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Journalists from Asia and Pacific Get a Taste of Texas

Story by Emily Starbuck Gerson



Photo by Toni Harris

The University recently welcomed several journalists from East Asia and the Pacific who were visiting America as a part of the Edward R. Murrow Program for Journalists. Among the 17 visitors representing 17 different countries were a radio host from Australia who works on a current affairs program targeting Australian youth; a television producer from Thailand and a stringer from Burma, both of whose

countries own and censor all forms of media; and a woman from the Solomon Islands who started a news station as an effort to educate and connect the illiterate and disenfranchised people of her country.

The Murrow Program is sponsored by the U.S. Department of State's International Visitor Leadership Program. The visiting journalists spent a total of three weeks in the United States examining the ins and outs of a free press in a democratic society. Objectives of the program included observing operational practices, standards, and institutions of media in America, gaining insight into the social, economic, and political structures of the United States, and participating in academic seminars and symposiums highlighting current trends and challenges in journalism.

After a visit to Washington, D.C., the journalists came to Austin for one week and experienced many Texan activities, including a tour of the LBJ ranch and library, lunch with the editors of The Texas Observer, a visit to News 8 Austin and the Austin American-Statesman, a tour the Capitol and the Alamo and meals at Las Manitas and Stubbs B-B-

Q.

Professor Tracy Dahlby, the Frank A. Bennack Chair in Journalism at the University, coordinated the group's visit to Austin. Dahlby spent 13 years living in Asia, in which he worked for both Newsweek and The Washington Post.

Dahlby believes that this program gave the visiting journalists a very thorough American experience. "I think it's human nature to minimize the complexities of any society when you see it or think about it from afar," he says. "We all tend to do that. It's not until you actually visit, as a reporter or traveler, that you engage the complexities that make a place and its people really come alive in an interesting way." Dahlby says that the group was not only able to see the Statehouse and talk with politicians and reporters, but they were also able to have lunch at the Texas Chili Parlor and do other activities that gave them a true taste of our culture. "I think they came away with a more textured understanding of Texas politics than they may have had before," he says.

At a reception for the journalists at the Littlefield Home on campus, I had the chance to speak with several of the journalists about their experience in America and learn how they felt our media system compared to theirs back home.

Steve Cannane, a radio host for a youth-focused news program in Australia, said that he feels like America has the best and the worst journalism, and that it truly reflects our diversity. "One difference I notice between American and Australian media," Cananne says, "is that American journalists are more polite to politicians. We give them a harder time. Also, our prime minister, which is equivalent to your president, gives lots of interviews. Bush doesn't do that-he mainly just gives press conferences. Also, we don't have to cover superficial things like Anna Nicole Smith-we'd rather do a 45-minute documentary on something really great."

Soo Seo, a print journalist from South Korea, has been to America before, but this is the first time she's had the chance to see the inner-workings of the media. "In South Korea, we're struggling with how to make the transition from offline to online media. Most youth are shunning traditional print, but we want to know how big papers make sure quality is kept with the transition." Seo says that South Korean papers have modeled themselves after American papers, and have adopted a USA Today format. She admires our media system, but has one major issue with it: "I see so many excellent American journalists, but not great American newspapers. The Washington Post and TheNew York Times and the big ones are great, but you're the greatest country in the world --why don't you have better local papers?"

Dorothy Wickham of the Soloman Islands just started a television station back home and came to the America to see how we're dealing with new technology. She says that the

Soloman Islands have only been independent for about twelve years, and a lot of areas don't even have access to telephones. Because of this, she sees media differently. "I feel we have a different role to play than journalists in your country," she says "we're news gatherers and educators. We want our audience to be presented with facts so they can make good decisions about new developments. We will have less emphasis on entertainment and more responsibility to inform." Wickham says that because her country is spread out over one thousand islands, all with different dialects, many people just vote for the politician who speaks their dialect rather than who stands for certain issues. She hopes to teach people how the government works with her new television station, and knows that this trip in America can help her learn how we do it.

Overall, Dahlby sees this visit to Austin as a success. " I think we were able to put together a program that not only showed our visitors how the news media works in Austin and in the U.S. but also gave them a sense of the rich diversity of the Austin community and issues of concern to various community groups in a multifaceted society," he said. This trip "provide[d] an opportunity to compare what they're doing in their individual countries to inform their readers, viewers and listeners with how we in the American media are making our own transition to new ways of covering our world."

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