australian film-maker and journalist Carmel Travers said the media had a duty to question any government

policies that could lead to damage to the environment.

She said one of the reasons parts of Australia's Great Barrier Reef had been damaged so badly was that journalists had failed to realise the effects the Queensland state government's pro-development policies were having on the environment.

The media should be enormously suspicious of what governments said on issues affecting the environment, she said.

"Balanced reporting becomes very important. We need to keep our eyes open and offer some hope where we possibly can."

John Zinkin of the University of Nottingham said journalists in developing countries should not be deterred by physical risk when covering environmental stories.

The faced risk when covering stories such as child labour or environmental abuse, he said. "But that's your job – you are paid to do it. Perhaps you are not paid enough."

Professor Zinkin was responding to Tito Da Costa, a journalist from Timor Leste's national broadcaster RTTL, who asked what could be done to highlight environmental damage in small developing countries.

Mr Da Costa said 75 percent of Timor Leste had been covered by forest in 1972 but that this had dropped to 35 percent by 1999.

Former top British diplomat Crispin Tickell said self-censorship of the media on environment issues was sometimes worrying. As an example, he said there had been little reporting of the fact that a rise in water temperatures was helping cause hurricanes like Katrina, which hit Florida in August.



The Sarawak River which runs through Kuching City has been relatively spared from pollution

Some of the challenges of covering environmental issues were highlighted by Mohammed Zin Nordin of University Sains Malaysia. He said journalists were committed to the truth but lacked the resources and information to cover these stories adequately.

Balanced reporting becomes very important. We need to keep our eyes open and offer some hope where we possibly can.

- Carmel Travers

There was agreement from journalists in the audience. Some spoke of the difficulty of finding scientific experts who were willing to speak on the record about environmental issues. A scientist responded that the media too often wanted to boil down complex environmental issues into an easily digestible form and were not interested in the "ifs and buts".

Australian environmentalist and writer Sharon Beder urged journalists to be on their guard against prodevelopment spin.

She said some private companies set up "front groups" to campaign against environmental legislation.

There was advice too for conservation groups in how to deal with the media. "Try to think of them as individuals, not as part of a media monolith," British journalist Clare Rewcastle said.

The conference was organised by News World Nature, part of News World International, a media event management company.

The ABU was among the supporting organisations. A similar conference is planned for next year, also to be held in Kuching.

Look for environmental solutions, journalists urged

diences want solutions to environmental problems and not simply doomsday stories, participants in an environmental journalist training workshop have been told.

This was one of the key issues dealt with at the two-day workshop, held in the Malaysian city of Kuching in November in conjunction with the International Media and Environment Summit.

The workshop brought together 37 participants, including 16 journalists and 12 camerapersons from members of Asiavision and other ABU broadcasters.

It was conducted by three trainers, Tim Grout-Smith, Lily Poberezhska and Alex Kirby, all former BBC staff.

Among the topics they covered:

• How to push your sources to come up with solutions to environmental problems, instead of carrying stories that leave audiences feeling helpless.



Tim Grout-Smith (left) and Lily Poberezhska

- How to engage the audience and make the stories entertaining.
- How to impress upon editors the importance of carrying environmental and related stories.
- How to handle the scientific aspects of environmental stories, and the sort of questions to ask. Scientists are



usually cautious in what they say, while journalists want answers.

- The importance of achieving balance and double-checking every fact. Like anyone else, environmental campaigners can sometimes get it wrong.
- How to handle vested interests. Many people will try to influence what journalists want to write on environmental subjects.
- The need to cover all aspects of environmental stories – economic, political, social and the like. Unless you cover these issues comprehensively, people cannot make the right choices.

The journalist training workshop was aimed not at senior environmental reporters but at middle-career and young journalists with an interest in the environment.

International Media and Environment Summit

The journalists took part in the full two days of training. The camerapersons joined them for the final day, which included a visit to the Semenggoh orangutan sanctuary outside Kuching to film the animals and interview the people involved in running it.

