

The Changing Role of The Media in Asia

"... let us strike for one thing amid the push and pull of superlatives: Balance."
Hon. Sec. Luis. P. Lorenzo. Jr. in a speech delivered during the 5th Hitachi
Young Leaders Initiative, Singapore July 30, 2002

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INTRODUCTION

Give one good reason why the media¹ has grown to be such a powerful institution in Asian society. Why the need to silence it in Vietnam and Burma, regulate it in Singapore and Malaysia yet allow it to be freewheeling in the Philippines, Indonesia and Japan? Perhaps it is because the press can shape public discourse and serve as catalyst for change. Perhaps because in blind writing, it can give tacit approval to corruption and even coddle a dictatorship. Or perhaps because in fearless writing, it can inspire a revolution.

Indeed, a discussion of the timely issue of regional cohesion is never complete without an analysis of the mass media. As the Singapore Information Minister Mr. David Lim said, modern societies are becoming increasingly cosmopolitan, with multicultural, multilingual and multi-religious interactions to be dealt with. Such diversity will inevitably mean more differences. Forging mutual understanding and opening lines of communication therefore takes on added importance in building regional cohesion, and this is where the mass media could play an important role. Ideally, the mass media's roles are to serve as a catalyst for change, to provide checks and balance in all sectors, and to facilitate closer relationships among different peoples. While it would be quite idyllic to have a free and responsible press, Malou Mangahas puts it best: Freedom does not necessarily translate into an excellent press. Nor an ethical one. In the hands of the unscrupulous, press freedom becomes the freedom to sell stories, the freedom to market the news as a commodity, the freedom

¹ Media refers to mass communication tools which entail a process that involves senders, messages and receivers as well as a specific social context in which they operate. These thus include all written, electronic and visual medium, such as newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet, as defined by Briggs and Copley, c1998, page 1.

to turn mass media into mass mediocrity."² Having said that, it is evident that reality is often a far distance from what is ideal, and it would serve us best to ground our discussion in the current situation.

This paper is organized as follows: starting with a brief description of the status quo of Asian media, it then proceeds to a detailed discussion of the problems characteristic of the said status quo. Finally, we put forth certain proposals, which, although by no means exhaustive, will hopefully set the direction for Asian media to become an effective tool in forging regional cohesion.

WHAT IS THE STATUS QUO?

A cursory inspection of Asian media confirms that they span the whole spectrum--from excessive freedom to excessive regulation. The Philippines, Japan and Indonesia reflect the former; while Singapore and Malaysia lean more towards the latter; and Thailand lies somewhere in between. But it is not as simple as that. In fact, Asian media shift their stance on this bipolar continuum at different points of time, depending on prevailing circumstances. Balance is definitely the key.

WHAT ARE THE PROBLEMS WITH THE STATUS QUO?

We are in a day and age where the changes in mass media come at dizzying speed, what with information communications and technology growing by leaps and bounds, coupled with the ever-present issues of censorship, cross-ownership and media consolidation, among others. Affected sectors often find themselves in a state of transition socially, culturally, politically and economically, adapting to what is new yet retaining a measure of what is old -- with the adjustments coming in painfully for some countries.

Socio-cultural issues:

Diversity

Asia is home to a rich tapestry of different cultures--encompassing race, ethnicity, gender, physical abilities, sexual orientation, age, religion, social class, and many other dimensions. While diversity may be a beautiful thing, diversity in the region has also led to escalating tensions. Instead of promoting harmony and tolerance among citizens in the region, some media has contributed to the magnification of the differences rather than bridging the gap across them. In Indonesia, for instance, the interfaith and interethnic conflict has been aggravated by provocative reports from extremist media, sometimes without sound proof. The goes for Malaysia, especially in meritocratic issues.

² Taken from Chay Florentina Hofilena, *News for Sale: The Corruption of the Philippine Media* (Quezon City: Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism: Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, 1998), page 77.

