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In Asia : Implications For National Communication Policies**

By

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THE LIBERALIZATION MOVEMENT AND COMMUNICATION IN
ASIA: IMPLICATIONS FOR NATIONAL
COMMUNICATION POLICIES

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Observations in this paper are divided into four parts:

- A. The economic context of change
- B. The political context of change
- C. Aspects of liberalization
- D. Implications for national communication policies

I thank Mr. Vijay Menon and Mr. Victor Valbuena of AMIC for inviting me to participate in this timely conference and share some observations with you on the subject of their session.

It is good to be back in the Philippines soon after the renewal of a multiparty democratic system that is part of the concerns that we are looking at in this agenda.

We meet here in Manila in times that are unique for our planet and for Asia. There has certainly been notable progress in many respects by which the human condition today is better than it has been in history. At the same time there is regression, a distinct decline in other equally, if not more important, aspects of the human condition.

To see our subject in perspective we have to look at the political context and at the economic context in which we presently

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live and which will impact upon the next 10 to 15 years. Here are two contrasting facts before we look at the economic context.

Fact one is that over one-fifth of the world's people, every person in five, live in absolute poverty, a condition that deprives the individual of virtually all opportunities for self-advancement and condemns him to perennial deprivation.

Fact two is that income disparity has worsened, not improved over the past 30 years.

Whereas in 1960 the richest 20 per cent of the world's people had incomes 30 times greater than the poorest 20 per cent of the world's people, in 1990, the gap had doubled to 60 times, with such a trend continuing.

While certain countries in Asia are already world economic powers and some others are fast becoming major international forces, severe disparities and discordancies exist in Asia that have a bearing on the authenticity of the liberalization movement and also impinge on the communication sector. To only partially offset the bad news there is of course some good news as well.

For the first time in decades, world military expenditure is declining though a couple of regions are still maintaining previous levels.

The economies of East and South East Asia are attracting some of the highest levels of direct foreign investment (d.f.i.). One-third of all d.f.i. is going to six Asian countries.

The export of manufactured goods from the developing countries to the industrialized countries increased 5-fold between 1975 and 1989 whereas industrialized countries merely doubled their exports in the same period. However, certain other data indicate the adverse situation that faces many countries in Asia.

- a World Bank study shows that trade restrictions by industrialized countries imposed on exports from developing countries reduce the GNP of developing countries by 3% for an annual loss of US\$75 billion.
- 20 out of 24 industrial countries are today more protectionist than they were 30 years ago.
- Official Development Assistance (ODA) by donor countries to developing countries, many of them in Asia, is only 0.35% of the combined GNP of the OECD countries in contrast to the international target of 0.7%.
- Asia does not receive a fair share even of this inadequate aid. For example, South Asia, which has one-fifth of the world's population, i.e., over 1 billion people, receives only US\$5 per person while certain aid-receiving countries in the Middle East with far less population receive US\$55 per person.
- the countries that get the most aid are often those that use their aid for military purposes
- net World Bank transfers became negative in 1991 to the extent of US\$500 million

- real interest rates during the 1980's for industrialized countries were at about 4%, while for developing countries they were 17%.

As the preceding data assumes an ominous prospect for the poor, the liberalization movement in Asia is ostensibly characterized by democratization of political systems in Asian countries during the past few years.

At the same time it is relevant to note that:

- a. large areas of Asia with substantial as well as modest-sized populations continue to live in non-democratic or only partially democratic systems. Therefore, the liberalization movement is still in an initial stage.
- b. Much of the non-democratic, non-liberal aspect of contemporary Asia is the lingering consequence of colonialism that disrupted, divided and distorted Asian development. Therefore, liberalization is not an enlightened idea being gifted to us now by those who colonized and exploited us.

Rather, liberalization in Asia is an inevitable ongoing evolution of our respective societies as we unravel the contradictions of our history and our distorted systems.

- c. Where pluralist democracy does not exist in Asia there are a number of factors such as deep-rooted social, religious, economic, political factors that prevent a genuinely free exercise of choice and opinion by citizens. Thus, we have the facade of liberalization, all the motions of going through the democratic process, without its real substance.

Asia remains a diverse, heterogeneous continent. While it is good for the spirit to define an Asian perspective, the mind must remain analytical and recognize that authentic democracy is practiced in only very limited parts of Asia.