They were joined on the outing by a well-known wildlife biologist, Ian Redmond, and a leading American cameraman, Robert Stanley.

One of the participants, Singaporebased Channel NewsAsia reporter May Wong, said she found the workshop refreshing. "Some of the pointers given by the trainers were very useful."

The interaction with journalists from various media and countries was an additional benefit, she said.

Trainers impressed

Mr Grout-Smith said the course went well and the trainers were impressed by the enthusiasm and interest shown by the participants.

"As always with such workshops, we most enjoy the reaction of the participants; it was a particular pleasure to meet such a range of young journalists from across Asia, from such different backgrounds."

Fellow trainer, Ms Poberezhska, added: "It was a real delight to discuss ways of getting environmental stories up the news agenda, and to try to help such committed journalists, who clearly had a lot of dedication to their trade."

Apart from Asiavision, the workshop's sponsors were Malaysia Airlines, the British Council and the British High Commission in Malaysia.

Most of the participants stayed on in Kuching after the workshop to cover the International Media and Environment Summit.

'Japanese viewing tastes changing'

The Japanese people were becoming much keener on watching environmental programmes about their own country, a senior producer for public broadcaster NHK told the International Media and Environment Summit.

Masaru Ikeo, Executive Producer of NHK's Science and Environment Programme Division, said the viewing tastes of its audience had changed in recent years.



Masaru Ikeo

When NHK launched its natural history programme "Wild Secrets" 16 years ago, the ratings were highest when the show featured predatory animals such as lions, cheetahs or crocodiles.

"However in recent years people have tended more to enjoy watching familiar nature in Japan, though the picture is not as exciting or spectacular at that of predators," Mr Ikeo said

Viewers had become much more interested in knowing about their surrounding natural environment after realising that they needed to protect it before passing it on to future generations.

Mr Ikeo said NHK considered producing environmental programmes one of its most important missions. It aimed to provide its viewers with the latest information on environmental issues and solutions to problems.

He showed clips from a number of NHK environmental programmes, including "Getting to Know Japan", "We Love the Earth: The New Era of the Environment", "Equator" and "Scenario 2100".

NHK also placed emphasis on producing environmental programmes for children, he said. One such programme, "Only One Earth" was used in classrooms and streamed on the Internet.

The programme focused on one theme a year, such as waste problems, water issues, forests, food or the global environment. Twenty 15-minute episodes were produced each year.

NHK's 54 regional stations around Japan, added Mr Ikeo, also participated in producing episodes of environmental programmes with an emphasis on local issues.

Radio 'a key medium' for environmental issues

Radio is an important medium for carrying news and information about the environment, the International Media and Environment Summit in Kuching heard.

Sarawak-based university lecturer Thomas Yesudhasan said radio was a flexible, inexpensive medium that was widely available in rural areas.

Many people in interior villages still considered radio a good companion and an important source of information and entertainment.

"Radio journalists need not wait for an environmental disaster to occur to talk about emerging issues on the environment," he said.

Environmental shows

He cited environmental programmes carried on All India Radio which had proved popular across the country. One, "Boond Boond Ki Baat" (Story of Each Drop), focused on the conservation of oil and the protection of the environment.

Both informative and entertaining, it had been aired in Hindi and several regional languages, and had later been published in book format.

Another, "Beeja Sampada", had been produced jointly in Bangalore by All India Radio and India's Green Foundation. Designed to promote the importance of sustainable agricultural practices and seed conservation, it too had been released as a book.



Dr Yesudhasan, a lecturer at Curtin University's campus in Sarawak, has himself worked as a radio presenter.

He said radio's absence of visual impact did not hinder the success of programmes on environmental issues. Sound bites carried expression and emotion, and stories could be presented in an interesting way.

