RESEARCH ONLINE

Asia Pacific Media Educator

Issue 2 Article 14

1-1-1997

# Relating journalism training to development needs in Laos

Eric Loo
*University of Wollongong*, eloo@uow.edu.au

Recommended Citation
Loo, Eric, Relating journalism training to development needs in Laos, *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 2, 1997, 117-120.
Available at:http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss2/14

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

RESEARCH ONLINE

# Relating Journalism Training To Development Needs In Laos

*As the Lao People's Democratic Republic goes through a period of "controlled development" local journalists are beginning to re-examine their role in communicating "development" messages from the government to the people. While most of the journalists do not have any formal training in journalism, their inquiries on what to them are new concepts of reporting issues of development in Laos highlights the inherent conflict between critical free reporting with "development news reporting". This article. based on my short stay in Vientiane in April, describes the circumstances that Lao journalists are working in since the country started its economic reforms in 1979.*

***Eric Loo***
*University of Wollongong, Australia*

Vientiane from the air looks like a vast village hamlet. Instead of an urban sprawl of multistorey buildings, one sees expansive parched rice fields, endless stretch of ochrous dirt roads and grey thatched roofs scattered across the plains. Snaking through this administrative city of Laos is the Mekong which, during the dry season in April, has exposed its sand bars where village children gather in the evenings to play barefoot soccer. But come the monsoons in June, the mighty Mekong will rise to engulf the sand bars and flood the plains.

The Mekong's seasonal tides epitomise the subdued yet vibrant undertow of Vientiane and its people. There are signs that the "City of a Thousand Temples" and its inhabitants are being slowly swept away by the rapid changes to its earthy, peasant way of life.

While itinerant foreign journalists and NGO workers sit back and romanticize about the imminent loss of Lao peasant culture and communal values, it begs the question whether the Lao people would, if they have a choice, settle for the "better" lifestyle of the "foreigner". With the influx of tourists, the presence of 29 NGOs and more than 2,500 expatriates living in Vientiane, how long the locals will remain unfazed by the foreigners' lifestyles they see daily is anyone's guess.

©AsiaPacific MediaEducator
Issue No.2
Jan-June 1997

Since launching its revolutionary *chintanakaan mai* (new thinking) reforms in 1979, the Lao Peoples' Democratic Republic now faces the dilemma of conserving the near-pristine cultures of its numerous ethnic groups, especially in the provinces, while opening its sanctuaries to invasive tourism. About 430,000 tourists visited the country last year. With a master plan to attract about 1m visitors over the next four years, the concern among conservationists is how will Laos develop its tourism potential without losing its soul; while the literati ponder on how the socialist structure of Lao society will change over the next few years -- especially so when Lao PDR becomes a legitimate member of ASEAN.

Somsanouk Mixay, editor of *Vientiane Times*, believes, Laos is going through a difficult period of soul searching. He says while its ASEAN neighbours are focused on attaining double digit growths, the Lao government is actually decelerating development to avoid the urban blight commonly seen in many Third World cities. There is an unspoken fear that if Laos develops too fast, it may be trampled over by the commercialism of Thailand, visible in the town of Nong Khai just across the Mekong.

Most roads in Vientiane at night are still pitch dark. Where there are major hotels, embassies and government offices, the streets are dimly lit. The rest rely on the ambience filtering through the dust shrouded roads from small family shops, makeshift food stalls, and motorbikes puttering through with at least two on pillion.

The World Health Organisation estimates that there are 135 persons to a vehicle in Laos compared to 88 in China and 18 in Thailand. With a population of 450,000 scattered across the city and its three districts, the main means of transport are bicycles, Honda cubs and smoke belching three-wheeler *"tuk-tuk"* people movers.

