BANGKOK, May 2 (IPS) - More than gaining the freedom to report on society's problems Asian media must gauge its real contribution to the public's needs, especially at a time of increasing commercialisation.

This was the common theme running through an interactive dialogue here on Friday -- ahead of World Press Freedom Day on May 3 -- organised by the United Nations Economic, Social and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) around the theme of freedom of expression, access and empowerment.

"Press freedom is meaningful and important not only to journalists, but to society at large. With freedom of expression, more information becomes available to the people," said UNESCO Bangkok director Sheldon Shaeffer. "With more information, people are empowered to participate in more activities affecting their lives. And to engage in discussion and debate, they must have freedom of expression... and so it goes."

At the same time, media must make this space for freedom of expression work in terms of addressing the human development needs of the society it claims to benefit. Asia boasts several economic and human development achievements in the last few decades, but it is also home to growing inequalities, including economic gaps and their adverse effects on women.

"One of the causes of this inequality is 'knowledge poverty,'" said Patrick Keuleers, head of the Democratic Governance Practice Team of the United Nations Development Programme.

Knowledge poverty, according to Keuleers, is the lack of information that helps prevent the impoverished from taking part in the economic, social and political processes around them. It also refers to the lack of transparency that leads to all types of corruption.

Calling Asia a "region of paradoxes", Keuleers noted the ongoing explosion of many privately-owned media outlets and websites, as well as Internet users, in the region.

But more media avenues do not necessarily mean media that produce information that addresses social needs and social change. "At the same time, media outlets are often monopolised by private interests and many journalists practice some form of self-censorship in covering sensitive topics," Keuleers said.

"Press freedom is not only about an individual's right to expression, but it's also about the value of making sure that important ideas are heard," said Melinda Quintos de Jesus, executive director of the Philippines-based Centre for Media Freedom and Responsibility.

"The challenge to free press grows more serious as we gain more in communication media and technology," she said. "We're also challenged by the fact that some citizens out there are probably better informed than the journalists."

With so many media tools available to the public, journalists are hard pressed to engage readers with news that have to contend with more entertaining sources, concedes Steven Gan, editor-in-chief of Malaysia's independent online news site, Malaysiakini.com.

"As news journalists, it is our job to make our news relevant. It is our job to engage our readers and connect them. If our readers think that our news is not worth reading, then we are not doing our job," he said at the UNESCO dialogue.

Apart from politically related repression that led to the deaths of 17 journalists worldwide in 2007, the problem of overcommercialisation in the media -- which critics say has led to the 'dumbing down' of many media entities -- is another cause for concern, participants at the discussion said.

While media organisations need to look after revenues, having this become their only goal and driving force could create an environment that discourages the generation of news and information around serious public issues because they are not attractive to the 'market'.

Malaysiakini's Gan knows the dilemma only too well. "This is something that we are worried about. But we wanted to provide a...
new economic model in terms of media organisations," he said, explaining that the news site relies mainly on subscriptions, instead of advertising revenues.

"We separate business from editorial to the point that I don't even know exactly what my chief executive officer is doing. One good thing is that my CEO is a former journalist who can run the business side of things and also understands what journalism is all about," he added.

Malaysiakini also has policies to demand and protect editorial freedom. "Any investor who wants to do business with us has to sign a memorandum of agreement stating that they will not interfere with our editorial policies," Gan explained.

De Jesus sees education as the only effective antidote to commercialisation taking control over the news media. Education, she added, is a "part of the whole process of developing good, autonomous and independent media because an educated person will always seek to know more".

"Of course, there is always this human response to look at the bright side of life, to turn away from great seriousness. Yet, if we do that, we abdicate our responsibility as citizens," she explained. "The whole issue of commercialisation rests on the public that we are serving. They will be the ones who will say 'enough already'."

But Roby Alampay, executive director of the Bangkok-based Southeast Asia Press Alliance, did not discount the possibility of something substantial coming out of what is considered frivolous and mundane.

"You don't just give up on any type of mass communication because there could be an effective platform for people or community (to bring to light important issues)," he said.

Alampay cited the case of a Burmese astrologer who predicted that 2007 would not be a good year for the junta -- and was subsequently investigated by the authorities. This, he said, was yet another example of the repression of freedom of expression in that country.

Alampay added: "When it comes to media, it's easy for everything to become political and it's a good thing. It's also easy to cross over from something mundane to something serious."

(END/2008)