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# The Age Of Asian-Centered Media Perspective And Dawn Of The Vocal Village

*The Asian-centered media perspective is a discourse of empowerment that reaffirms the necessity for Asians to talk to other Asians, regardless of the designs of the dominant Western media. Within the dynamics of empowerment, Asia's media environment will transform, and in time, move beyond Marshall McLuhan's notion of a global to a vocal village. The vocal village, this article asserts, embodies Asia's brand and blend of political, social, economic and cultural concerns, free from the intimidations and biases of the West.*

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Pride throws people together. So does fear. But unlike pride which strengthens, fear constantly undermines the evolving solidarity. Historically, Asian unity has been built on fear rather than pride. There was the fear of ideology (communism), the fear of religious fundamentalism, the fear of military insurgency, the fear of economic backwardness, the fear of cultural dominance, the fear of authority, the fear of neighboring countries' expansionary designs - the list goes on.

A major reason for the perpetuation of this mentality of fear has much to do with Asia's failure to recognise the strengths of the region's diversity. Buying into the dominant Eurocentric slogan of "imitate the West, the best of all possible worlds", Asian nations develop a sense of backwardness, if not inferiority, in striving to catch up with the Western world (Amin, 1989). This inferiority complex persists today as many Asians continue to display a colonial mindset that bestows much admiration and adoration for all things Western.

Even though the global balance of power has changed considerably with the end of the Cold War as the systematic forces governing the world remains largely the same (Chromsky, 1991, 1989). The vehicle that has been instrumental in ensuring the status quo is the international media which are still very much

controlled solely by Western media moguls.

With the proliferation of foreign, especially Western, media into the Asian societies, the ideological bombardments will only intensify. Politically, the Western media stand accused of disguising their very biased agenda as having an international appeal and universal acceptance by all communities in the world<sup>1</sup>. This insistence on judging Asian societies on foreign cultural values and political standards have pitted Asian leaders against the Western media.

The presence of a more intrusive global media has lead some Asian leaders to describe the role of the Western media as "...a political project on a global scale; a project of homogenization through imitation and catching up aimed at keeping those in the periphery where they are" (Arrighi, 1991). As noted by Singapore's Senior Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, in explaining why America will have a hard time adjusting to Asia's rise: "The sense of cultural supremacy of the Americans will make this adjustment most difficult. Americans believe their ideas are universal - the supremacy of the individual and free, unfettered expressions. But they are not. Never were." (Straits Times, October 6, 1995)

For other critics, the distrust of the global media is seen "as a construction that draws on and feeds into the new posture of Asia in the post-colonial world which actively creates the West as an enemy of the State" (Yao, 1993). Whatever the explanations, the suspicions remain as "Asia has joined the global village" (Menon, 1994:39).

However, in today's global economy where the developed world is becoming more and more dependent on the Asian countries (van Putten, 1994:1), it is counter-productive to dwell on ideological leanings of the Western media. Instead, Asian nations work towards become more assertive in establishing their presence in the global polity and avoid the "...roles assigned to them in a play scripted in the historical centers of power" (Yeap, 1994:66). What is proposed is a need for Asian governments to anchor the strategies and policies of their media industries on a theoretical framework that is more representative of their thinking and interests. The proposed theoretical approach is the Asian-centered media perspective (Yeap, 1994:63-72).

The Asian-centered media perspective is not rooted in hegemonic intentions as it is neither anti-West nor is it imperialistic (to replace or dominate the West). Rather, it allows the political space occupied by the Western media within the Asian polity and

## Theoretical Concerns

accepts the discursive nature of their rhetoric. While not denying the existing ideological divide between the two worlds, the Asian-centered perspective avoids confrontation in that it does not see one view as a threat to, or a replacement for, the other.

The Asian-centered media perspective represents a discourse of empowerment aimed at facilitating an "Asian reading" of international events for the Asian audience following the shifts in centers of power. It reaffirms the necessity for Asians to talk to other Asians regardless of the designs of the Western media.

In contrast to the more popularly championed "Asian way" <sup>2</sup> the Asian-centered media perspective is believed to be more representative in nature as it recognizes the diversity and heterogeneity of the region and reflects the paradox of multiple centers rather than that of a single center of Asianness and a monolithic Asian culture.

It is indeed a discourse that is free from culturalist distortions of any kind. For instance, while the focus and emphasis by Malaysia and Singapore in Asianising the media perspective may differ in content, the end-product cannot be worlds apart as there exists certain positive "Asian" commonness between the two countries with regards to institutions of power, religion and culture.

