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**Communication Education In Singapore :
Responding To Media Needs**

By

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COMMUNICATION EDUCATION IN SINGAPORE: RESPONDING TO MEDIA NEEDS

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides both general directions for media communication education and the needs of the media as well as specific efforts to date for tertiary education in Singapore to meet those needs. It is argued that a strong commitment to both the means and method of responsive media education is necessary if implementations of communication and information technology are to attain the goals of advancing society.

1. WHITHER MEDIA EDUCATION

If the amount of literature available on the topic of media education is any indication of its importance, then media education is and will remain a vital part of the overall formal, informal and institutional curriculum. The 1982 UNESCO declaration on Media Education issued by the International Symposium on Media Education in Grunwald, Germany, still provides ample rationale for media education. The declaration begins with the simple acknowledgment that, "We live in a world where media are omnipresent." This alone seems to provide the need for responsible education in media developments and as the declaration further states, "...making sense of such consequences as the rapid development of two-way communication..." The declaration also calls upon the competent authorities to initiate and support

comprehensive media education courses, develop training courses for teachers, and stimulate research and development among others. All laudable goals to achieve, with strong rationale for their achievement.

As we have all been witness over the last decade, there is an ever increasing plethora of media technology and services which engage our time and attention. The proactive implementation of such communication technology through numerous and varied policies and plans as well as reactive market conditions for development, are simultaneously shaping an evolution if not revolution of human activities. There is no shortage of both new and challenging, as well as old and unresolved, subject matter in the various media worthy of our focused attention.

Questions remain, however, as to whether we are currently doing enough, or should we do even more in the future in the realm of media education. A quick survey across the nations of our planet will reveal very uneven answers to these questions even if we presume media education is important. Lack of resources can constrain even the best intentioned programmes while poor plans and execution can crush a well-financed one. Substitutions of the new and exotic can often come faster than the establishment of the fundamentals. Media education can be a part of an intense political agenda for the public at large or relegated to relatively obscure corners of the oft-forgotten campus.

As Alvin Toffler claims in his book *Powershift*, information and knowledge are an ever increasing part of the formula of power in the world today and information's increasing role is also transforming the relationships of power itself. We may only tacitly acknowledge such excitable hyperbole of the otherwise eye-opening prognostications of Toffler. However, the inescapable conclusion for media education as part of the power of information, is that its importance will necessarily expand in the future. Whether we are prepared to commit to that necessity, available resources notwithstanding, will in part determine the redistribution of power in the transforming geo-political landscape. The globalisation of media itself should be of concern to media education planners as well as the need to adjust the curriculum in part to take account of the rapid changes. In terms of relevance and importance, it would appear that giving media education (as one part of the broader communication curriculum) an even greater priority is more pronounced now than ever.

2. STATE-OF-THE-ART AND STATE-OF-THE-MIND

Few will doubt today that the 1990s have already witnessed an explosion of communication and information technology use on a global scale, causing serious re-assessments of both national and international assumptions in nearly all domains of human activity. The distribution of such technology, however, is of course very

uneven across the globe. Those with the means are increasingly using it for functioning and gain on a global level and those without are increasingly feeling the anxiety and direct losses associated with being left out.

Holaday (1992) observes that the communication curriculum in Asia is itself becoming more globalised. After passing through various succeeding attempts to Westernise and Asianise the curriculum in the 1970s and 80s respectively, many programmes in Asia are in fact attempting to place communication in a broader globalised context in the 1990s. While admitting such categorisation may be somewhat of an over-simplification, Holaday asserts that this process is symptomatic of a deeper cultural shift over the past 20 to 30 years. He claims that the students themselves have an intuitive sense of the importance of the media [perhaps because it is so pervasive in their lives] and that "their apprehensions about control over their lives accurately describe their situation, and indeed the situation in which we are all living... This anxiety of control is taken to be the driving force behind current popularity of communication studies, as well as the basis for the prevailing attitude of its new recruits." (Holaday, 1992, p.227) He further suggests that education needs to respond to what I will term as a particularly anxious "state-of-the-mind" and that communication curriculum development must reflect the pressure brought to bear by the students' anxiety of control.

