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# Reporting Asia The Asian ‘Way’ - Issues And Constraints

*There is a growing debate in South East Asia regarding Asian perspectives in news reporting. This has been triggered by the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis. Commentators and politicians in the region have claimed that Western media reporting has played a role in undermining their economies. There is a strong feeling that their negative reporting of the region impacted on the loss of investor confidence. There are also counter moves to establish an ‘Asian Media’, where the voices of the Asian people will be heard much louder and clearer. This paper attempts to look at some of the issues underlining these moves and how such an indigenous media could develop and what bottlenecks may lie ahead.*

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“Objectivity is a sense of no view, I don’t think that is possible. I think a completely objective story or a completely objective publication will be a boring one to read. What we try to do is, that, we have in the story, some sort of a subjective viewpoint. We have to be very careful that it roles out of the facts that are reported and not out of some pre-conceptual ideology. I think the key word is accurate and fair rather than objective”, said Urban Lehner – Publisher of the *Asian Wall Street Journal* during a panel discussion about reporting the regional financial crisis on *CNBC Asia* in October 1998.

*CNBC* broadcast the hour-long panel discussion consisting of Asian and Western journalists in response to an article in Malaysia’s *New Straits Times* (NST) a few days earlier, which called for curbs on *CNBC*’s broadcast rights in Malaysia, after it transmitted a taped anti-Mahatir speech by Anwar Ibrahim, and also because of its biased coverage of Malaysia’s capital control measures.

*NST* (Tan, 1998) questioned *CNBC*’s objectivity for reporting in a consistently critical fashion the Malaysian government’s decision to impose capital controls. They pointed out that media organisations like *CNBC* have a vested interest in opposing such measures to control the “free flow of capital” because their survival depended on “going where US money flows”.

“Without a free flow of capital, especially the short-term ‘hot money’ type, the demand for information from this global media network will diminish” *NST* pointed out.” They certainly are not happy that we are taking steps that can threaten the foundation of the global business”.

At the beginning of the *CNBC* (1998) programme, they broadcast an excerpt from an interview with the Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahatir Mohamad in which he said: “Because you own the media, you can tell lies to the world and influence the whole world against us. We are powerless, there’s nothing we could do”.

All the above raises some very interesting questions and dilemmas. Many Asian leaders and even many of their media executives resent the power of the Western media, especially the huge global media conglomerates like *CNBC* and *CNN*, which do have the power to influence the political and social agenda in Asia. On the other hand, lack of financial support for public broadcasting and reluctance of political leaders in many countries of Asia to allow more freedom of expression to the local media, is hindering their capacity to develop an Asian alternative to the Western media.

In this paper, I will revisit the ‘Asian Values’ debate in looking at the issue of how the Asian media could report Asia from an Asian perspective.

Lehner’s (*CNBC*, 1998) comment is an uncharacteristically frank admission from a Western media executive that cultural or even political and social backgrounds of the journalists would have an influence on the way one reports a story. For long, Western journalists have refused to acknowledge that objectivity is subjective. Thus, they have refused to accept criticism of cultural and political bias in their reporting.

Over the past decade, I have often argued this point with Western journalists, especially from the United States, Britain and Australia.

## **Anwar and Erbakan**

Former Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim’s case is a good example. To start with, the Western media, especially the American, British and Australian media, have been hostile to Dr Mahatir for a long time – simply because he has been saying things about them they don’t like to hear. They resent him consistently, pointing out the double standards and hypocrisy of the West. Anwar’s supporters, many of whom have studied in

## **Resentment Against Western Media**

the West, knows it very well and they have made good use of this fact. They knew, that if they provided a taped anti-Mahatir speech by Anwar to *CNBC* it would almost certainly be broadcast.

*CNBC* of course argued (*CNBC Asia* broadcast, 1998) that, it had great news value, having arrived on the day Anwar was arrested. But, would they have broadcasted a similar taped speech from the deposed Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan of the Islamist Welfare Party?