Other factors of "Asian" commonness central to this perspective include the sense of duty over rights, the need for accommodation over open confrontation, the belief in that the government is good rather than evil, a pragmatic versus an idealistic expectations of power dynamics, and the acceptance of hierarchy over equality in their understanding of the controlled relationships. While these factors are by no means static, as they are influenced and shaped by the internal and external forces of any societal change, their form remains relatively constant within the confines of the cultural settings in the Asian region.

The Asian-centered media perspective differs greatly from the tenets of the "Asian way" as the latter gives the perception of the region and its institutions as a homogeneous whole. This line of thinking merely perpetuates the antagonistic East versus West mindset as it establishes a series of oppositions - truth and distortion, tradition and modernity, authority and freedom and so on. These oppositions are divisive and unproductive as it promotes a zero-sum mentality - acceptance of Western modernity equates to rejection Asian traditionalism. This "us versus them" thinking, advocated by some Asian leaders who are more critical of the Western media, is best summed up by the remark, "What

he does to me, I do to him".<sup>3</sup>

By avoiding this dualism of oppositions, this perspective moves the Asian subject away from the discourse of being a victim of Westernisation - what the dominant West does to the dominated East. Dropping all pretense that all cultures are equal, and accepting the reality that the West will do what it wants regardless of the East, the Asian media must move beyond locating the sources of their woes in the West and redefine the region's representation in the world by providing an alternative reading.

This process of redefinition will empower Asians to become responsible for their own image to their own people and the international audience. As pointed by Singapore's Minister of Information and the Arts, BG Yeo, the time has come for Asian nations to "go on the offense...in promoting our own values and way of life" (Straits Times, 20 December 1993).

The Asian media have a key role to play in providing this alternative reading if the present dominant world view, peddled by the global media, is to be kept in check. As urged by a Singapore journalist who wants a larger online presence of Asian news sources as he warns that "Western media influence...goes beyond mere formats to the setting of agendas and the spreading of values. These assume a greater significance in the digital sphere as news from anywhere can be called up at the click of a button" (Straits Times, September 27, 1993).

Emerging from the Asian-centered media perspective is the dialectics of the Asian media coming to voice. This Asian voice is determined by the countries and their respective encounters and interactions with the West and modernity. This struggle to come to voice can be traced to what political scientists refer to as the "culture of silence". For many years, trapped within this culture of silence, the Asian media lacked the confidence as well as the will and resources to express their alternative viewpoints to challenge the existing dominant and hegemonic Western monologue and its version of global realities.

As a new political game develops on the Asian horizon, the universalism of meta-narratives, which sustained the moral, economic and cultural integrity of the West, comes into doubt. To many Asian nations, the time has come for the global realities to "...be generated from the periphery, and that the culture of non-dominant groups should be regarded as rich a driving force for the pedagogy as that of the dominant groups". With Asia transforming rapidly into tomorrow's economic powerhouse, this new-found voice will empower the regional media institutions to insist and attain their due representation in defining the images

**Arrival Of  
The "Vocal  
Village"  
In Asia**

and realities made available to their own populace.

It is within the dynamics of empowerment that Asia's media environment will develop and in time, move beyond Marshall McLuhan's concept of a global village: more interestingly, what emerges could be described as a "vocal village" that embodies Asia's brand and blend of political, social, economic and cultural concerns, free from the intimidations and bias of the West.

No doubt the global village is a widely accepted prophecy but it offers mixed messages. It sounds like a relatively value-neutral descriptor of a supranational universe of media interconnectivity. However, on closer examination, it reveals extensive casual assumptions, normative intentions and value judgments.

The concept of the global village can be questioned at several levels. For some sectors of the business, they have express doubts concerning its substance while some Asian leaders, in seeing it as essentially "Westernisation", have attempted to curb it through the use of tight regulations (see Osborne, 1995:7-10). Among the developed countries too, the global village has been equated to the formation of "little Americas" and many have also responded through attempts at regulation. For media scholars, the global village has been interpreted as a device to further the commercialization of individual cultures around the world (Schiller, 1989) while others pointed to its absence of both historical perspective and a sense geographical place following the shift in global politics.

One of the most powerful argument challenging the relevance of the global village is linked to the analysis by Majorie Ferguson (1992) on globalization's underpinning assumptions and the myths associated to it. Ferguson asserted that understanding the concept is problematic as globalization's meaning varies according to the source being used, the evidence for its actual existence is largely economic, and the evaluation of the evidence tends to ignore a variety of other value-based considerations. The globalisation myths she identifies which have implications for this discussion on global village include big is better, more is better, global cultural homogeneity, democracy for export via American TV and the new world order (1992:75-88).