BBC natural history journalist Julian Hector said radio could attract big audiences who were very different from those who watched television. He described radio as an elegant medium – the sounds could take listeners on an emotional journey.

A Swedish-born environmental consultant based in Japan, Peo Ekberg, described the success of "J-Wave", a private radio station for which he works.

He said an environmental and health programme he presented each Sunday was increasingly popular with listeners. "J-Wave" was also the first radio station in Japan to transmit shows by renewable energy, including windpower.



'Regional kids and youth TV fest here to stay'

The first-ever Asia-Pacific Children & Youth TV Festival, held in October in China, has been hailed "a shining star" for children in the region by its Jury President, Preben Vridstoft of DRTV-Denmark.

Mr Vridstroft said the event, modelled after Prix Jeunesse – the German-based premier festival for children's and youth TV programmes – was a huge success judging from the way it was organised and the quality of the entries submitted.

He said the quality and storytelling was so strong that it made the judging process very difficult for the jury members who hailed from China, South Korea, Norway, England, Japan, Denmark, Germany, the United States and the United Kingdom.

"We had to pick the winners, and that was hard because the quality and storytelling was so strong. We used the Prix Jeunesse system, where you evaluate each programme on four criteria: idea, script, realisation and target audience," he said. Several ABU members won awards at the event. Among them were CCTV-China, KBS-Korea, PTV-Pakistan and MRTV-Mongolia. "A Day in the Life of a Dog" by PTV was named the best low-budget production from a developing country.

Mr Vridstroft said he was very impressed with organisation of the awards ceremony which was broadcast throughout China on various CCTV channels, adding that "the audience was full of excited children and the stage was full of talented children".

"It normally takes a year at least to organise a TV festival. CCTV had only a very short time – only weeks – to prepare. Still, if they told me they had spent a year or more planning it, I would have believed them. It was that great."

CCTV had also arranged three days of contest screenings at Beijing's Media Centre. The broadcaster had also organised a conference day, inviting inspiring speakers from around the world to talk about quality children's programming.



Entry screening in progress

"We had the unique opportunity to see a lot of wonderful children's programmes of all kinds. Certainly, several will be seen at Prix Jeunesse International 2006," he said.

Mr Vridstroft said the Asia-Pacific Children & Youth Festival was definitely here to stay.

"In only its first year, the contest became a very important motivation for creating better television, and the conference became an important place to create a network amongst people that want to improve TV for Asia's children.

"I look very much forward to the next Asia-Pacific Children & Youth Festival, for it has already become an important event and a shining star for children."

Indonesian broadcasting regulations put on hold

The Indonesian government and the House of Representatives have agreed to postpone the implementation of the much-criticised government regulations on broadcasting, reported *The Jakarta Post*.

They settled on a timetable to amend some articles in the country's broadcasting law, the ambiguity of which sparked the controversy. The postponement came after staunch criticism over four regulations issued on 16 November, which the media analysts and lawmakers claim suppressed press freedom and violated the broadcasting law.

House members agreed that a revision of the law should be conducted democratically and include the government, the House, the Indonesian Broadcasting Commission (KPI), press experts and several former lawmakers who deliberated on the bill.

In the hearing's conclusion, the House told the government to completely lift the current night time ban, which applies to all local broadcasters.

The ban was enforced several months ago to comply with an energy conservation campaign.

Asia TV Forum

ABU members urged to sell more content

Several ABU members exhibited at this year's Asia Television Forum (ATF), which was held in Singapore for the sixth consecutive year from 30 November to 2 December.

They include Bhutan Broadcasting Service (BBS), Australian Broadcasting Corporation Enterprises, Deutsche Welle from Germany, and Singapore's MediaCorp.

BBS – which began TV transmission in Bhutan only in 1999 – registered as a seller for the first time. Last year, it's Managing Director, Mingbo Dukpa, signed up as a buyer to scout the market.