About a year before Anwar's arrest, Erbakan, a democratically elected Prime Minister was overthrown, when he was forced to resign under pressure from the Turkish army. His party – Turkey's largest political party – which won the general elections about a year earlier, was banned by the courts. Erbakan was stripped of his parliamentary seat and his civic rights, such as standing for elected office.

*CNBC* and the other Western media conglomerates did not give the same type of coverage to this story, as they did for Anwar's overthrow. Obviously, the spread of Islamic fundamentalism, which Erbakan and his party represent on the doorsteps of Europe, is a threat to economic globalisation, without which global media companies like *CNBC* will not prosper. This is the point *NST* was also making.

## Is There An 'Asian Media'?

Is there any chance that an 'Asian Media' with a different point of view to that of the Western media develop in Asia? At the moment, there are a number of attempts made across Asia in this direction.

One such example is Singapore's *Channel News Asia* (*CNA*). "These days, we talk about the 'Western Media' as if there are other media players around. After all there is no 'Asian Media' that we can refer to" said *CNA*'s vice president Woon Tai Ho in an interview given at the time of its launch in 1999.

"For a long time now, they did not exist simply because news and journalism as we know them today, were defined and came from the West. One of the pillars of Western democracy is to establish a 'watchdog' for the government. Today, that 'watchdog' is a 'bulldog' for anyone and anything that is influential", he added.

Ho (1999) argues that the rapid spread of the Western broadcast media in the Asian region has given rise to a situation where Asian governments now have to face up to the scrutiny of the media, not from within, but outside. They are answering and defending their policies, not to their own media, but to outsiders.

He believes that to change this situation it will take some time. Over a period of time, the Asian media will be able to

establish its own credibility to be a powerful voice for the region. “The time could be considerably shortened” he argues, “if and when the Western media would leave room for different style and attitude towards the treatment of news”.

Many in the West would argue that Asia’s own political leaders, who do not believe in freedom of expression, are undermining the credibility of the Asian media. However, as someone who has worked both in the West and Asia, I would argue it is not completely true.

In my arguments with Western journalists in recent years, many have argued that one is anti-Western, if you do not follow their standards and perspectives in news reporting – which comes from the liberal democratic principles of the West.

Unfortunately, this liberal democratic principles itself seems far from being liberal in its application to media practices. I have consistently argued that this “liberal” western media only pay attention to what they say and have ignored the other media. Thus, they have grown up to believe there is only one truth, and anything else is blasphemy.

As Denis McQuail (2000) argue, “it is hard to ignore the fact that most media theorizing has been done by ‘Westren’ scholars, living in and observing the media of their own countries and inevitably influenced by their own familiar social cultural context and its typical values”.

He argues, that it is time to rewrite some of the media function theories, taking into account not only the liberal democratic principles of the West, but also communication traditions of the East.

“The philosophical traditions of India and the communication values of China and Japan, with their stress on harmony, solidarity and emphathy are reminders of alternative prescriptions for judging media performance and guiding media practices,” observes McQuail.

Some of the examples in this paper reflect this view, where individual human rights which comes out of the Western liberal democratic tradition is given more emphasis by the Western media to communal rights and social harmony aspects of a society.

## **Reporting human rights is more than being a watchdog of the Government**

For most Western reporters covering Asia, human rights is about freedom of expression, democratic elections, gender discrimination or child labour. Efforts by Asian countries to protect social and national harmony, solidarity and empathy are not

interpreted as protection of human rights.

Thus when agents of Western capitalism pose a threat to these, it is not seen as a violation of human rights. What about the role played by Western-based Hedge Funds, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in marginalising the poor even further in Asian societies in the last three years or so?

The Asian financial crisis of 1997 exposed a major shortcoming in the Western media's claim to be a 'watchdog' (Seneviratne, 1998). While they used their investigative skills to report on government corruption, lack of transparency and crony capitalism in Asia, they did not investigate with the same intensity another major player in the same episode – the Western hedge funds- such as those run by the infamous George Soros. They did not apply their own liberal democratic principles to ask questions from them about the lack of transparency in the way these hedge funds are run, where the money is coming from and the lack of democracy within these organisations.