The presence of institutional structures of democracy with an ostensible multi-party system is not a guarantee of genuine democracy and the exercise of free choice on the basis of objective information. Even in long-standing democracies in Asia, there remains a gulf between power and the people.

When a government gets an honest mandate in a fair election, it enjoys far too much protection from regular accountability. The panoply of the power structures in virtually all Asian countries affords undue protection to governments from scrutiny and accountability.

Just as the longevity of a dictatorship does not qualify it for legitimacy, so too the sheer continuity of democratic institutions does not automatically endow them with efficacy or nobility. Never perhaps has public disenchantment with political institutions been greater - in some of the most well-established democracies than it is today. There are examples of this in Asia as well as in North America and Europe.

Democratic processes in Asia are diverse and still fragile -- as is the case of democracy world-wide in general. Even in the industrialized countries, democracy, with a couple of exceptions, has

grown at a belated pace and with an uneven quality of development in as late as the 20th century. One of the world's most significant economic powers today i.e. Germany was under fascist rule just 50 years ago. In the U.S. women got the right to vote only in this century. Switzerland managed to complete the process only a few years ago.

The media have paved the way for democracy and liberalization. In some parts of Asia, the press has always been free, in others, always under control. In most of Asia, the electronic media have always been under State ownership and government control. The cinema has made a major contribution to the communications process. Whatever their own specific states in terms of ownership and control, seen cumulatively over the past 40 years and collectively together, the media have spearheaded the continental move towards liberalization, spurred by the rapid advances in technology that have enabled people to gain access to media despite restrictive, even repressive policies enforced by States and governments. The liberalization movement began with the nature of modern media because they inherently represent liberation from ignorance or low information flow.

Radio was the pioneer, and remains the unrivalled mass medium that equalizes all people's - specially the poor's - accessibility to information from across the world. Though radio has been deglamorized by the recent advent of TV, radio despite now having become the great

unnoticed medium of the 1990's, reaches more people in Asia and more people in Asia keep in touch with the rest of the world through radio than any other medium does.

Official moves towards "liberalization" are therefore simply a belated reaction by State systems to deal with a reality that already exists. That reality is that for the past few decades, the people of Asia, some hundreds of millions of them, though not all, have already been part of a "liberalized" media reality. This "prior" liberalization is evident in different ways. The credibility given to the BBC Radio's South Asian News Services by large audiences in the region over the listenership of local radio. The popularity of song-and-dance cinema entertainment in contrast to the prudery of official mores. The rampant smuggling of pre-recorded video tapes across borders to enable people to view material officially banned within their own countries. The continuing piracy of films and TV programmes across continents.

Thus, media themselves, inherently, embody liberalization and even though some media systems in Asia are rigidly controlled by governments, other media systems have developed in parallel or in the underground, as a liberal counter-vailing force to media repression.

The media symbolize the extraordinary growth and complexity of the total information process today. For example, the globalization of the economy through information processes is manifested in the fact that every day, inter-active data networks transmit more than US\$300 billion for world capital markets.

Liberalization, per se, does not bring equity and quality in mass communication. In other parts of the world liberalization is accompanied by self-indulgence, trivialization, escapism and the pandering to the lowest common denominator of taste and quality in the name of economic viability, profiteering, circulation, audience size ratings et al. Liberalization in Asia is, in parts, showing signs of leaning towards a vulgarization of media content.

New, carefully crafted regulatory frameworks have to be evolved and enforced that operate on the fine line between inhibiting and intimidating media from creative and frank expression on the one hand and stimulating and facilitating media to broaden and deepen the mass communication process on the other.

Liberalization has, by dint of historical and contemporary factors, become synonymous with the free market that is presently enjoying a phase of world-wide adulation. It is thus also associated with consumerism and material hedonism. Whereas a liberal communication environment should, ideally, be independently legitimate and identifiable, to be aspired for and maintained for its own civilizational values.

Even as liberalization proceeds in Asia we must remember that repression continues to reign in certain parts of Asia.

This takes the form of State repression as well as community-based repression, with journalists being intimidated and killed for reporting material that some would not like to see in print.