Western cultural imperialism:

Historically, certain countries in our region have been subjected to colonialism and have been influenced by our predecessors. Today, Asia is just recognising its political and economic influence as a rising power in the world. However, it is sad that even in the aftermath of colonialism and with the current influx of information, Asian society has been dramatically transformed. These influences have confused Asians as to the degree of our worth in the eyes of the world, submissively accepting the notion of being a lesser culture. This perspective is definitely counterproductive in the development of Asian society and the building of pride among Asian people.

Dr. Marwah Ibrahim adds, "Instead of providing some appreciation of the richness of Asian culture, including our ability to live peacefully with nature, utilise traditional medicine, and respect the elderly, many Western media report these as signs of primitiveness. And we in Asia follow that belief."³

So much so that some Asians even prefer to learn about Asian issues through the eyes of Western-based media. The problem lies in the tendency of foreign journalists and mediamen to presume and generalise much when discussing issues such as human rights cases seen in Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand whose governments were in fact democratically elected. This has caused confusion and portrayed false impressions of the real picture amongst Asian nations.

Political issues

The relations between the media and government often hinge upon the dynamics of circumstances, particularly the changing demographics of late. Frequently the shift in media-government relations is aimed at achieving social cohesion. The media in Singapore, for instance became strictly regulated after the racial riots that occurred in the 1960's, but is currently moving towards a more liberated scenario, as the media has proven to be quite responsible in its work.

On the other hand, media and government relations also depend on the political agenda present within government policies. We can see that the patronage system does affect the media industry, in that some media is protected by some government politicians, and in order to repay the favour, the media can be pressured to report only good stories and scrap the bad ones. In the end, the losers are the readers and consumers of media since they have been denied access to the truth.

Another example would be Malaysia, where the issue of national security is used as a means to influence the mainstream media in the reporting of sensitive news. Traditional control mechanisms such as the licensing of newspapers, control of the quantity allowed for distribution, personal pressure on journalists, ownership of newspapers by political parties and a culture of self-censorship have permeated the media scene.

³ Dr. Marwah Daud Ibrahim, Member of the Commission VI of the House of Representatives in the Republic of Indonesia, in a speech delivered before the 5th Hitachi Young Leaders Initiative, July 29, 2002 Singapore

On the issue of terrorism, war-related coverage has been severely controlled by the government, on the pretext of promoting national security. Where should one draw the line between state security and the public's right to know? As it is, the balance is tipped towards state security. It seems that officials are the unanimous news sources, feeding mostly positive reports to a powerless press and an unsuspecting public. On the Philippines front, for example, a content analysis of the media coverage of the Mindanao crisis revealed that the overwhelming source of information was the government, accounting for close to a whopping 74 per cent⁵. How much can we trust these reports? Have we any other choice?

Socio-economic issues

The media is first and foremost a business entity that needs to finance itself and reap profits for its stakeholders. It would be quite naïve to expect the media to always put public service or public trust over and above business concerns. The truth of the matter is that the media is also at the mercy of its sponsors and consumers, who provide the lifeline -- money -- for the media's sustainability.

There are many instances where the media has traded objectivity for sensationalism, just to appease the readers. Reporters or writers have gladly obliged by delivering what the public wants to know, instead of what they should know, for the sake of increasing market share. Chu Mei Feng -- a Taiwanese politician -- would identify with this situation, after the media exposed her private affairs to the general public. Her image as a politician has been tarnished by the dramatisation of the media all for the sake of selling more copies.

The structure of media ownership has also evolved to the point where a few entities own and control a significant part of the industry. In Indonesia, for example, there is a single media group, which owns 107 publications that are circulated over the archipelago. This over consolidation poses a threat of limiting the amount of information flowing within society, and of giving powerful entities a large voice in lobbying for their special interests. Think about it. Media moguls can shape public opinion simply because they have the channels to do so, the breadth of resources that can change society... hopefully for the better, but possibly for the worse.

The question is: will the increasing number of media available in the market actually have a significant impact on the diversity of information and opinion given to the public who, in this case, are the consumers? Hooper⁶ suggests pluralism of ownership, which although "does not automatically lead to a diversity of view, is the closest proxy for it, especially when linked with the various types of content regulation."