Meanwhile, during the last decade, IMF policies have forced governments in Asia such as in Sri Lanka, Thailand and Indonesia to cut public spending, which has resulted in the poor becoming worse off. They have lost access to government subsidised food rations, schooling, health care, cooking fuel, fertiliser, housing and transport services.

### **Are these not basic human rights and if so, should not IMF be held accountable for these human rights violations?**

WTO's evangelical zeal in opening up markets for Western multinational companies in Asia, has become another serious threat to human rights in Asia. These policies have begun to threaten the very survival of many communities around Asia, especially rural farmers. There is very little reporting about these issues in the regional magazines and news programmes distributed in Asia by Western media organisations. These are stories, which should be headline news, not hidden in the inside pages or at the end of a news programme.

Let me take a couple of examples from 'Asiaweek' which is published from Hong Kong, but Western-owned. Their cover story in January 1998 at the peak of the crisis focused on Indonesia and the IMF. While rightly pointing out the widespread corruption and nepotism which has developed under Suharto's rule in Indonesia as the cause of the crisis there, the IMF was depicted as the possible saviour of the region.

Six months later, 'Asiaweek' did another cover feature on the crisis, this time they did point out the social costs of the crisis and carried some quotes from critics of the IMF. Yet, they fought shy of doing a good investigative feature on the question of whether IMF itself is contributing to the increasing deprivation of basic human rights to millions of people across the region.

In November 1999, 'Asiaweek' did an in-depth interview with the retiring IMF chief, Michel Camdessus, yet again, they were too shy to ask him whether IMF was contributing to human rights violations in the region. I'm not talking about freedom of speech here, but basic human rights such as food, shelter and healthcare - perhaps, it did not come to their mind, as that did not fit into the Western media's usual definition of human rights.

The problem with the Western media is that they are experts at reporting events, such as riots or censorship of the media by government decree, but they seem to have no clue on how to make process reporting interesting and absorbing. This is where the Asian media must come in and develop a new style of journalism. I would not call it development journalism, because this word has been stigmatised over the years.

Let it evolve and then we will name it later. Perhaps, we may then call it "Responsible Journalism" or "People-Oriented Journalism".

As Filipino journalist and social commentator, Dr Welden Bello (cited Ramanathan, 2000) observes, when business reporting proliferated in the Asian region beginning in the mid-1980s, Western multinational companies bought up regional English language media. *Dow Jones* purchased *Far Eastern Economic Review*; *Time-Warner* (who also owns *CNN* now) bought up 'Asiaweek' and Rupert Murdoch's *News Corp* purchased Hong Kong based *Star-TV*. *Dow Jones* also started the *Asian Wall Street Journal* and partly owns *CNBC Asia*.

"These news agencies became critical interpreters of the news in Asia to investors located all over the world and served as a vital supplement to the electronic linkages that made real-time transactions possible among key stock exchanges" states Dr Bello.

With just one gospel truth (market economics) as its guide, it was an easy job to do and as Dr Bello notes "parachute journalism" became a common practice in economic journalism in the 1990s. "Hence, economic journalism degenerated into just stringing along quotes, from different investment authorities. Not only that, these journalists and experts who were once prophets of permanent boom quickly transformed themselves into prophets of doom after the financial collapse of 1997" he notes.

Ramanathan (2000) points out that the key point to note about these regional media is that they are tied into the interests

## The Same Old Story?

of multinational media companies, which are now very influential in the Asian region.

All these companies have a stake in making people of Asia accept globalisation, by pointing out to them, that this is the only way to economic prosperity. But, what happens when they have to switch from economic reporting to political reporting? The same news values which have guided the Western media in reporting the developing countries for the last 40 years continues – nothing much has changed since the acrimonious New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) debates of the late 1960s and 1970s.