Ferguson pointed out that, for instance, on the impact of global television coverage of events, it can be argued that "despite this more visible world of the distant other and a more interconnected world political and cultural economy, we cannot infer from this an homogenized global metaculture. To do so would be to ignore the historical role of stratification systems based

on caste, class or party, on ethnic cultures defended by bloodshed or kinship traditions linked to religious proscriptions stronger than any claims that might be made for the reductionist power of global media" (1992:72).

As such, using the term "vocal village" would seem to be more representative of the recent power shifts in the region and the developments in the Asian media environment. More importantly, the vocal village avoids the trappings of the global village metaphor. Applying the vocal village logic to the understanding of providing an "Asian reading of Asia", it asserts that Asia's media industries must develop a new posture. This new posture should be based, as argued earlier, not on the dominant discourse of center-periphery power relations, but rather on the construction of an Asian-centered media perspective following a relocation of authority to the periphery.

This posture is also one of engagement, of building a dialogue to give the audience an Asian reading of Asia. Their Western counterpart should not see it as an attempt of hegemony. Some have done so and as such, they are not reacting constructively to these changes by seeking saviours among forces of the past and fervently attacking the new Asian posture with unfair criticisms.

To discourage the animosity from the Western media, the application of the "vocal village" in the discourse of the Asian-centered media perspective must be based on non-antagonistic and more competitive strategies. This is in contrast to the previous "draconian" strategies of rejecting the long established and powerful Western-owned global machinery, banning their publications or air-time, or throwing their representatives out of the country. The new strategies, counter-hegemonic in nature, should enable the variety of media institutions in their host countries "...to increase the production of their own output of news, comments, interpretation, amplification and explanation" of Asia (Yeap, 1993:2).

Within the dynamics of the "vocal village", the Asian audience knows that there are available to them alternative versions of realities other than that of the dominant West. This new role of the Asian media is fitting as the region prepares for its march into the 21st century, confronted with new forms of culture-based politics and the secular state, one which is global in scope, binary in its opposition, occasionally violent, and essentially a difference of ideologies. Faced with new challenges, the Asian

**Psychology Of  
Confidence:  
Common  
Meanings**

media must be capable of producing their own meanings, be heard by their own audience, and talk back when faced with developments which they find objectionable. <sup>4</sup>

A rallying point for this perspective must start with Asians learning to see their world with common meanings. As defined by Taylor (1985), when describing the formation of an international society, common meanings refer to " ... notions of what is significant, which are not just shared in the sense that everyone has them, but are also common in the sense of being in the common reference world ... common meanings are the basis of community". (1985:38-39).

The basis for attaining common meanings starts with having a common consciousness. If nurtured, it leads to solidarity, based not on fear but pride, thus giving rise to a strong Asia. Based on the "commonness" of thinking shared by media institutions in this region, there are also indications that a common consciousness is re-emerging in the region, in particular, among the East Asian countries.

In the political realm, there exists a common perception on tricky issues of democracy, human rights and environment which are vigorously pushed by the West. While Asian leaders are not denying the importance of these value-laden concepts in their societies, they also do not want to blindly subscribe to the definitions and standards of foreign cultures. Many Asian governments are seriously working towards redefining a more appropriate understanding and appreciation of these concepts in their polity.

There is also a common belief that the region is coming under siege in both the economic domain as seen in the threats of protectionism and strengthening of trade blocs in the West. But given the rise of economic, political and cultural confidence among Asian countries, there is a natural common desire to play a bigger and equal role on the world stage despite the continued vulnerability and comparative powerlessness to the West.

This growing sum of the confidence, which sometimes becomes perceived as indefensible arrogance, is very much at the root of the growing consciousness and assertiveness of Asians on the global plane. This psychology of pride and confidence reinforces the thinking that Asians can move towards having a common voice, not only to address highly controversial issues imposed by the West, but also to facilitate dialogue among themselves in resolving regional problems.

This talk for a common voice among Asian nations is not a new one. Skepticism surrounds the relevance of this initiative.

This is to be expected as in the past there have been similar efforts which amounted to merely grand theories rather than pragmatic propositions. Why should it be any different now?

In the 60s and 70s, Asian leaders have the political will but lack the economic resources to make the difference between talk and action. Many of the Asian nations had just emerged from political independence and were economically weak. Distrust was rife and there was a lack of common commitment to the region as many nations were sold on the *eldorado* promised by their colonial masters.

Times have certainly changed. Economic interdependence and integration among Asian economies have lead Asian governments to come to agreement on many previously thorny and divisive issues. The political and social barriers, which have been at the lowest points in half a century, are being dismantled daily as Asian leaders are beginning to see the world eye to eye.

