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# Constraints On Reporting Australia's Asian Neighbours

*Indonesia's political landscape after Soeharto, Malaysia after Mahathir and Singapore after Lee Kuan Yew will raise whole new sets of political sensitivities which could challenge and even threaten the positions and perspectives of Australian journalists trying to report the region. As this article points out, it is because of the inevitability of fundamental political changes in the region that Australia needs its own journalists in Asia, viewing regional developments from an Australian perspective.*

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Since the 1970s, Australian journalism on and from Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia has been claimed to be a considerable source of friction between the governments of these countries and Australia. Indeed, the issue of Australian reporting of the region has been cited as being the primary bilateral difficulty by Indonesia in its relations with Australia. (Alatas 1994). Malaysia's Prime Minister, Dr Mahatir Mohamad has also complained about Australian journalism, particularly with reference to the raising of issues of the environment and human rights. (See for example, Malaysian High Commission 2/1988, and Searle 1994) Singapore's Senior Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, has criticised the Australian news media for what he has called "preaching", while regarding Australia as little more than an economic, political and social basket case or, according to Lee's successor, Goh Chock Tong, for talking too much and doing too little. (Byrnes 1994:168).

This paper discusses some of the underlying issues of the regional criticisms of Australian journalism, including those of culture and politics. Here, culture is intended to mean those processes of social organisation, value systems and world views which prevail within a particular social group, which may or may not correspond with the idea of the state. Politics overlaps with culture in the area of social organisation and may (or may not) reflect common value systems or world views, but does include conceptions of the state and the achievement, use and maintenance of power. In particular, the issue of cultural difference, or different

"values", has been claimed by a number of regional leaders to be at the heart of disputes between them and the Australian news media.

In broad terms, the Australian news media has, according to regional leaders, behaved with insensitivity, ignorance and an overriding sense of cultural chauvinism in its reporting of Australia's near neighbours. It has, according to this view, offended cultural sensibilities, interfered in domestic affairs, imposed a set of values which are not only alien to the region but have imperialist or neo-imperialist overtones and is, implicitly, racist. By extension, this perspective presents Australia as a remnant of the colonial past, an imperial outpost clinging to an unfounded sense of superiority and cast adrift in a sea of rising post-colonial states.

Sometimes even members of Australia's domestic elite align themselves with this regional leader's perspective, for reasons of belief, personal advancement or political advantage. Examples of this Australian support for the regional leaders' perspective of Australia could be said to include the "Indonesia lobby" of former Australian ambassadors to Jakarta and some academics, as well as former Minister for Foreign Affairs, Senator Gareth Evans, and some senior business people with investments in South East Asia.

This post-colonial "anti-imperialist" criticism has been directed not just against its media but against Australia more generally (for example, by the Indonesian military newspaper *Angkatan Bersenjata* in 1986). This includes regional criticism over expression of Australian concerns for issues as diverse as the marginalising and sometimes repressive treatment of ethnic minorities, environmental degradation, political participation and, more generally, issues such as the separation of the judiciary and the legislature, adequate legal representation, treatment of refugees and freedom of expression, association and political participation which comprise civil and political rights.

If these are the types of issues which attract such regional ire, the criticism then begs the question of why it is being made and who could potentially benefit from it. It is my contention that such criticism of Australian journalism less often reflects genuine cultural difference but rather political difference and that this reflection of political interest, on the part of regional leaders, is self serving.

A significant division between the perspectives put by regional leaders and the Australian news media concerns distinctions between society and the individual. According to what is claimed as a broadly based regional conception, Asian societies have greater concern for the welfare of the group rather than the

## **Culture And Social Distinctions**

individual, whereas Western societies such as Australia are primarily concerned about the individual which, in turn, is claimed to be at the expense of the wider society. "Society" in the case of the three countries identified is embodied in the state and the state, in turn, is embodied in the government which, in these three cases, has not been open to political change and has held power for a minimum of three decades.

This Asian conception, such as it is presented places particular emphasis on notions of hierarchy, respect for authority, loyalty and a disinclination to openly debate (the preferred mode of settlement of difference being consensus - the negotiated removal of points of greatest objection). Such values have been described by, amongst others, Lee Kuan Yew as constituting "Asian values" or the "Asian way". These values have been claimed by Lee and others as being at the heart of the economic success of Singapore and the growing prosperity of other regional societies (and could therefore explain the Philippines lack of economic success, although is less easy to rationalise in Thailand). Journalism in the less open societies of Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia is required to support the state, to avoid conflict or confrontation and to enhance economic development.