"We are here this year to explore the possibility of co-productions. There has been a lot of interest from producers for Bhutanese content, which is basically travel programmes on the culture and wildlife in our country," said Tshering Chhoden of BBS.

The Bhutan national broadcaster was among the 200 international seller companies from 29 countries present at this year's event, which was held in



BBS-Bhutan representatives promoting their organisation

conjunction with the Asia Film Market & Conference (AFMC) and Asia Animation Conference (AAN).

In his opening speech, Ed Ng, the President of event organiser Reed Exhibitions (Singapore & Malaysia), said there were 84 Asian companies selling their content in this year's market.

"This development clearly marks the rise of intra-Asian business in our market. Until now, we have been viewed largely as a hub where international content and programming were traded with Asian buyers.

"We are therefore witnessing the ATF market taking an additional key role of facilitating transactions among Asian sellers and buyers," said Mr Ng.

There were also many ABU members among the list of buyers: EBS-Korea, ITN and SLRC from Sri Lanka, NTV-Nepal, MediaCorp, RTB-Brunei, VTV- Vietnam, and Indonesia's ANTV, TPI, RCTI and Indosiar.

Reed Exhibitions is hoping that more ABU members would sign up as sellers in future Asia TV Forum events as they produced plenty of their own content.

According to Yeow Hui Leng, Senior Project Manager for Reed Exhibitions, smaller ABU members would be able to attract buyers of their content at regional events such as the Asia TV Forum.

She said that smaller players tended to get bypassed when exhibiting in big marketplaces such as MIPCOM in Cannes and NATPE in Las Vegas.

"For smaller operators, the ATF is closer to their prospective customers in terms of geographic location. It would be easier to sell to other broadcasters in the same continent because of cultural similarities than to push their items in a global market.



Sellers are given separate suites at the Shangri-Ia Hotel in Singapore in which to conduct their exhibitions and one-on-one meetings

"If you're an Asian broadcaster, your biggest clients will always be Asia. For instance, the 'Korean Wave' of popular drama serials started catching on in Asia in Chinese-speaking countries first," she said.

Ms Yeow said some US\$30 million worth of programming sales were conducted this year, an increase of about 42 percent over the previous year.

"Last year, it was US\$21 million. But this figure did not include deals that were concluded after the event," she said.

Reed Midem's International Sales Manager, Arnaud de Nanteuil, said he hoped that smaller ABU members could participate in bigger markets like MIPTV and MIPCOM under an Asia-Pacific pavilion.

"This way, we can provide a visible platform for Asian sellers to exhibit their content and compete with bigger players in the biggest TV market in



Representatives of MediaCorp-Singapore with their Sri Lankan friends

the world. They can use that platform to also establish co-productions," he said.

Asia TV Forum

Mr de Nanteuil said that the annual event in Cannes attracted 12,000 participants from almost 100 countries, with about 1,500 exhibiting companies. It also generates programming sales of about three billion euros (US\$3.6 billion).

"But out of that, only 14 percent of the exhibitors are from the Asia-Pacific region. But we are slowly seeing some growth."



Arnaud de Nanteuil

He said that large Asian broadcasters from Japan, South Korea, China, and India were regular sellers, and were able to attract sizeable attention from international buyers.

"Everyone is looking for content. If people attend MIPCOM and MIPTV for the first time, they keep going back.

"That is why these events are a great place to see new trends and ideas, make and build contacts as well as establish co-productions and clinch deals," Mr de Nanteuil said.

Asia TV Forum

ABU launches HIV/AIDS programming

The ABU, MTV International, several UN agencies and the Kaiser Family Foundation have launched a series of madefor-TV programmes entitled, "Think Positive: The Asian Face of HIV/AIDS".

The project, aimed at raising awareness of the global HIV/ AIDS pandemic, has seen short-form television productions being created by 14 national broadcast companies from the Asia-Pacific.

The TV productions will focus on the implications of HIV/AIDS in the contributing producer's home country, with an emphasis on the human or social dimension.