A typical example of how these news values, which were criticised during the NWICO debates, still exists. For the last two years, the Western media has been reporting almost on a daily basis, so called ethnic or religious clashes in Indonesia. During this period I have visited Indonesia many times on reporting assignments, especially to Java, Bali and Riau Islands and never witnessed a riot. Of course, I have not been to the Maluku Island, Aceh or East Timor. But, the point is, why tar the whole country with one brush, when most of Indonesia has been largely peaceful most of the time during this same period?

At the same time, Indonesia is a fascinating story of how a large and ethnically diverse country has been transforming from a dictatorship to a thriving democracy in such a short space of time. Due to Western media's pre-occupation with ethnic and religious clashes, Indonesian people have not got the due credit for this monumental accomplishment.

For example, in February this year, the Indonesian parliament passed a motion of censure (which could lead to impeachment) on President Abdurrahman Wahid, something unthinkable during the Suharto era. Instead of hailing this as a great landmark in Indonesia's evolution towards a liberal democratic system, the reporting by the Western media focused on gloom and doom.

*Reuters* (Ali, 2001) newsagency story was titled "Indonesia's Wahid refuses to quit despite censure" and in the *'The Australian'* (Sheridan, 2001) the heading said "Knives are out for wily old Wahid". But, Malaysia's *'New Straits Times'* (2001) headed its story as "Call for compromise" and Japan's *Kyodo News* (2001) titled the story as "Wahid says still has Indonesians' support".

It is interesting to note that the heading in both the western news sources indicated conflict while the two Asian publications hinted at compromise.



## Where is the “watchdog” when people rise against global capitalists?

In Thailand, there has been a growing people’s movement over the last three years opposing IMF and World Bank policies in the country. When this movement known as the ‘Assembly of the Poor’, mounted protest action such as during the UNCTAD meeting in Bangkok and the Asian Development Bank meeting in Chiang Mai last year, they got covered, very often with headlines such as “mobs riot in....”.

If you bother to go behind these frontlines and speak to the people one would find some very interesting stories. You will learn how the World Bank and IMF are trying to get the Thai government to charge farmers to pay for the water, which they have been getting for free for generations. The poor will also tell you that they are not poor because they don’t want to work, it is because they have been forced out from their lands, very often to make room for foreign investors, as part of IMF’s economic liberalisation policies.

In a report filed from Chiang Mai during the ABD meeting, *Inter Press Service* newsagency’s Amrit Gill (2001) spoke to many of the demonstrators who expressed these views. Thus her report was titled “ADB chants new mantra at annual meeting” and reflected a very skeptical view of ADB’s claim to having changed its priorities towards funding poverty reduction programmes now.

Meanwhile the *Associated Press* (2001) report from Chiang Mai focused on the demonstrators with the heading ‘Thousands protest at ADB meeting venue’. Singapore’s *‘Straits Times’* (Tang, 2001) also took the cue from these western wire services and headed their story “Mob overshadows ADB meeting”, even though it was filed by its own correspondent in Thailand.

It is not true to say that investigative reporting about the excesses of global capitalism in Asia, often working in collaboration with local governments and their elites, are not newsworthy and it will not sell.

For instance, in 1994, I read a two-paragraph story in an Australian newspaper about 11 rice farmers committing suicide in Sri Lanka. For the newspaper, it was just another story from the Third World about some crazy, strange people killing themselves because they have nothing better to do.

But, I knew that farmers in Sri Lanka have been badly hit by the IMF’s economic reform package the Sri Lankan government has been forced to sign a few years earlier in order to get a loan. Thus, when I visited my birthplace a few months later, I offered to write a story about this for the *Inter Press Service* (IPS) news agency for which I was working from Sydney at the time.