By contrast, Australia's pluralism and the expression of dissenting views is viewed as constituting internal divisions and are therefore responsible for its inability to compete with the new industrialising economies of South East Asia and its relative economic decline. If Australia was not careful, Lee said, Australians would become the "white trash of Asia". (Byrnes 1994:xi)

Yet the criticisms of Australia's economic performance, especially by Lee Kuan Yew, were always exaggerated and ignored some of the more attractive characteristics of Australia's liberal political culture, and conveniently failed to acknowledge the significant changes which have been implemented at both macro and micro-economic levels starting in 1973 and gathering considerable momentum throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. Similarly, the political criticisms of Australia by the Indonesian armed forces newspaper, *Angkatan Bersenjata* - that Australia could not be trusted, that communists influenced the Labor government and so on - also reflected less on Australia's political reality than a desire on the part of Indonesia's armed forces, ABRI, to peddle its own extremely regimented view of conservative political order.

By any international standard - and for all the remaining faults of which there are not a few - Australia is a tolerant society, not just accepting ethnic diversity but actively encouraging it. Australia does have a history of institutionalised racism, in particular through its "White Australia" policy and in its treatment

of its indigenous peoples. There was also considerable discomfort amongst many Australians about the arrival in Australia of migrants from non-English speaking European backgrounds in the wake of the Second World War, and again in the late 1970s and early 1980s as the "boat people" fleeing the aftermath of the Indochina wars came to Australia in sudden and large numbers.

But the Australian government and existing Australians have generally accepted the "boat people", particularly once they came to understand that they tended to embrace rather than reject the liberal pluralism on which Australia's political society is founded. Such liberal pluralism is at fundamental odds with Indonesia's government generally and its influential armed forces in particular, and has been explicitly rejected by both the Singaporean and Malaysian governments.

In trying to defend Australia more generally from some of the more scurrilous attacks upon it by regional leaders, it would be very easy to slip into what Edward Said has referred to the "politics of self-congratulation". (Said 1981). This paper is not intend to be "self-congratulatory". Rather it is intended to point out a basic distinction between Australia and its political culture and that of some neighbouring governments which from time to time express disapproval of Australia.

For all its faults, Australia tends to allow a considerable degree of personal freedom, particularly where politics is concerned, while maintaining a healthy separation between the state and the judiciary. However, regional criticism of Australia appears to be based on questionable interpretation or self-serving rhetoric. Criticism of Australian journalists in particular often appears at best a failure to recognise as a very real part of Australian political culture the normative quality of a relatively unfettered "watchdog" role for the news media. The news media is a partner in the Australian political structure - the so-called "fourth estate" - but it is, or at least should be, independent and sometimes critical of the government of the day.

It might be going too far to suggest that the news media does or should "afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted", as some journalists say, given the ideological implications of the term. But it is far more reasonable to suggest that the news media has a right and indeed a responsibility in a democratic society to provide a voice for the views and concerns of ordinary citizens, in many cases in regard to government policy or practice. This is one of the "checks and balances" which can limit the authoritarian leanings of government, scrutinise its administration and expose its tendencies towards inefficiency, poorly conceived policy or

## **Unfounded Regional Criticisms**

corruption. In this respect, Australian journalists tend not to make a distinction between the government of their own country and that of others. (Swancott, N. in Milne 1989:3). Nor, in a sense, do Australian journalists make a distinction between the nationality of the citizens whose interests they might be representing.

I acknowledge here that this might tend towards a somewhat idealistic view of Australian foreign journalism and that most overseas stories are more prosaic than of struggles between authority and the individual. But many stories are of this type and in most cases it is these types of stories which call forth the greatest critical regional response.

There is also the criticism that many Australian journalists have not acted professionally, or that they would be more welcome in the region if they behaved in a professional manner. (Alatas 1994). The two definitions of the term professional which come to mind are on one hand that a person is paid for their work and on the other hand, more specifically, that they are a part of a recognised self-regulating profession which has particular rules of conduct. Journalism has long been recognised as not being a profession in this latter sense, in that it is not self-regulating, but is rather a craft, though with particular legal and ethical guidelines.