Will liberalization of communication in Asia facilitate trans-nationalization of media across the continent, specially TV and radio? While the daily vernacular press will most likely remain indigenous, the continental English press, i.e. weeklies, monthlies, and satellite TV networks presently appear to be controlled/dominated by trans-national corporations, some with headquarters outside Asia. The most ironic reflection of the lack of indigenous, continent-spanning media is that in order to see images of each other on TV everyday, Asians currently rely upon BBC in London to beam to them a 24-hour "Asian" TV service. While the excellence of some parts of western TV output is engrossing, it only illuminates the scope for Asian-based TV to grow in.

Implications for national communication policies:

1. Except for radio, the vast majority of Asian people do not have convenient access to other mass media; the first implication for national communication policies is therefore that these policies be closely coordinated with, and integrated into, national economic and development policies so as to optimize access to all mass media by the people, specially the poor.

This will call for encouraging availability of low-cost TV sets as well as accelerating literacy and primary education campaigns, thereby entailing a review of present policies that may be preventing proliferation of media and increase in access to media.

2. Government need to transmit with grace as well as vision from the role of sole custodians of electronic media to becoming partners with the non-governmental sector in a new era for radio and TV.

Such a transition will encompass a range of actions and options. From retaining 100 percent ownership and at the same time increasing, or introducing, private sector participation in programme production to partial or complete disinvestment from ownership. Then too there is the option of Government reducing its ownership role but retaining a formal presence in media organizations. There is the other extreme of Government permitting completely new initiatives and 100 per cent private ownership of new electronic media channels.

Whichever the option chosen, Government should review their insecure, overly possessive attitudes to control of news bulletins because in the 1990's, Government control of electronic media news has become a self-defeating anachronism proven also to be self-damaging.

3. There are implications also for the non-governmental and private sectors in Asia as a result of the changing and liberalizing communication environment.

The first of these implications is that of exercising enhanced social responsibility in owning, controlling or using mass media by balancing profitability with respect for continuity as well as change. In an age in which west-based media have great techno-

logical and other advantages over Asian-based media, cultures in Asia are facing an onslaught of western pop culture - some of it aesthetic and addictive, some of it trivial and terrible. Private sector media in Asia must act effectively to preserve and strengthen all that is valuable and worth sustaining in our heritage, be it traditional mores, narrative structures, dances, music, folklore, etc., while enabling the contemporaneity and virility of western media output to also be disseminated in Asia.

4. Government and non-governmental communication sectors together in the new liberalization movement should strive to evolve new norms and apply new indigenous models for media that are true and relevant to the history and the reality of Asia instead of blindly imitating some of the role-models adopted from non-Asian sources.

Just as we have tended to transplant political systems from the west into Asia without adapting them to our own needs and psyches, so too in media we need to think through the possibilities of an indigenous character.

Past unsuccessful attempts in the political field to adapt political systems and democratic institutions have failed mainly because of individual ambition and incorrect strategies concealed under other misleading cloaks.

In the case of media, this should not deter us from exploring a new milieu of relating liberal media systems with the living truth of Asia.

5. Yet another implication is that investment in training must be increased substantially in order that professional skills and capacities are upgraded so that Asian mass communication also begins to show some of the gloss and finesse which, in the case of western media, too often passes for substance because it is so slickly presented.
6. A sixth implication is that we should now work to democratize media rather than only privatize media. For mere privatization may well replace one evil with another. The democratization of media can be conducted by creating new partnerships between government, commercial investors, media leaders and specialists, citizens groups and other social organizations. There is a virtual vacuum calling for new institutional initiatives.
7. Such leads us naturally to the seventh imperative which is that communication elites which include all the above should do a little less teaching the people about development and do a lot more learning from the people. These elites tend to drift away from the grass roots and therefore from the wisdom and the truth that the people have in such large measure.
8. Such a learning process is possible as a direct corollary of an overdue decentralization of the media policy-formulating system and the production methodology. While for reasons of logistics, economy and convenience, centralization of some aspects is unavoidable, we have allowed too many important decisions to be taken in too many insulated corridors of power.

We must find a way to enable vital decisions to be taken at the district and the community level rather than in the capital cities.

Thus, there are at least eight implications for a review and re-direction of communication policies in a changing Asia, in an Asia where change should not represent an obliteration of the past but a respect for all that is worth preserving so that "change" becomes an enhancement and an advancement of the vast richness and potential of the continent and its people.

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*Economic data quoted in from the UNDP Human Development Report 1992.

Elements of observations by Mr. Javed Jabbar, Chairman,
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