To a stranger, Vientiane looks earthy, raw, unspoiled. After a week, I could not see any city street beggars or homeless children such as commonly seen in Jakarta, Bangkok and Manila. If urban poverty is measured by the sore sight of human misery, urban slums and rich-poor divide, then Vientiane is relatively "rich". Local restaurants for the local folks don't close till midnight. Youths and children are well attired and looked well nourished -- by Lao standards. City folks are by nature polite and gentle, ready to help a stranger with a *Sabai dee, bo* - "How are you?" or in whatever broken English they can utter.

The spontaneity of city folks, however, belies the dearth of skilled tertiary educated youths in Laos. With a national

population density of only 17 persons per square kilometre, its total population of 4.6m is considered to be extremely small in terms of providing a ready pool of skilled labour for its "controlled development". Where for every 1,000 babies, 125 will die before they are one, nurturing a new generation of healthy, skilled educated populace means perpetual reliance on foreign development aid and, more immediately, the voluntary services of NGOs.

Currently, the Lao government is banking on the learning of English, especially among its bureaucrats, to get into the mainstream regional economy. Education up to tertiary level has for decades been conducted in Lao. Foreign languages such as English, French and German are now being introduced as major fields of study at the newly established National University of Laos in Dong Dok, a district in Vientiane.

There is only one English biweekly newspaper, *Vientiane Times*, which mainly caters for expatriates, embassy staff, foreign investors, tourists and a small market of local readers. The importance given to the English language follows the growing fascination of English-speaking tourists with Laotian culture, history and nature. *Vientiane Times* is currently one of the vehicles geared to teach the people some basic English.

The group of 17 Lao journalists I worked with for a week do not speak any English. However, there was an implicit common appreciation of the "constructive" role of journalists in a society which is going through its transitionary period of "controlled development". The journalists see themselves primarily as instruments in providing the communicative link between the people and the government. The notion of a "free unfettered reporting", as defined by Western liberal media, does not elicit much overt journalistic passion -- which is somewhat understandable in a media environment where the president of the Lao Journalists Association happens to be the Deputy Minister of Information and Culture.

Most of the journalists did not go through any formal media education or training. In sharing their experience as reporters in the vernacular press, they do not perceive their role as a "watchdog" but more as a facilitator of smooth communication between the government officials and the people. Due to language difficulties, it was hard to pin down the journalists' personal conception of "news" and their attitudes towards media censorship and control. Nevertheless, the circumstances that Lao journalists are working in highlights a need to rethink the "Western" concept of independent critical reporting when it comes

to training journalists in a political system where taints of socialism are still in the air.

Besides deliberating with the Lao journalists on different reporting genre in relation to 'national development', I spent a few days taking them through a workshop on low-cost news design and production. Their total unfamiliarity with the English language sets a unique learning environment. All were from local Lao language publications except for three from *Vientiane Times.* In the process of sharing visual concepts, I came to know more about the textual design of Lao papers and "news values" from the journalists as they would have learned about contemporary news design from me.

In communicating through the interpreter, Somsanouk Mixay, I was compelled to think and teach in capsules. The result is an extremely structured form of visual communication and practical exercises adapted to vernacular Lao newspaper format.

The workshop delved into typographic principles and their applications to news design; copy layout including exercises in conventional cut and paste; actual laying out of a tabloid page containing six stories complete with text, photographs, advertisements, multi-deck headlines, sub-heads, and pull quotes. All completed exercises were posted on a notice board for peer criticisms and comparisons with their respective publications.

As PageMaker 5.0 is used in the production of *Vientiane Times,* there were moments of incidental learning when I showed how design errors could be effectively tackled by computer design techniques. Desktop publishing in Lao newspapers remains a training area to be fully explored.

The week-long workshop was organised by the Indochina Media Memorial Foundation based in Bangkok and the Lao Journalists' Association in Vientiane. IMMF is a non-profit organisation launched by journalists to assist colleagues who are emerging from war, poverty and isolation. It draws on a network of trainers to run courses, foster exchanges and fund important media development activities for journalists in the Indochina region. ■

*ERIC LOO is senior lecturer at the Graduate School of Journalism, University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia. Email: Eric_Loo@uow.edu.au*