Having said that, Australian journalists have not actually become worse at their craft over the period of the last couple of decades. Rather, on balance, Australian journalists have gotten noticeably better. Australian journalists are, on the whole, better educated, more articulate and more socially engaged than their forbears often were. They are broadly less inclined to the boozy stereotypes which characterised the "old school" and, interestingly, they are increasingly likely to be female. Australian journalism, once a blokes' club for long lunches and drunken nights, is more these days a meritocracy. This more thoughtful journalism is reflected in their approach to regional affairs.

In the region, rather than simply report bald facts, Australian journalists are more inclined to look at the context of those facts, to understand their history and to consider their local implications. The problem is not so much that Australian journalists are not sufficiently professional, rather it is that they are simply journalists just doing the job of journalism, and perhaps they are doing it better. The term "professional" therefore means, in this context, a willingness to bow to the desires of politicians. As a matter of principle, Australian journalists tend not to do this.

So, if there is a distinction between the political landscape of Australia and some of its neighbouring states and, on balance, the standards of Australian journalism have not declined, perhaps the real issues lie in other than the rhetoric of offence taken by neighbouring governments. It could be suggested that the

sensitivity on the part of Australia's neighbours reflects more the direction of their own developments.

The period of a generally increasing intolerance of Australian journalism in South East Asia parallels a more general intolerance of Western journalism's excessively negative reporting of developing countries, as outlined by UNESCO's call in 1978 for a New World Information and Communications Order. (UNESCO 1978). It was thought by UNESCO and a number of developing countries that information instead could be harnessed as a development tool, to provide constructive input into the development process - the "how to" and "lead by example" types of stories. Although most governments of such countries realised they had little hope of influencing the international media to adopt this position, they were much more successful in bringing to heel their domestic media.

Unfortunately, in many cases having the domestic media run more "constructive" stories resulted in government disinformation and propaganda; stories which painted a more rosy picture of affairs than might have been warranted, which reported government statements without criticism or analysis or which even praised the admirable qualities of the government of the day, regardless of the sometimes negative facts. The corollary of so-called "positive" stories was that "negative" stories - those dealing with government or other failure - were usually reconfigured or censored.

Censorship is a fact of life in these countries and the respective governments would, generally, like to see and often do impose restrictions on foreign as well as domestic journalists. Domestic journalists exercise self-censorship as a survival technique and it is easy to be critical of such compromise from an outsider's perspective. But while in many cases such criticism is warranted, it often takes considerable courage and skill to continue to operate in the margins of what is permitted to be said. Many journalists in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore are fined or in other ways legally punished, and very often find themselves unemployed and unemployable. The cost to the individual can be very high indeed.

As an aside, I once had a Singaporean journalism student who believed the stories she wrote as class assignments - fairly simple and relatively uncontroversial stories in Australian terms - would preclude her from becoming a journalist when she returned to Singapore. Another Singaporean journalist I knew could not get a job again in Singapore after having worked in Australia. In Singapore itself there was potential for employment

## **Journalistic Relativism**

## **Politics Of Culture**

as a journalist for trained outsiders, yet this begged the question of why choose journalism when there were more lucrative and less compromised ways to make a living.

And then there was a Malaysian colleague, who reported from Kuala Lumpur and was torn between the requirements to report for an Australian news service and domestic restrictions on the media. His position had become increasingly tenuous and some Australians in Kuala Lumpur had arranged a bolt-hole for the colleague in the event that the Malaysian government tired of warning him and decided to act. The plan was he would be spirited to Australia as a political refugee. As it turned out, he jumped before being pushed and is now an Australian resident. These are but the tip of a very large iceberg and do not even begin to represent the hundreds of journalists who stay in their countries and try to work between the cracks of government control.

It is important to note that criticism of the Australian news media for their lack of cultural sensitivity does beg the question of cross-cultural interpretation: how well or otherwise an outsider such as myself is able to distinguish cultural authenticity from political manipulation. If one accepts the idea of fundamental cultural difference, then not only is cultural offence more likely to be caused, inadvertently though that may be, but a method which might be employed to overcome such difference would itself be culturally located and, consequently, compromised.

Such cultural relativism would mean that no-one could offer any sort of critical analysis within any other cultural context without being at least insensitive and probably ignorant. I do not, however, subscribe to this view. While regarding cultures as different, I do not believe they are radically so. (See also Ricoeur 1981:49-50, Todorov 1986:374). The quality of being human underpins culture, and supersedes it. Hence, for example, that controversial subject of many news stories from the region, human rights, is by definition universal rather than culturally specific. If issues of human rights are, as claimed by many regional leaders, culturally specific, then what is being referred to is Indonesian "rights", or Malaysian "rights" or Singaporean "rights", not rights which are founded on the quality of being human.