Coupled with the trend that Asia is fast becoming one of the world's fastest growing economies, and given its economic weight, regional self-confidence and pride, and the perception that its welfare is so dependent on the development of world affairs, it is perhaps only natural to expect Asians to seek greater empowerment. The region's media is central to the attainment of this need for empowerment as it can make or break the region's move towards a modern and strong Asia. Only by seeing the world through Asia's own cultural lenses can the region's quest for a more vocal presence in the global media environment be attained.

As Asian governments intensify their efforts to set up networks of alternative media sources, coloured with an Asian flavor, some Asian leaders have predicted that in the next 25 years, the region's media will be able to wrestle control of the news from the West (Straits Times, Feb 3 and 6, 1993). This prediction is based on the premise that in the next 25 years, the combined gross national product of East Asian alone would be larger than all of Europe's and twice that of the United States'. That is not including the rest of the Asian nations that are already heading towards economic growth.

This development will certainly transform all cultures in the world and radically change the way Asians look at themselves. It is inevitable that the Western domination of the global media will be contested. The regional news services currently pursued by several Asian media corporations, for instance, can be considered as a good business strategy as the mass media, after

## Pragmatic Measures

all, is also a profit-motivated driven industry. The argument here is that business sense of the industry will facilitate the political aspirations of Asians in challenging the Western media's hold on global news.

This logic holds so long as free enterprise in the mass media market place is allowed to operate without much interference. By providing the Asian audience with quality news sources from an Asian perspective, it is only a matter of time before the dependence on the Western media declines. Unfortunately for governments, the ideological divide is not so clear in the mass media as it is cursed with a power that transcends good business sense. News, Asian perspective or otherwise, is not free of ideology.

This premise applies not only in relation to the Western media's domination of the global news but also among Asian nations themselves seeking to lead in dissemination of information in the region. As such, if the aim in challenging the West's hold on news is to provide Asians with a new paradigm other than the Eurocentric model, then the efforts cannot be seen as solely an initiative by any one Asian nation for the matter.

No doubt one or two Asian media corporations could be poised to play a lead role as they have the resources to provide the initial impetus. But if the efforts of giving Asia a louder voice is to succeed, it must have a wider involvement from the other countries. This explains why tackling the problem of news imperialism cannot be solely a business decision. More important, but less obvious, is the political dynamics involved in the conceptualization of an Asiancentric ideological foundation in contrast to that of the West<sup>6</sup>. Without such a dominant ideology for the region, any efforts, no matter how financially sound and justified, will not go very far.

To facilitate meeting Asia's hunger for information, there is a need to shift towards deregulating the present media environments. Deregulation, however, must not be taken to mean delegislation. (Yeap, September 25, 1993). The process of deregulation is to ensure that the Asian media companies are able to compete much easier with foreign companies entering the local marketplace. Laws must continue to exist to ensure that ethical standards and accountability on the part of the information disseminators are not compromised.

However, with the impact of the development of new media technologies such as the Internet, media legislations should be revised. Short of repealing the existing tough media laws in several Asian countries, government should reassess their applicability

and impact. For Asian governments, the laws represent a necessary evil. Its blanket definition of what constitutes internal security should be modified to be more specific and its imposition limited to only serious breach of state security. Revising the laws would ensure that there are no double standards for journalists when reporting on their own country and about other countries.

Media enterprises in Asian capitals should also start to expand their services beyond the boundaries of their countries. By providing healthy competition among the various media services, the quality of news coverage and presentation could only get better. The integration and cooperation of media resources in print and broadcast would further strengthen the regional ties between countries.

Singapore's newspapers have taken the head by going regional and online as seen in more pages on Asian affairs covered by their correspondents based in the capitals. The country's broadcast industry is also slowly sending their crew to other Asian countries to produce news, documentaries and travel programmes (Yeap, 1994:67).

With the arrival of the Internet and the availability of the World Wide Web to Asian users, governments must work towards wiring up their country onto the information superhighway. Incentives must be given to facilitate the setting up of Internet providers in the countries so that the cost of information is gradually reduced and made affordable by all sectors of the public. Enabling Asians to put their "voice" on the World Wide Web serves as an important channel to ensure that no one point of view dominates.

As governments, both East and West, are tackling the issue of censorship on the Internet, it must be realised that any attempt to limit access to users is self-defeating in a world where the medium is truly becoming the message. Rather than trying to legitimise the need for censorship on the Internet by governments (see Ang and Nadrajan, 1996:72-78), it is more constructive to establish an effective ethical standards acceptable to the Internet community. Censorship, however justifiable, will have serious consequences on the people's ability to make informed decisions.