In the increasingly tantalising realm of communication and information technology development, anxiety over control of new systems or, worse, being controlled by such systems, can easily outweigh the often overly-optimistic proclaimed benefits to society of such technology. Mulgan (1991) points out that the degree of public controls imposed over content and access will, to a large extent, determine the limits of a society's openness and comfort with new technologies. While requiring a commitment to financial resources which are sometimes difficult to justify in the short-term, the state-of-the-art provision of equipment where feasible, allows students to develop skills in the educational setting that in fact help to alleviate anxieties of control. When students gain a handle on the means by which communication control takes place, they become not only able to transfer skills to successive state-of-the-art developments, but as importantly, they become masters of their own state-of-the-mind. Informed students who have both the fundamental *skills* (practical as well as analytical and critical) and the fundamental *knowledge* of communication and communication technologies are more likely to put those skills and knowledge to broader open, creative and positive use in society.

The restrictive control to which systems and services of communication technologies are often reduced in many Asian countries is due in part to the implementation of more negatively-oriented and control-minded policies precisely

because of the very kind of anxiety the students feel. This anxiety in fact resides in the leadership itself which is often unaware and even afraid of the rapidly changing communication scene to which they feel a need to control in order not to be overrun culturally, socially and politically. But negative control as a reaction to a communication and information influx is eventually self-defeating both politically and economically as history points out time and again. Instead, the focus should be placed on developing and mobilising the resources which allow for the use of new technologies to provide a more viable alternative (both competitively and popularly) than the influx of products and services from outside. The development of such alternatives will require a long-term, cooperative view, not the least of which is the development of media education itself to help foster a more positive environment for alternative systems and services to flourish.

Communication education in the globalised sense, then, means overcoming that anxiety-based control and turning it into positive, socially constructive implementations of technologies which provide access on a broad and open basis. A perhaps trite but telling example may be appropriate here. We have all witnessed the astonishing success of primary school students when introduced to personal computers and their adaptability to and acceptance of computers as a normal part of their lives. This is compared to the sometimes extreme anxiety of older generations toward the use of the same. But, even this latter group can also adapt, provided both means and method to continuing education are available.

The bottom line eventually seems to favour the necessity and justification for providing both the financial means for state-of-the-art in skills development and the curricular methods to evolve a positive, open state-of-the-mind. When provided with both the means and the method, education in communication especially in areas of the media can achieve very positive, high-quality results. This will eventually lead to a broader social acceptance and understanding without the perceived need (due in part to associated anxiety) to control through negative sanction. Rather, a strong commitment to communication education can play a major role in encouraging an environment where positive, creative and, ultimately, sustainable use of communication and information technology can in fact obtain the lofty goals of benefit to society at large. Obtaining these goals is most certainly not a given of the technology itself. The lack of education in this area in fact will almost necessarily result in a failure to obtain these goals.

3. CURRICULAR STRUCTURES TO MEET MEDIA EDUCATION OBJECTIVES

The major advantage of media education at the university level is that it encompasses the liberal arts and an inter-disciplinary approach, thus broadening the student's vision, and to help him place his skills training in an appropriate social context (Karthigesu, 1992). To this end, I suggest that a successful programme in communication education, especially in terms of the special subset of media education as an applied art, must in various forms co-opt and be co-opted by the media industries.

First, there should be no doubt of the very basic and overriding importance of providing the knowledge of and reflections on the media itself. This is at the core of a university education in the media studies. The purpose is to allow the student to begin careers imbued with positive notions of responsibility and understanding of the media as well as to develop the ability to analyse new situations and come to reasonable conclusions for action. However, with today's rapidly changing media environment comes the necessity of education to be adaptable to meet ever changing media industry needs as well. This is also a necessary part of an evolution to remain relevant despite the underlying importance of media education.

