New thinking needed to report the "Globalising" world

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Commentary

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“\nIt is commonly perceived that Western journalism tradition is about the media acting as the “watchdog” of governments, so that they will serve the people and not abuse their power. While in Asia, the media is supposed to serve the social good of the society -- which has often resulted in the media becoming the public relations arm of the government. The irony is that both in the East and West today, the rapid commercialisation of the media has meant that it has become the public relations arm of not necessarily governments, but of big businesses, some of which have the power to influence government economic and foreign policies. ”
“To recognise Asian values in journalism we need to rely more on our own sources and media, instead of picking up Eastern stories from Western media and ‘re-presenting’ their historical biases about Asia as Asian reality” – Mrinal Pande, Secretary General of the Editors’ Guild of India.” – Seminar on Asian values and the role of the media, Hong Kong, 1994.

“The Asian journalist must provide a record through reportage, he or she must re-report Asia and the world for Asians, and Asia and Asians for the world. In doing so, the sub-texts at work in the West’s existing mapping of Asia must be revealed and countered, which is difficult. The sub-texts are rarely explicit misreporting, and when they are, they are relatively easy to counter. They are more subtle, and hence insidious. They are present not only in what is said or written, but also in what is unsaid. Whether the people will listen to the Asian journalists’ re-interpretation is another matter; the attempt is the important thing.” – Asad Latiff, Senior Features Writer, Straits Times, Singapore (1997)

I came across the above comments almost a decade ago when I first moved to Singapore to work, after having spent almost 20 years in Australia. Now having seen the workings of the media in Asia from closer quarters, I think the two quotes clearly define the challenge Asian journalists still face today.

The sub-texts Latiff talks about have become more insidious today with globalised television news services in the region re-presenting the dominant Western perspective of issues through Asian faces - never mind their Anglo-accent. Just because an Asian presents the news does not mean the news necessarily reflect ‘Asian values’. However, I would not talk about Asian values here because I believe it is a question of perspective, and if this perspective reflects the voices of grassroot Asian communities, by definition it is reflective of an Asian perspective.

The reality is it does not matter if one resides in the East or the West. The radar screens of the local media, as far as news priorities and agendas are concerned, are often set by a handful of global media companies, predominantly based in the West. Their inherent biases and “sub-texts” are often channelled through without any significant challenge by the local Asian media.

Increasingly, the profitability of these global media companies are linked to unfettered access to markets in the developing world – especially in Asia - for their goods and services, as well as the unquestioned freedom, nay commercial rights, to the acquisition of local media outlets. This they call “free” trade or economic “liberalisation” - in short, a globalisation of economies to suit the commercial imperatives of Western capital. Very rarely do they discuss or even think about who benefits from this globalisation – the people in Asia, the governments, or the transnational corporations?

Let us look at other examples of ill-informed reporting of Asian stories by Western media. In India, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines, there are peoples’ movements actively resisting the imposition of globalisation that is having a negative impact on their livelihood. Often both the international media and the urban domestic media report these people and movements as “extremists” or “terrorists”. For the international media, they are constructed as the peoples’ movements, only if they
oppose regimes, which are critical of the West, such as Myanmar’s military regime or Dr Mahathir Mohamed’s Malaysia.

Indonesia’s Ulama Council (MUI), a council of Muslim clerics, or Sri Lanka’s JHU (National Heritage Party) a political party of Buddhist monks, both of which opposed what they see as “unethical” conversions by Christian missionary workers, are routinely described as “extremists” by the international media. On the contrary, the National Liberation Front of Tripura (NLFT) in India, a Christian group, which has been terrorising and ethnically cleansing Hindu Bengalis in the state for many years, is not portrayed as Christian “extremists” or “terrorists” (Paul, 2005).

In Indonesia, MUI issued 11 fatwas in August 2005, which were interpreted by the international media as Islamic “extremist” moves to stifle freedom of religion in the country. Yet, if one were to go into the Islamic community and speak to its members, even the most moderate Muslims in the most moderate Islamic nation in the world would say that that was a self-defensive action against the forces of globalisation, which through satellite television, Western funded NGOs – some of whom are Christian evangelical groups masquerading as aid agencies – economic liberalisation, and Western pop music are threatening their Islamic values and lifestyle. Mustofa Kamil Ridwan, a researcher at the Islamic think-tank, Habibie Center in Jakarta argues:

“From the ‘conservative’ point of view liberalism is really a challenge they have to be always alert to, because they feel that liberalism will make their children and the Muslim community leave Islamic values they uphold highly” (Seneviratne, 2005).

Meanwhile, Athuraliya Ratana, a Buddhist monk and JHU member of Parliament in Sri Lanka, likewise refutes the notion that his party is extremist. He argues:

“Throughout the country people are rising up to the injustices and if that is called Buddhist nationalism, I don’t think that is correct. What is happening is that people have mobilised using our language and cultural heritage as the basis of the struggle. Buddhism is not about prayers and worship, it is a way of life. This way of life is disappearing under globalisation, which is robbing us of our livelihood and our social system. We need to protect our values and culture” (Seneviratne, 2005).