The completed productions will be made available for exchange among participating broadcasters, as well as being made available rights-free to all ABU member broadcasters. Participating broadcasters include Bangladesh Television; China Central Television; PT Surya Citra Televisi, Indonesia; PT Indosiar Visual Mandiri Tbk, Indonesia; Sistem Televisyen Malaysia Berhad; Nepal Television; Geo Independent Media Corporation, Pakistan; Media Niugini, Papua New Guinea; ABS-CBN Broadcasting Corporation, Philippines; MediaCorp News, Singapore; EAP Networks (Pvt) Ltd-Swarnavahini (TV), Sri Lanka; National Broadcasting Services of Thailand; and Vietnam Television.

Joint involvement

The content production project was accomplished through a cooperative arrangement involving the ABU, MTV, UNDP Regional HIV and Development Programme for Asia, UNDP Asia-Pacific Development Information Programme (UNDP-APDIP), UNAIDS-APLF, UNICEF, MTV International and the Kaiser Family Foundation. The ABU's Development Projects Manager, Craig Hobbs, said: "This was a first co-production initiative arranged by the ABU for its member broadcasters and in association with the Global Media AIDS Initiative.

"It has resulted in strong interest and participation by our broadcasters, who moved very quickly to complete this project in time for World AIDS Day.

"It has also begun stimulating many additional broadcast activities relating to the increasing awareness and changing behaviour for fewer HIV infections."

The HIV/AIDS initiative was launched in Singapore in conjunction with the Asia TV Forum and related events.

The organisers have expressed hope that through sustained efforts the media could play a critical role in breaking the silence and mobilising society to confront HIV/AIDS.

Animation co-production projects offered

T^V France International – an association of French television programme exporters – is keen on partnering with ABU members to develop documentary and animation co-productions.

Its Executive Director, Mathieu Béjot, said the association's members were willing to share their expertise with ABU members, especially in the field of animation by giving Asian broadcasters training in graphic design and computer generated imagery (CGI).

"We have a training institute in France which teaches graphic designers the tools



of the trade such as CGI, traditional animation, clay modelling – just about everything," he said.

Mr Béjot said the association was undertaking joint projects with Japan and China, and was hoping to expand its presence in the Asian region where it is already exporting content to countries such as Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos and the Philippines.

"Currently 8.9 percent of our exports are to Asia. We would like to increase this figure," he said when met at the Asia TV Forum in Singapore in December.

For more information, contact TV France International's Public Relations Manager, Xavier Chevrau, at xavier@tvfrance-intl.com or go to www.tvfrance-intl.com.

Asia TV Forum

Asia TV Awards sees five-fold growth

A constantly changing format and a consumer-oriented focus are the keys to making the annual Asia TV Awards in Singapore a success, said the awards founder and prime mover, Jonathan Hallett.

Mr Hallett, who has been the Awards' Chairman for the past 10 years, said the event now attracted some 1,500 entries from 15 countries, compared to when it first started in 1996 where only 300 entries were submitted from about seven to eight countries.

"The awards are partly an industry event and partly a consumer event. The public in Asia knows about the awards as it is broadcast in Indonesia, Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan, India, the Philippines, China and Sri Lanka.

Great desire

"The more consumer-oriented you make the awards, the more the broadcaster wants to win it. But the awards has still got a long way to go before it gets anywhere near the stature of the Emmy Awards," he said.

He said that the format of the awards and the categories it offered kept changing over the years, according to the trends and demands of the burgeoning TV industry in Asia. But the number of categories has been strictly maintained at 32.

"In the past, we didn't have reality TV. Now that has been included as a category in the awards. Sports programming was recently dropped



Jonathan Hallett

because we had fewer entries being submitted," he said.

Mr Hallett said the idea to start a TV-based award for the Asian region came about with the liberalisation of the TV market in Asia and the need to create a level playing field for broadcasters in the region.