To accomplish this, special efforts must be made on both the part of the university and industry to cooperate and indeed understand the mutually beneficial results of such cooperation. Curriculum and course planners should not shy away from seeking industry input to help shape curriculum and facilities in an advisory role. Industry leaders should simultaneously take the lead in providing universities with information on their near and long-term needs to help strengthen the university's ability to gauge and adapt to the changing media environment.

In my experience, however, this is often easier said than done as channels of communication between the two are poorly developed. This situation is in fact often the result of a very problematic academia-industry suspicion gap.

The suspicion gap might be characterised in two ways. First, many older and well-seasoned media professionals lack formal academic qualifications often for the simple reason that such educational opportunities did not exist when they were students. While a lack of such qualifications in no way speaks ill of such professionals, who often learned their skills in the real-world classroom of 'hard knocks', they sometimes perceive university graduates as a threat to their positions. Secondly, to be blunt, academics can sometimes think too highly of themselves. Such attitudes are viewed negatively by industry professionals as undeserved egoism or an unjustified superiority based solely on paper qualifications. Fortunately, while there are many exceptions, the fact is some academics have precious little professional

experience upon which to draw in presenting conceptual knowledge. Unfortunately, neither characterisation helps in providing a more competent and relevant educational environment.

Academic qualifications at the tertiary level, however, are becoming a necessary starting point today as the media industries expand and diversify, requiring entry level personnel to come ready-equipped with a broad range of knowledge and skills. This also will help ensure that new employees who come to the industry are genuinely interested in such careers. Coupled with good career prospects for the new employee and competitive pay, the inherent interest of the communication graduate may help alleviate high turn-over rates often associated with the media industries. These industries cannot wait for the inexperienced to spend many years learning the trade hands-on. New employees must be able to contribute directly to the organisation's viability from the start, even if they lack the full benefits of years of actual work experience.

The university itself can do much to alleviate such rifts. One means at reducing the academia-industry suspicion gap would be to simply acknowledge the contributions of seasoned professionals while embarking on the necessity of educating a new generation of potential media professionals. The experienced journalist or television producer for example should be brought in to the university setting as a special lecturer (part-time or adjunct) or for special occasions such as one-off seminars or workshops. They could even become mentors. Students are very eager to benefit from the wisdom of such practitioners, whose roles, far from being threatened, are in fact given special value and recognition.

In addition, university officials can make a special effort to bring media leaders into the formal education planning process. This could include establishing various advisory panels which meet regularly with faculty and administrators. Far from being committees without agendas or mere rubber stamps, both industry and academia should take such an opportunity seriously to learn from each other. Very likely, the outcome would be many new positive suggestions which both sides can utilise.

Such cooperative arrangements are more likely to succeed if the means by which to carry out curricular objectives of media education are more clearly identified. Various curricular structures to meet the objectives of media education are outlined below. This list is neither intended to be exhaustive of possibilities nor are almost all the notions new. But, it may help provide emphasis to planning for possibilities and strengthening the quality of media education.

1. Theory, principles, process and structure -- Providing for empirical, analytical and critical knowledge development with a conceptual understanding of the media. Universities are uniquely positioned to develop intellectual abilities through this essential knowledge core.

2. Research, research training and collaborative research efforts -- This should be a strong, if not unique domain of the university. In terms of service to the media industries, indeed community and national service, research is the value-added business of a university media programme.
3. Directed Workshops -- The university curriculum in media education should develop a strong but not necessarily overriding appreciation of generic functional skills for effectiveness in managerial/directorial/editorial roles.

At this juncture, permit me a major digression to discuss the very difficult questions that arise out of the more practically oriented, skills training objective of the curriculum.