The above quotes from two Asian of different religious backgrounds argue the same point. To better understand their arguments, one need to have a sound knowledge of their country’s recent histories, where both were colonised by European powers, and as a result they are arguably suspicious of Christian agencies, be they local or foreign.

If Asian journalists are to successfully confront the sub-texts in the Western media mapping of Asia, firstly, they should get their fundamentals right about Asian history, especially of the past 500 years. Unfortunately, the education systems in most Asian countries do not provide that foundation, thus making local journalists easily captivated by Western media’s historical and cultural discourse. In addition, many Asians go overseas to study mass communication, learn, and to an extent internalise Western (mainly American) media theories and practices, return and uncritically adopt these ideas, believing it to be the most effective way to modernise the media.
If one were equipped with an in-depth knowledge of Asian history, for instance, one would know better about the East India Company – not the trendy EIC fashion label but rather its symbolisation of European colonisation and plunder of Asia centuries ago. The way the EIC penetrated (and colonised) Asia using the British gospel of “free trade” then is almost identical to the “free trade” push of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) today. Familiarity with this history, arguably could provide journalists with clearer insights to analyse the WTO from a different perspective to the global media’s prevailing portrayal of WTO trade treaties as bringing billion dollar windfalls to Asian economies and helping to lift millions out of poverty.

Often, the Western media are inclined to question Asian leaders’ opposition to globalisation and modernisation. But seldom do the Asian media take to questioning Western leaders, especially their economists and trade negotiators, about how these “free trade” deals are benefiting the people of Asia.

In-depth knowledge of Asian history would also help journalists in Australia to better report on Australia’s decade old efforts to enter the East Asia Economic Caucus. Very often I have read commentaries by well-known Australian journalists who argue that Asian leaders, particularly Malaysia’s, refusal to accept Australia as part of the evolving Asian Community harks on racism. But few have asked why similar efforts from India to join the EAEC were similarly resisted by ASEAN as well? India finally became a member of the East Asia summit in December 2005, perhaps based on the argument that India, being the second most populous nation in the world with one of the fast growing economy, is a potential economic powerhouse.

Indeed, for over 1500 years India’s culture, language and religions have had a tremendous impact on shaping East Asian societies. Many of the South East Asian languages have a Sanskrit base, not to mention Buddhism, which originated in India and spread across the region over 1000 years ago. Also the Chinese Taoist religion has borrowed much from Hinduism, even their gods. In contrast, since European colonisation of Australia 200 years ago, successive governments have tried to shield Australia from Asia – until Asian countries became lucrative markets for Australian goods and services in the 1980s. In this context, are East Asians more racist towards Indians rather than towards Anglo-Saxon Australians? This is a question worth investigating by journalists reporting on Asia.

Commodification of News and the Social Good

Kunda Dixit, former regional director for Asia-Pacific of IPS newsagency observed in his book ‘Dateline Earth: Journalism as if the Planet mattered’:

“Public service role of the media is being usurped by businesses for whom the definition of news is very simple: news has to sell, otherwise it is not news. Fewer and fewer people today control the information we get, and they are setting the agenda for the rest of us – how we should behave, what we should buy, which credit card we must use, what we should wear, what movies we can’t afford to miss, what we should eat, what we must smoke… They are
telling us Saddam Hussein is a crook, free trade is good, it is OK for five percent of the world’s population to consume half its resources” (1997:7).

For some time, both in Asia and Australia, we have mulled over what constitute Asian or Western values in journalism. It is often assumed that Western values are about freedom of expression, plurality of viewpoints and so on, while Asian values are at its best about social harmony, responsibility and, at its worst, self-censorship (if not overt government censorship) in reporting.

It is commonly perceived that Western journalism tradition is about the media acting as the “watchdog” of governments, so that they will serve the people and not abuse their power. While in Asia, the media is supposed to serve the social good of the society – which has often resulted in the media becoming the public relations arm of the government.

The irony is that in the East and West today, the rapid commercialisation of the media has meant that it has become the public relations arm of not necessarily governments, but of big businesses, some of which have the power to influence government economic and foreign policies. As Pande argues, if we are talking about Asian values we need to rely more on our own sources for reporting Asia. During the height of the Asian values debate in the mid-1990s, some Asian leaders argued for certain Asian values, which need to be reflected in reporting. For instance, journalists should not report critically of authority if it leads to social disharmony and instability. But, crony capitalism and corruption scandals, which were laid bare by the 1997 Asian financial crisis, have put these ideas to rest.

Today, there is a push right across Asia by journalists to develop a set of people-centred news values. Some may call it public journalism or civic journalism, which is essentially a reincarnation of development journalism made popular in Asia in the 1960s by journalists like Tarzie Vittachi, who founded the Asian Press Union. But, the concept of development journalism lost its credibility when governments used it to justify its call on local media to restrict its report on the good things that government do rather than “a critical assessment, not a hostile assessment, of development issues” (Vittachi, 1987).