And for those who do argue for the cultural specificity of human rights, my experience in countries where such abuses take place has overwhelmingly confirmed that ordinary people don't like being jailed, tortured or killed no matter what their cultural or political affiliation.

Further, and perhaps more immediately, what is represented as one country's culture is often that which is



constructed by its political elites, usually to their own advantage and that of their colleagues. Given the cultural diversity of the countries under consideration, claims to cultural uniformity are patently nonsensical.

Yet Australian journalists are generally not anthropologists, nor are they usually sufficiently immersed in the particular country they report on not to miss some subtleties, especially given that foreign postings are usually for no more than a few years at a time and are often just short-term assignments. Australian journalists sometimes do get it wrong, but it is very rarely "getting it wrong" that causes angst, or alleged angst, amongst the region's leaders. More often they express concern when Australian journalists "get it right". No-one ever disputed the facts of the "Soeharto billions" affair, or that Malaysian timber companies were logging rainforests at the expense of the homes of indigenous peoples, that the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have little time for a meaningful political opposition or that constraints on free political activity, expression and peaceful dissent were often suppressed by means which constituted a breach of human rights as defined by the United Nations, of which these countries are members.

But that Australian journalists sometimes do slip up, as they do at home, and that they cannot often immerse themselves deeply into the culture or cultures on which they report does not necessarily preclude cultural sensitivity, nor does it imply that meaningful communication is unavailable. Those who argue that cross-cultural communication is inherently flawed and probably impossible generally base their case on the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis in linguistics (Whorf 1956), which proposes the basic untranslatability of language and hence conceptualisation. The idea is that conceptualisation is relative to language, and that cultural difference is therefore impenetrable.

This theory has again been made fashionable by some post-structural theorists intent on recognising difference rather than similarity, and comes in response to the universalist approaches of structuralist theories, fashionable from the 1950s through to the 1970s. The main critique of such universal positions was that it imposed a uniformity of type and precluded regional identity, which had negative implications for ethnic minorities, women and non-mainstream groups and individuals. By asserting difference, such groups were able to retake ground commandeered by the universalist position.

Yet this has led to a fragmentation and closure of debate, all arguments being concluded by resorting to difference, which is shallow logic. And unfortunately for supporters of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis, people can learn languages and translation does

work in a meaningful and practical sense and conceptualisation is available across and between people from different cultural backgrounds.

Further, Australian journalists based in the region tend most to report politics, and the practice of the exercise of power varies very little in its basic premise from one culture to another. One need only reread Machiavelli (1963), Weber (1964) or Lukes (1974) and compare their theoretical approaches with the political practice of the region to see that there is nothing very different in a meaningful sense in the attainment, maintenance and exercise of power from one culture to another.

On balance, then, I do not believe that issues of concern expressed by regional governments can be sustained on the basis of cultural insensitivity. Rather, what is at issue is political insensitivity, and in the broadly liberal society to which Australian journalists report, being "insensitive" to the often questionable methods employed in the maintenance of power is not regarded as a legitimate complaint. To do so would be to engage in self-censorship, or the production of propaganda.

Having noted that, some Australian journalists working in the region have told me that they do practice self-censorship, in order to maintain their bureaux in difficult political environments. The issue of regional reporting is also complicated by the costs of maintaining overseas bureaux. When an expensive bureau can be closed because an Australian journalist has simply done his or her job, then the case for maintaining such bureaux becomes problematic, especially when there are cheaper, though less precise, options such as wire services, satellite feeds and so on.

The politics of the region are sufficiently potentially volatile to displace Australian journalists, regardless of their sensitivity or lack thereof, and may be exacerbated by the shake-ups to come. Indonesia's political landscape after Soeharto, Malaysia after Mahatir and Singapore after Lee Kuan Yew (who is still the power behind the government) will raise whole new sets of political sensitivities which could challenge and even threaten the positions and perspectives of journalists trying to report the region.

But it is precisely because of the inevitability of such fundamental changes to the politics of the region -- a region which is quite correctly identified as crucial to Australia's future -- that Australia needs its own journalists there, viewing regional developments from an Australian perspective and communicating in a style which addresses the interests and concerns of Australian audiences. ■

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