After spending 3 days with the rice farmers around the same area where the suicides occurred, I found out that the IMF package has taken away most government subsidies and services to the farmers. They have lost access to government storage and purchasing centres in the region, which have been closed. Fertiliser subsidies have been taken away and they have also lost access to cheap government credit. Thus, the farmers have been forced into the clutches of local moneylenders. They are Mafia type operators, who have been exploiting the farmers no end. They lend the money, sell the seeds and buy back the produce. They control the farmers' lives, and the farmers have nowhere to go for help. It is this hopelessness that has forced them into committing suicide.

The story was moved by IPS under the heading 'Now it's a suicidal farm policy in Sri Lanka' (1995) and I received over 20 clippings of that story published by newspapers around Asia.

Rice is not only Asia's staple food, rice farming plays a major role in the cultural life of Asians. Today, there is a concerted attack by forces of globalisation, such as the IMF and the WTO, to undermine this sector. On one hand Western agribusiness want to control rice farming in Asia. On the other hand Western countries such as the United States and Australia, wants markets for their produce.

The plight of Asia's rice farmers under this concerted attack from the West is going to be a major news story in Asia in the next few years. Not only about the market opening measures the WTO is forcing on governments, but also the impact WTO's Trade Related aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) regime is going to have on the survival of the rural rice farmer in Asia.

It is thus, very important that the Asian media report it through the farmer's voice as a human rights issue to the rest of the world. But, will they do it?

## Investing In Investigative Reporting

"Investigative reporting is a risky business" notes Sheila Coronel (2000), executive director of the Philippines Centre for Investigative Journalism. "It threatens to upset the cosy relationship between media owners and their friends among the upper-crust of business and politics. In addition, press proprietors are wary that investigating such issues as corporate irresponsibility might turn off advertisers".

She argues that the advent of democracy and a "free press" in the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia in recent years has not given rise to an increase in investigative reporting, especially when it comes to reporting business activity. In many cases, in order to sell their product, media proprietors compete with their rivals by offering sex, sleaze and sensation, instead of in-depth reports.

Good example is the so called “euphoria press” which has developed in Indonesia since the overthrow of President Suharto in 1998. Some of the very people who have been clamoring for a free press during Suharto’s time are now asking the government to clamp down on the sexual sleaze published by many of the newcomers (Asmarani, 2000).

One may argue that the Philippines media played a major role in exposing the misdeeds of President Estrada and forced him out of office. But, if these misdeeds did not include sexual scandals, would it have made much of an impact?

Just before the onslaught of the Asian financial crisis there was a lively debate in South East Asia about Asian Values in journalism. Many Asian journalists themselves were skeptical about it, fearing that this was being used by certain leaders in the region to gag the free-wheeling media which was evolving in the region, especially in the Philippines and Thailand.

As Suthichai Yoon, publisher of *The Nation* in Thailand observed during a seminar on this topic in Hong Kong in 1996, the governments used the communist threat during the Cold War to ask the media not to publish certain stories, now it is Asian Values. He argues that the underlined problem here is that, Asians themselves have a very low opinion of their own media.

“A bad story published in Thailand may be called an Asian story, which is a big insult for Asian journalists” complained Suthichai (1996), adding, “a good, strong, in depth investigative report is usually seen as Western style of journalism”.

“This is a major insult for the level of competence of journalists in Asia” he noted.

Today, the ‘Asian Values’ debate has somewhat waned, but there is a growing discussion in media and academic circles in the region about Asian perspectives in news reporting.

I have touched on some aspects of this in this paper and since it is an ongoing debate, and a very necessary one at that, I will leave you with a quote from an Asian journalist, which may give some food for thought.

“We have tolerated the onslaught of foreign influences from colonial times. Now it is time to become tolerant of our own people and their views,” says Owais Aslam Ali (1996), director of the *Pakistan Press Foundation*.

“It is time to let our own people write and broadcast what they want, to give them the freedom to compete with our Western counterparts on a level playing field. The views that emerge from a free expression of creative talent by Asian journalists will inevitably be Asian in character,” he argues.

## Asian Values Or Asian Perspectives?

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