As the media corporations develop their financial bases, it is a matter of time before they divorce their operations from government ownership. The privatization of media corporations is a first step towards removing the stigma that Asian media is part of the government's propaganda machinery. Media and information policies - political, economic and technical - which are stumbling blocks to a freer flow of information between

countries should be reviewed and revised. By doing so, the Asian audience will have a wide access to alternative sources of news.

An international news agency - for print and broadcast - wholly-owned and managed by Asians, could be set up to provide financial as well as general news services with an Asian perspective for the global audience. National news agencies should be encouraged to subscribe to the Asian news wire service.

A final recommendation is the education of the Asian public in understanding and appreciating the complexity of the mass media. Local universities must be able to provide an Asian focus in their curriculum if the next generation of media practitioners and their publics are to break-away from the historically dominant ideology. It is important that Asians eventually learn not to judge their own media with a Western-based yardstick when they themselves are not ready to handle and be responsible for the liberties they believe leads to an "open society".

## Conclusion

Influencing public opinion reigns crucial to any emerging economies. As there is no way Asia is able to shut itself from the impact of the Western media especially with the presence of technologies such as satellite dish and cable TV, the governments must learn to accommodate the unwarranted intrusions.

Instead of being engrossed in the tit-for-tat verbal attacks at the Western media, it is better to win the support and belief of the Asian community by ensuring the availability of better Asian-based media services. Only then can the region remain undivided, rich, and free of its past addiction to the allure of the West.

The formation of the regional media institutions, rooted in the Asian-centered media perspective, will enable Asians to have a louder voice and ensure that the region has a fairer representation in shaping the news reality for their own people and the rest of the world.

This perspective is empowering and it serves as the common ideological backbone for the "Asian reading" of world events. Coupled with the financial gains from the operation of the media services, the Asian countries today are asserting their presence in the global polity by becoming more visual and vocal as they engage the West in a dialogue, rather than a clash, of civilisations.

## Notes

1. Asian leaders totally dispute the claims of universality in Western values as it supports the view of cultural supremacy. Singapore's strongman, Lee Kuan Yew, commenting on the displacement of America in the Western Pacific, argued that the Americans have a hard time emotionally accepting this development 'by Asian people long despised and dismissed with contempt as decadent, feeble, corrupt and inept'. He added that it is this sense of cultural supremacy that the American media attacks a small country like Singapore as "we have not complied with their ideas of how we should govern ourselves. But we can ill afford to let others experiment with our lives in this small island" (Straits Times, October 6, 1995).
2. According to van Putten (1995.1), Asia's most outspoken advocate of the "Asian way" is Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew. She equates Lee's "Asian way" as authoritarianism and stated that Malaysia and China share Lee's political rhetoric where "free markets are fine but not free speech and multi-party politics".
3. This remark was made by Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad when he was addressing the United Nations in 1994, regarding his summoning of media magnate, Rupert Murdoch, for a personal briefing in New York.
4. In their attempts to talk back to the West, which may be unsettling to former colonials, many Asian leaders have ended up with bad press and misrepresentations of their governments in the international media coverage. Several more vocal leaders have been labeled as "enemies of democracy" and in one case, "a recalcitrant". All the name calling merely aggravates rather than mend the old ideological wounds between the two worlds. In fact, attempts to "put down" Asian leaders echoes the Orwellian conclusion where a few powerful Western media elites in one country or more dominates the interpretation of reality and images for the rest of the world
5. Taylor's concept of common meanings is more appropriate for the understanding of an Asian community as it takes into consideration the fragmentation, diversity and pluralism of social identity that exists in heterogeneous Asia. This is in contrast to works by historians like Hedley Bull, Martin Wright and Adam Watson, whose international society proposals are defined by a set of intersubjective rules and institutions in a unified world order recognised by a system of states
6. The intimate relationship between the media, economy and politics is summed up for the Europeans by Karen Siune and Wolfgang Truetzschler (1992:14). "The media tycoons are very much part of the entrepreneurial class and pursue the specific logic of the industrial establishment. But the peculiar nature of the commodity they trade in, communication, singles them out as 'political actors. All of them, in their home countries as well as on the international stage, inevitably establish close ties with law-makers and politicians. They make deals,

and engage in tugs of power with them, and it is from them that they receive the green light to pursue their interests. So there is a one-to-one relationship between economic and political power for the control of the resource of communication: the tycoons flatter the politicians and the political circles favor the tycoons. The results are the weakening of the public media".

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