

Opening Address

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Professor Dr. Judy Pearson, President of the World Communication Association, Associate Professor Dr. Md. Salleh Haji Hassan, Chairman of the Organizing Committee, Professor Dr. Amat Juhari Moain, Dean, Faculty of Modern Languages and Communication, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First of all, I would like to thank the organizing committee for inviting me to this renowned gathering of scholars and practitioners of communication. I would also like to say selamat datang to Malaysia to all foreign delegates and thank you to World Communication Association for choosing Malaysia as the host to the 15th Biennial Conference of the Association.

There is no doubt that communication is essential in all human activities. In fact, communication is basic to all human beings, just like we need food, water and air. We cannot not communicate and human communication oc-

curs as long as we live. However, the variation in communication that occurs within different groups, different regions and different professions makes communication challenging. In this context, I appreciate WCA's selection of the theme for this conference, "History and Horizons: Cultural Constructions and Contradictions," which is very appropriate in addressing the diversity and richness of culture found in this world.

We in Malaysia live harmoniously, even though by origin come from different ethnic backgrounds. Except for the 1969 incident, we had lived and progressed together for forty-two years since independence. How do we achieve this? Obviously, we communicate; we learned from one another and we respect and appreciate one's culture. This shows that effective communication can achieve miracle results.

In the era of information, communication technology has a bigger role to play. With the tumbling down of na-

tional borders, information can flow one country to another. Nowadays, information can be transmitted from one end to the other end of the world at very fast speed and volume. As such, to some this phenomenon will create information overload and to some this is a great opportunity to have different views on an issue, and to others this means there is more information for better decision making.

There is very strong relationship between communication and education. I say this because it is difficult to make distinction between the two. Oftentimes, these two processes go together. So, is knowledge and information—how can we differentiate the two? Perhaps scholars in this hall may have the answer. One thing for sure, communication technologies and communication media have been utilized in educational activities both in formal education and informal or life-long education.

It is important to note how communication technology has managed to package knowledge and information in varieties of media for the utilization of the masses. There are videos, audio cassettes and CD's available in the markets covering almost all aspects of human needs. The topics are also targeted for specific audiences so that the public can choose the materials useful to them. Due to the global nature of our economic systems, these media come from

all over the world. Thus, it is very important for us to know and understand the culture of others in order to get the full benefits from these media.

As the communication technology has provided us with the avenue to be linked to one another, let us use it to share our knowledge and experiences. I believe communication scholars and practitioners could play a great role in providing the contents of the media with elements that are useful and beneficial to all society. The message of the global media should be focused towards the environment, peace, mutual respect and living in harmony. We should provide an alternative to the commercial media that take every opportunity to make as much profit as possible. Or, perhaps it is time for us to work with them in producing "edutainment" programs in order to educate our younger generation to respect and appreciate the culture of others, be sensitive to the environment and be proud of their own culture. After all, the borders among the countries will become irrelevant as the internet paves the way to anywhere, everywhere.

This year marked the end of the 20th century and the beginning of a new era, the information age and globalization. Rapid advancement of communication technology has made countries of the world closer to each other. Technologies such as satellite, fiber optics, wireless, enables communication across the

world to take place within seconds or a fraction of a second. People in countries at opposite ends of the world are able to communicate with each other as if they are in adjoining rooms. Such are the effects of communication technology, which we never thought could happen before. But, whatever the past may be, the present condition is here to stay. And in the future, more miracles may be in store. Twenty years ago did we think it possible to communicate at such a rate that we are doing now?

The scenario I just described shows that communication by means of technology has enabled people of the world, which are of diverse cultural background, to share information. An event taking place in one country can be shared by others as if they are where the event is happening. This means that countries of the world are no longer isolated or separated. They are joined by means of communication into one huge common society or a global village. The concept of global village indicates that communication will make events happening anywhere in the world common to all. But, will communication be able to achieve this ideal situation?

To really appreciate the importance of communication and information to mankind we may recall what was it like before we had the media facilities. Think back to the time when information about important events from the government had to be passed on by word

of mouth or interpersonally. Imagine the amount of time it needs to inform the whole population of a nation or the amount of distortion that may occur. Today, we can obtain information from various sources conveniently and at a fantastic speed using communication technology. Internet has been made accessible to various sectors of the world. This has enabled nations and people to form closer relationships in areas of life. Economic ties, political association, educational cooperation are some examples of things made possible by communication. But, then does communication and information provide for more effective relationships? The answer is yes if people know how to manage information. We know that massive amounts of information get into the communication system. Some of this information may not be authentic or relevant to our needs. So, it is critical that we utilize the information maximally, but filtering out the irrelevant information and focusing more on information that is relevant and accurate. Otherwise we may end up worse off than before.

I have mentioned about the information age, information era and other such names given to the rapidly developing role of communication technology in providing information to people across the world. This situation can be characterized by faster flow of information between nations, communities,

groups and individuals. The amount of information transmitted in the system would be more, the information would be more timely and accurate, resulting in better decision. There will be a free marketplace of ideas available for the people to choose those relevant to their needs. The scenario may be enhanced by some parties providing needed information, and others may create confusion by injecting into the system rubbish and worthless materials. There will be merging of information together with dissolving of boundaries between nations and culture. Those with information will have more power over those nations without. This shows the possible chaos that can be created by communication if not managed efficiently.

As such, communication can be mobilized to overcome such a situation so that only a positive effect of information is realized. I believe that guidance as well as training should be provided to people to enable them to cope with that situation. Policy guidelines by the relevant bodies to help maximize the information in the system must be developed.

Communication and information, if properly managed, will help individuals, groups, societies, nations build closer relationships among each other. Transmission of cultural heritage, understanding of cultural values and norms are important considerations in main-

taining a more harmonious relationship in a borderless world. Therefore, I believe that communication should try to narrow the differences among nations and any such differences should be respected as being due to cultural diversity rather than differences of opinions which may affect harmonious relationships. As communication is important, everyone should have a formal experience of the field. Furthermore, communication involves skills that need to be learned. As such, communication should be part and parcel of our education system.

At this stage, I would like to reiterate that communication and information are essential to mankind. As such, greater attention must be given to making everybody knowledgeable and skilled in communicating in a multicultural context.

I would like to congratulate the organizing committee, WCA, and the participants for choosing such a relevant and timely issue to deliberate upon for the next few days. I hope all of you would have enlightening sessions ahead to discuss the issues of communication, culture, and other relevant and pertinent issues so as to come up with more suggestions on improving communication and relationships in culturally diverse groups.

I hope that you would take the opportunity to get to know Malaysia by visiting some of the historical sites. I

also hope you would be able to get to know the people and enjoy your stay in Malaysia and come back in future. Hopefully, this conference will be the starting point for a closer relationship among the participants and the people

of Malaysia. I think this conference will create some working relationships in terms of sharing academic experiences and fostering ties in research.

With that remark, I declare the conference opens. Thank you.