Today, commentators like Red Batario in the Philippines are leading exponents of this brand of journalism. He describes it as:

“Public journalism uses a new agenda in setting the news agenda and covering the news, by offering opportunities for public discussion and debate over what issues should be top priority and how these can be addressed. Its aim is not simply to persuade the public that a problem exists, rather it is to engage the public in a search for solutions”. (Seneviratne, 2004:136)

Gunaratne (1996) sees many similarities between public journalism and development-oriented journalism, such as:

- Careful, timely and sensitive listening to community needs.
- Systematic consultation of the community by means of polls and focus groups.
- Listening more closely to their audience and facilitating dialogue or ‘conversation’ so that everyone talks.
• Continuity of in-depth reporting on issues chosen independently by journalists for their immediate relevance to citizen’s concerns.
• The journalist must be ‘fair-minded’ participant in a community that works.

Is this a recipe for developing the Asian perspectives in news reporting? If you are to listen to the people, use their voices, do in-depth analyses of their concerns and even report about communities that work, would we be practising a form of journalism that reflects an Asia of everyday-living rather than an “imagined” Asia?

Journalism Responding To Value Aspirations

“Journalism in Asia must respond to the surge of value aspirations rising from underdevelopment,” argues de Jesus (1996). “Journalistic communication must be in touch with the pressures for rapid economic development: the desire for labour with dignity, for a better lifestyle for everybody today, and better still for their children.”

Although these comments were made a decade ago, these are issues the media in Asia and journalism in particular are still struggling to come to terms with. Very often, politicians, economists and the commercial global and domestic media are quick to grab economic indicators such as the rising economic growth figures released by the central bank, or the rise in the stock markets, to report that peoples’ aspirations are being catered for without trying to talk to the greater part of the population who are still struggling daily to make ends meet. This was well illustrated in the coverage leading up to the Indian general elections in 2004.

A country often touted as the world’s biggest democracy, and well known for its press freedom, both the local and the international media succumbed to the ruling BJP’s (Bharatiya Janata Party) slogan “India is Shining”. For the media pundits, surely India was “shining” because the economic growth rate and the stock markets were at an unprecedented high. But, come election day, they all had egg on their faces. Even the opposition Congress Party seem to have believed the media hype, and its leader Sonia Gandhi was unprepared to take up the Prime Ministership.

On the other side, the BJP leader Atal Bhari Vajpayee, who expected to continue life the way it was, the day after the election he was shell-shocked. What happened? Because the media forgot that the majority of the Indian voters were in rural areas, or were the marginalised in urban electorates, who are not benefiting from the economic growth rates and the rise of the stock markets. Journalists, in the freest media in Asia forgot that news is about people, not about stock market indicators on computer screen or some figures released by bankers.

People-Centred Journalism and Media Systems

It is one thing to argue that journalists should develop more people-centred journalism skills in order to reflect an Asian perspective in news reporting. But, if that perspective does not fit in well with governments, who aspire to consolidate power, or big business – who also aspire to consolidate power – and both of these
entities own the mainstream media, albeit not necessarily in partnership, what are we going to do?

This brings us to the question of developing alternative media outlets, which organizations like UNESCO and the Soros Open Society Foundation have been active in funding across the region. Yet, these often face the problem of economic viability once the initial funding phase expires. Recently, governments have got nervous about these outlets and are trying to restrict its operations or expansion, such as in Thailand (Glahan, 2005). This perhaps indicates that effective, financially viable alternative media may be a counter balance to the commercialised mainstream local and international media.

How to provide such viable alternative model of journalism is a dilemma for free media activists in Asia, and increasingly in the West. In launching his Current Cable Television project, former US Vice President Al Gore (Fouhy, 2005) said that “we’re about empowering this generation, to engage in the dialogue of democracy and tell the story of what’s going on in their lives in the dominant media of our times”.

The best model for the practice of people-centred television is arguably the public service broadcasting (PSB) model. But, its independence has been threatened in recent years in countries where it was most vibrant, such as in the UK, Australia, Japan and Canada. I will leave you with the thought that culturally-relevant journalism training cannot be practised divorced from the reality of media controls and commercialism in today’s world. While we endeavour to develop a generation of people-centred journalists we must also pay attention to the media systems where they could be gainfully employed. If need be, educational institutions should argue, advocate and, where possible, pressure governments to continue funding PSB systems, and guarantee its independence. This is today a necessity both in the East and the West.

In an ideal PSB model, the public purse will fund the service, while its contents and editorial policy will be independent of government controls. In other words, it will be a commercially viable broadcasting model, where the contents reflect the peoples’ perspective, and preferably produced by journalists who are connected with the issues and concerns at the grassroots. Some may argue this is akin to community broadcasting. Yes, it is. But, the PSB model with open community participation will be economically sustainable.

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