⁵ Center of Media Freedom and Responsibility, "*Content Analysis: Deconstructing Media Coverage of the Mindanao Crisis*," <http://www.seapa.org>

⁶ Hooper, Richard, *Media Ownership and Control*, International Institute of Communications, 1995, page 229.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

To address the aforementioned issues, we propose the following recommendations that could be undertaken by a three-pronged cooperation by government, media and society. Let it be noted that it is only through the concerted efforts of the three institutions that we can suitably tackle these pressing issues.

Role of the Government

In the case of government-media relations, the state should not be an active player, and should allow the media to have the right to express their own opinions. The state should act as a 'referee' in regulating the media. In formulating media regulations, the state should engage in mutual discussions by involving the media as well. In this manner, the media could have a stronger commitment to complying with the regulations.

The second role that the government should perform in the case of media ownership is to limit the monopoly of media ownership. This could be done through strengthening anti-trust laws, or setting a ceiling to the number of publications a particular entity can circulate within an area.

The governments of Asian countries must likewise emphasise the importance of the media in enhancing the need for regional solidarity to further strengthen the bonds we have built. Exchange or fellowship programmes for key players in the Ministries of Information, for example, could generate a different perspective of the administration of other countries' media. This might enable us to more effectively harness the propagation of information towards the uniting of our nations.

Role of the Media

The media should subject itself to the same standards and rules that it imposes on its news subjects and sources. It must be part of the media's mandate to investigate and expose itself. The media should be aware of the issues and make a conscious effort to increase the voice of the minority. The state and mainstream private media should be encouraged to provide more access, space and airtime for increased diversity of representation, instead of merely delivering standard reports. In addition, the media should educate and instill media ethics, instead of merely perpetuating present social problems.

The media, therefore, will have to take on a bigger role and responsibility to continue promoting greater awareness and understanding among the many people in Asia of our many similarities and differences. Only with the sharing of information coupled with a deeper understanding of one other can we create a sense of regional solidarity and achieve a greater well-being for Asia.

Role of Society

Beyond the media practitioners themselves, who must undoubtedly earn what is a constituted freedom in all democracies, so must society stand firm to preserve that freedom. It is imperative that you and I become media literate. This means that we must have the ability to be a critical and proactive user of media, coupled with an ability to send information freely using accessible devices. By cultivating media literacy, we cease to be merely information receivers to becoming critical analysers and information selectors. It is imperative that you and I become watchdogs of the watchdog, the vanguard of the Fourth Estate. We must demand fidelity of the highest order and care about the accuracy of the papers we read or of the broadcasts we hear.

This can be achieved in two ways. First by establishing and strengthening regional media alliances, whose interests go beyond what is national or commercial. These regional watchdogs must aim: (1) to develop mutual understanding among the media in the region by presenting balanced news with Asian and Western perspectives, (2) to have a stronger voice in giving Asian perspective internally within the region and externally to the West, and (3) to provide minimal standard regional code of conduct.

The Asia News Network (ANN), Organization of Asia-Pacific News (OAPN), and the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA) are some examples. Second is by including within the educational system a program on how to handle the information overflow, how to analyse its contents, how to distinguish between what is true from what is a generated truth. Think about it. If democracies are going to put their fate in the hands of the citizenry, would it not be reasonable to ensure that these hands are matched by an enlightened mind capable of making sound decisions?

Publishing, real-life coverage, reports and documentaries, not to mention films could be used to provide additional reinforcement into the education, cultural, business, and industrial world. For instance, coalitions can be formed between interested corporations, NGOs, associations, and the public to promote the economy and societal development of a nation.

Conclusion

At the end of the day, Asia remains to be one of the most dynamic and complex regions, hosting a sea of diverse peoples. Its issues on the state of media would naturally permeate in the fields of politics, economics and social life. Though our recommendations might not necessarily be an end-all solution, it is our hope that this paper might somehow alleviate its woes.