"We could never see entries from Malaysia, Singapore, the Philippines or India winning 10 years ago. But the standard has enormously improved since. I daresay the early winners of the awards would probably not even make the shortlist now!"

Mr Hallett said the liberalisation of the Asian TV industry and the inception of the awards helped promote the production and airing of more local content among Asian broadcasters.

"There is so much more local production now. Back then, broadcasters in Asia used to air more foreign content. The amount of content produced has also gone up over the years. Asian broadcasters now have bigger budgets and ratings to consider."

Mr Hallett also said that one of the greatest achievements of the annual awards was that it also had a scholarship fund for broadcasting students as well as professionals seeking to further their studies in this field.

"Any surplus from organising the awards is channelled into the fund. This year, \$\$60,000 (US\$36,000) was given for grants to study in Nanyang Technological University in Singapore.

Scholarship fund

"In addition to that, the 70-odd awards judges fly into Singapore at their own expense. The artistes performing at the event do it for free. We are a nonprofit organisation and it is great to see the amount of support we have from the industry," he said.

Mr Hallett also debunked the opinion that the awards were usually presented to entries from Singapore as it was based in that country.

"When we first started out, there weren't very many entries to begin with. The Singapore element was true maybe five years ago, but the perception has changed since then.

"If you look at this year's event, the big winners were the Philippines. Japan usually wins the documentary category, Thailand normally does well in games and quizes and Korea is a strong contender for its dramas," he said.

Japan Prize rewards educational content

The Japan Prize 2005 awards, held at the NHK Broadcasting Centre in Tokyo in October and attended by the Japanese Crown Prince, saw the Japanese public broadcaster win the Grand Prix award for its entry, "My Dear Child of the Enemy".

The documentary is based on an apartment building called the China-Japan Amity House. Its residents are Chinese nationals who were foster parents to Japanese children abandoned or orphaned during World War II.

The annual award honours outstanding TV programming with educational value. Although it is a competition which is held behind closed doors, it is also open to the public as a platform to exchange ideas on educational TV programming.

Seventeen jurors from 14 countries gathered in the Japanese capital to view and discuss the pre-selected entries a week before the award winners were announced.

The contest attracted 270 entries from 146 broadcasting organisations in 53 countries and regions.



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The winners of four categories of the Japan Prize having a chat

The best programming award for Early Education went MRTV-Mongolia for its 15-minute drama called, "Friend". The programme is based on a true story of two friends – one a young boy and the other a teenager with a severe mental disability.

The teenager would lose his temper and hurt other children with the intention of protecting his friend, but he eventually had to be sent to a special care centre for people with mental disabilities. The touching storyline and outstanding acting made the programme a firm favourite with the jury members.

For the Programme Proposal category, educational programmes by Afghanistan and Bangladesh were adjudged the winners out of the 61 entries submitted from 25 countries and regions.

The Best Proposal Prize – known as the Hoso Bunka Foundation Prize – went to the proposal by Education for All-Afghanistan called "Learn to Educate", while Bangladesh Open University's "Study for Yourself, Study for Your Future" won the National Federation of UNESCO Associations' Special Prize. The Special Prize was newly established to honour an excellent proposal for a TV programme which promotes literacy and language education and contributes to the development of basic education in an entrant's country or region.

The five finalists for the Best Proposal Prize had to come to Japan and present their proposals as part of the judging procedure.

Apart from ETA, the other four were TVRI-Indonesia, Harkara Media-India, Television of Thailand (Channel 11) and Ulysson Production-Tunisia.

The Best Web Prize attracted the participation of 27 websites The award went to "Garage about Films" (www.ur.se/garage) which was the creation of the Swedish Educational Broadcasting Company.

The website targets young amateur filmmakers, offering practical and hands-on tips which are interposed between films and contests. The Web Jury was impressed with its multiplatform approach as it felt that teenagers were traditionally difficult to reach with educational media.