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**HIGHWAYS, SKYWAYS AND CORRIDORS:
ASIA'S COMMUNICATIONS CHALLENGES**

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COMMUNICATING ACROSS BORDERS

by

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Ladies and Gentlemen, I would like to begin by posing a question: where do you think I am from? Take a guess.

If you are like other audiences, you will come up with a variety of responses. I often get Iran or some other place in the Middle East. If I am in the United States, people think I am from Mexico. On the other hand, in Mexico people think I am from somewhere else in Latin America. In Europe people seem to think I am Italian. Or perhaps Albanian or Yugoslavian.

If people examine my name they come up with different responses. Firdaus. How many of you think I am a Moslem? Kharas. That is surely Greek.

All those replies are, of course, wrong.

Why do people come up with a wrong response? It is quite simple. Some people just look at me, examine my features, color of skin, color of hair and come up with an answer. Others listen to me and come up with a guess based on my accent. Others examine my name and try and guess.

If you did any or all of those, like most people, you took a look at me or listened to me and then subconsciously applied what you saw or heard against a stereotype you have of the person from the country you picked. You matched what I looked like or sound like with what you think a person looks or sounds like from a particular country.

To create a television programme for me you would have had to look into my culture. What is my culture? What is culture? My list has the following eight dimensions:

- a. **Learning:** Culture is learned. No one is born with a culture, unlike other characteristics of humans.
- b. **Holistic:** A person's culture is not a single value or belief. It is the sums of all the person's value and beliefs.
- c. **Shared:** Culture is shared. It is common to particular social groups.
- d. **Diverse:** Absolutely no two cultures are alike. There are as many cultures in the world as there are social groupings.
- e. **Adaptive:** Humans adapt to culture. There are, however, limits to possible adaptation which is governed by each individual.
- f. **Multi-Generational:** Culture crosses generations. It is shared between generations and handed down from one generation to the next.
- g. **Structured:** Culture is structured. There are patterns that one can analyze.
- h. **Value and belief-based:** The most important part of a culture is the value system. The sense of what is right and wrong, acceptable or not, important or trivial.

The art of communicating is actually very simple. It involves five steps:

the sender determining the message
the sender encoding the message
the sender selecting a medium of delivery
the recipient decoding the message
and the recipient interpreting the message

This simple process can be extremely complicated when dealing across borders. Let us go from theory to practice.

I assume you all know about dealing across borders. Volumes have been written about how to effectively communicate across cultures. Very little, however, has been written about what I and other television programme producers deal with: **how to portray or articulate a culture.**

What does this mean to the content or programme producer? I speak from a position of being a television programme producer of programming seen in sixty-five countries by over 200 million people everyday. I am going to use the world of television programmes to illustrate my points.

In the little time I have, I am going to try to give you a compilation of eight personal observations to creating verbal and/or visual images that portray a culture that can travel across borders. I hope to give you a non-academic paper, using the example of television programmes, although my observations can really apply to any type of portrayal of culture.

1. Take into account cultures.

This sounds like an obvious statement. But it is a very, very common error for television programme producers and others involved in portraying cultures professionally to make. I can draw on dozens of mistakes I have made or seen.

Let me give you just one recent example. Here in Kuala Lumpur I am producing a soap opera called *City of the Rich*. It is meant for both the domestic and international market. The story revolves around a fictitious Malaysian family headed by a Tan Sri. The Tan Sri is the central character. All the other characters address him in the soap opera as "Tan Sri".

When I reviewed an episode we were sending as a sample to broadcasters around the world, it occurred to be that no one outside Malaysia would have realized that Tan Sri is a title. The audiences would have thought that the character's name is Tan Sri. That is, in most countries they would have thought he is Mr. Sri. In China, of course, they would have thought he is Mr. Tan.

The central character would have lost its meaning if I did not have the episode re-edited to have a couple of lines inserted to explain what a Tan Sri is.

If you were creating the character, what would you create? How should the Tan Sri dress, act and speak? Obviously, he is a character of authority. He issues instructions to subordinates. He commands respect.

To what degree should we have the Tan Sri nuance his language? By that I mean the level of directness he employs. In North America, managers and figures in authority are taught to be direct. In Malaysia by contrast, directions and conversations are far more oblique and inferences and innuendo are more important than explicitness.

Will the Tan Sri have his orders obeyed by his staff and family? In Asia generally, directions from superiors are followed without question, while in North America directions can be challenged. The scriptwriter can create drama and excitement by having conflict between the Tan Sri and his subordinates but would that be reflective of Malay culture?

2. Portrayals of culture that are acceptably by other cultures are not easy.

Creating cross-cultural content successfully is very, very difficult. It is immensely difficult to be able to successfully portray a culture and yet have people like an audience identify with that portrayal.

Are there concrete examples in television to illustrate this difficulty? I believe the absence of a pan-Asian television systems speaks directly to the issue. So far, for all the talk about the advent of several new satellite systems across Asia, I believe there is still only one truly Pan-Asian general entertainment delivery system. That is Rupert Murdoch's STAR system.

Even STAR has had to shift ground. It started with the idea that the same programme can be beamed across Asia, without any local customization. That model, the Pan-Asian television programme, has been proven to be a failure. STAR now dubs, localizes and customizes at a furious pace.

I am a great proponent of localization in television. Local programmes fare best. People like to see actors that look like them, that sound like them, that talk like them. That means that a programme designed to appeal to all the counties of Asia just cannot be made.

