Book review: Media Fortunes, Changing Times: ASEAN States in Transition

S. Ramanathan
Mediaplus Consultants, Singapore
primary task is to enhance the skills of a novice. Through a series of
dot-point lists, many skills-based issues are clarified. Among these
are report and feature writing techniques for print media, interview
techniques for print, radio and television, dos and don’ts of public
affairs reporting, investigative reporting and specialist reporting. It
is to the author’s credit that he has tackled the vast scope of the
book with ease, focusing on the actionable aspects of teaching.

Reporting in a Multimedia World chooses distinctly Australian
material for a well-defined local audience. Squarely aimed at
Australian students, it illuminates practical issues with experiential
wisdom gleaned through interviews with media professionals.
Illustrated with photographs, examples and box stories, the book
adopts an easy-to-read journalistic style of presentation, making the
concepts accessible and up-to-date. The authors show a clear
pathway to professional skills that need to be developed and
nurtured in budding journalists. Theoretical and practical aspects
of journalism are perfectly matched in the book, making it an
invaluable resource for students and teachers alike.

Media Fortunes, Changing Times: ASEAN States in Transition,
Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. ISBN. 252 pp.

Reviewed by Sankaran Ramanathan
Mediaplus Consultants, Singapore

Are ASEAN states in transition? If so, how many of the 10
states are? Are there changing times that the presumed transition
brings, and if there are, have media fortunes been affected? If so,
how have they been affected?

If we were to gauge on the basis of political uncertainty,
Indonesia, Laos and Cambodia qualify as being states under
transition. If we were to broaden the definition to include countries
whose economies are under transition (from developing to
developed economy status), we could then add the Philippines,
Vietnam, Myanmar and Thailand to the list. We could add Malaysia
to this list, arguing that the economy has taken a slide since 1997
and that the transition of political power is imminent. We can then
accept the contention that eight out of the 10 ASEAN member
countries are in transition.

According to the book’s editor, “transition” does not just refer
to changes in general (p.xiii). For some countries, it is the transition
from authoritarianism to democracy. For others, from planned socialist economy to a capitalist market model, and for some the transformation of societies through technological and lifestyle changes. How have media fortunes have been affected by this transition that the majority of ASEAN countries are undergoing?

The media function as a sub-system within the broader societal system. Hence, the nature and basic characteristics of media systems are determined largely by the societal system within which they operate. Since eight of the 10 ASEAN countries are deemed to be in transition, we can argue ipso facto that the media in these countries are also in transition.

Viewed from the functional perspective, media systems in Indonesia are clearly in transition, as discussed in two chapters (one on the broadcast media and the other on print). In Chapter Three, Heryanto and Adi describe the role and development of industrialized media in democratizing Indonesia at the start of this century. In Chapter Four, Sanyoto presents an account of the Indonesian press and the dynamics of transition, paying attention to the developments over the past five years.


In Chapter Two, Han Samnang looks at the Cambodian media in a post-socialist situation. He notes that “Cambodia has been experiencing a major transition through the 1990s from being run as a one-party socialist state to functioning as a chaotic polity trying to become a multi-party democracy.” (p.27) He then discusses the changes in state-media dynamics in the areas of media ownership, the law, state management tactics and the role of foreign players.

In Chapter Five, Thonglor Duangsavanh examines the impact of economic transition on the media in Laos. In Chapter Six, Zaharom Naim focuses on the media and Malaysia’s Reformasi movement. Other Malaysian media watchers may not agree with most of the assertions he makes, particularly as his research is limited only to media in English and the national language, Bahasa Malaysia. Notwithstanding that, it makes for good reading.

Chapter Seven, the lengthiest contribution, provides a well-documented report on the media in Myanmar. Written by ISEAS Senior Fellow, Tin Maung Maung Than, it traces attempts by the media in Myanmar to meet the market challenges while simultaneously surviving under the shadow of the state.

In Chapter Eight, Cherian George looks at the Singapore media at the mainstream and the fringe in the nineties. According to him, transition in the Singapore context refers to the process of change
from a mode of social organization called “enterprise association” to one of ‘civil association’ (p.173-4). He notes that the government is in transition because of fragmentation and flattening (p.185), while media is in transition because of the Internet revolution (p.188).

Peter Jackson takes a different track when discussing media-state relations in Thailand. In Chapter Nine, he looks at offending images portrayed by media with regard to gender and sexual minority issues, and aspects of state control of the media in Thailand.

In Chapter Ten, Tran Huu Phuc Thien focuses on the controversy of market economics in Vietnam, and how this impinges upon the operation of Vietnamese media.

The editor, Russel Heng notes that out of the original contributions at the Seminar, the paper about media in the Philippines was excluded “for technical reasons.” No suitable chapter was available for Brunei Darussalam. This is a pity, as contributions about the media in these two countries would have made the book comprehensive in its coverage of ASEAN.

The above notwithstanding, this book is a timely addition to the growing list of publications on media in the ASEAN states. It is also a useful addition to the list of scholarly publications on media emanating from ISEAS.