The scriptwriters and producers that work with me are always facing a dilemma. How do they create a television show that is both local enough to be appreciated by domestic audiences yet international enough to be exported?

3. Portrayals of culture are becoming more essential.

I am sure you all agree that the volume of international trade and communications is increasing rapidly.

In the world of television, there is a huge amount of American programming flooding into Asia and the rest of the world. The US is superb at exporting their culture. So far, Asia, Africa and Latin America, with the exception of Latin *telenovelas*, have not had much to throw back at the Americans.

That is now beginning to change. For the first time, Asia, Africa and Latin America are exporting their products both within their continents and between continents. At MIP-TV in Cannes this year, the huge global television programme trade show, I noticed an unprecedented numbers of exporters from Asia.

Therefore, for the first time, Asian television producers need to look at cross-cultural issues.

4. Nation states are irrelevant to culture.

Let us look at a small market like Singapore. Is it one market for me or four?

Of course, English dominates Singapore. But, there are four official languages. UTV International produces programming in Singapore in three out of four languages: English, Malay and Tamil.

My market is completely fragmented by language. I could produce the best, most popular television programme in English and it still would not register on the list of the top ten programmes in Singapore. Chinese programmes, simply by virtue of the language, are in all top ten spots because the Chinese language channel, Channel 8, has about 50% of the audience.

There are very few homogeneous nation-states in the world. Japan and Iceland are examples. The larger markets, though, are all multi-cultural, especially in Asia.

In my business, the challenge is for television programme producers to recognize commonalities among Asian countries either by segmenting the market by language, groups of countries or by smaller segments within specific countries. Country-specific and language-specific content is the programming model of the future. And, with the advent of digitization, this reality can be achieved no matter what delivery method is use.

5. Research for the future.

Who are you targeting when you communicate?

If you were targeting the largest five economies in 1993 according to the World Bank, you would have had to create communications aimed at the West. In order, the US, Japan, China,

Germany and France were the top five. If you are planning for the top five in 2000, forget about the Europeans; in order, plan for China, the US, Japan, India and Indonesia.

What does that mean? Let us again come down to practical examples from the world of television. Let us assume you have a character entering a house. If you were programming in the past, aiming at the West, you could have let the character enter the house with his shoes on. But, in China, Japan, India and Indonesia it is common to leave ones shoes at the door when entering a house. To reach the masses, I would have the character remove his shoes in programmes targeted to those countries.

6. Ignore the delivery system.

The medium is not the message. The principles of communicating across borders are the same if you communicating through the world of television, typing a message on the Internet, composing a fax, creating a CD ROM or simply talking on the telephone.

In this audience, I presume that many of you are professionals in Information Technology and are into the Internet.

In the coupling of entertainment and the Internet, much has been written about the possibilities of putting television programmes on to the Internet. People can, the theory goes, then call up the television programme of their choice with a click of a button and watch it on their computer.

It is entirely possible to-day. Yet no television programme producer I know is producing programming specifically for the Internet. Nor will they in the near future. If there are going to be television programmes accessible by computer, they will be the same programmes available on television sets. As a programme producer, I am oriented towards the television set, not the computer.

That is crucial. The audiences are vastly different. Television audiences are rooted in the country in which they are. They do not speak English, especially in Asia. They may not be literate. They cross all socio-demographic groupings.

7. Be a slave to the content.

The most watched television programme in the world is *Baywatch*.

Many of you may not know that *Baywatch* actually flopped when it made its debut in North America. It was taken off the air. Even to-day it is not at all popular in the US and Canada.

Yet, it travels very well and is seen in a huge number of countries. Why? Yes, it is because there are beautiful young men and women running around in swimsuits. But there is more. In my opinion, it is also because of the relatively simple plots and story lines. Simplicity works across borders. It is also works because it is quintessential American - young people having a ball at the beach. It is, therefore, believable to audiences.

Put the same plots into virtually any other country and it would not work. I do not think that even a very well produced, highly local programme showing Malaysian lifeguards at any of Malaysia's beautiful beaches would work.

Certain genres in television travel much better than others. Soap operas, game shows, educational programmes and documentaries travel well. Programmes that relate more to cultural nuances, like comedies, do not travel well. The self-deprecating humor of Britain does not have people laughing in Malaysia, where slap-stick is more appreciated.

Dramas and action-oriented programmes are difficult to characterize. In the West, sexual innuendo are much more tolerated than in most of Asia. Yet, the reverse is true for violence, where what is shown in Japan would be censored in Canada. Therefore, dramas may or may not travel well depending in large part on the acceptability of the content.

8. A new dawn is coming.

There are challenges to meet in communicating across cultures. The globalization versus national responsiveness challenge is acute in the world of media especially in the creation of entertainment.

The world is indeed shrinking at a very rapid pace. That is very fortunate and portends well for the future.

As the world shrinks, cross-cultural communications will become easier. Already powerful examples exist. Those that are on the Internet are largely homogeneous. They are educated, literate and usually fluent in English.

Technology has made the world shrink. It has made communicating across borders vastly easier. But, we are not yet there in the art of communicating across borders, especially with moving images. Those of us that create content to be seen by hundreds of millions of people across many countries still have a lot to learn about the differences and similarities of human beings.

As to where I am from....

INVOLVING MEDIA IN ASIA'S SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Rufus Bellamy
Manuel Satorre Jr.

TOPIC : *Involving Media in Asia's Sustainable Development*

- * *Is media a protector or perpetuator in the campaign for a clean environment?*
- * *Media's role in addressing poverty, population and environmental degradation*

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