In the realm of justifying the need for practical training and facilities provision at tertiary educational institutions, a number of divergent views exist. For example, Karthigesu (1992) contends that, "Media education, at both teaching and learning ends, is not predicated on modern up-to-date technology. Learning to operate these machines does not warrant years of training" (p.211). This viewpoint is well taken for placing skills training appropriately within a university curriculum. However, it tends to grossly underestimate the very real need for skills training in the media industries (which in fact does take a long period to develop), while naively overstating that such training merely consists of operating machines. This unfounded point of view unfortunately often equates skills training to "button-pushing", and confuses broader skills development with the use of the specific tools to carry it through. Such arguments can too easily be reduced 'ad absurdum'. Are we, for example, to forego skills training in all domains then that require some operation of machines as tools to be carried-out? Imagine the quality of engineering education without (often costly) laboratory workshops. Do pilots, even cabin crew for that matter, spend months training merely to push buttons on airplanes? (For my safety, I sure hope not!) Can we expect doctors to practice medicine successfully without adequate practical (clinical) skills training or do they merely need a day or two of training to operate all the medical machines? Why, then, might it be expected that media students only require "a few days of in-house training"? I know of few in the media industries who would agree. While state-of-the-art facilities certainly are not obtainable to some, it does not mean we should forego their pursuit wherever possible in striving to provide for a better quality education.

In reality, of course, it is more for differences of financial rather than intellectual justification that workshop training and practical courses are one of the more sensitive areas surrounding the overall perception of a quality university education in communication and especially the media. The development of high-quality technical facilities can as easily be intertwined with confounding purposes of prestige and

university image. Such facilities require not only a large capital expenditure at the outset, but also require a long-term commitment to an adequate operational and maintenance budget with the view toward the amortisation of facilities and their eventual up-grading and/or replacement. Such resources are simply not readily available in many situations.

However, we may ask ourselves if everything has been done to explore the possibility of utilising existing facilities of both public and private industry players for the purpose of collaborative workshop courses. Many innovative and creative agreements between the university and industry are possible and should be given more attention especially for the university which does not have its own extensive resources for full media training costs. For those universities that do have such resources, the onus is on them to incorporate the best that industry has to offer in order to make such facilities truly useful. In addition, measures to make the facilities 'profit-centres' might also be explored in order to justify on-going operation and maintenance costs. This is certainly true for a student newspaper operation on campus for example, which might charge for advertising to help off-set costs.

On an academic level, practical courses at the university level in media training, including radio or video production for example, involve skills development of the full process of project conceptualisation to implementation. Not the least of the outcomes of such training is the student's own reduction in anxiety at gaining control over the means of production. This naturally must include gaining an appreciation of technical functions and tools. Methodologically and pedagogically, these skills are best taught at a generic level, however, and not be proscribed directly to any one particular type or brand of equipment. Transferability of skills is an important function of this level of training.

But, much more importantly, skills training includes the management of resources, including the management of technically trained personnel. Such management is often most effective when the managers and directors (roles to which university graduates will eventually progress) at least understand the technical aspects even as they may not become technically skilled specialists themselves. Such an appreciation is poorly learned if facilities and equipment are not of a professional standard. A well-endowed university programme can certainly offer a more sophisticated appreciation of the technical and managerial roles, and good facilities certainly can greatly enhance the quality of education as it provides a more complete learning arena. However, it does not mean that lacking such facilities will necessarily compromise a university education in media. Only the scope of that education may be limited in such a situation. Returning to the broader and more important point, such facilities should not be the major focus of media education even as they are often the

most visible and most expensive apart perhaps from staff costs themselves. The more practical skills are just one aspect of the larger role that a university education plays in preparing students for their eventual roles of higher responsibilities in society.

To continue with the listing of possible curricular structures to meet media education objectives:

4. Campus-wide practicum/service operations - i.e. newspapers, journals, radio and TV stations, communication network services, electronic distance education operations, teleconferencing services, information/database services, etc. These hands-on operations, where feasible, not only provide an excellent training ground with "real-world" sensibilities built-in, but, often can become viable and integral services to the campus and community themselves. They absolutely require a sense of largesse and generosity-of-thought on the part of university officials and politicians to allow for honest mistakes and teething problems. To succeed, students themselves should not have an undue fear of commercial, financial or political reprisals. Ideally, these settings should be seen as both testing grounds for new and creative ideas, as well as a place to provide responsible practical training with a generous regard for the occasional blunder. Such opportunities will help build, amongst other benefits, a much needed sense of confidence.
5. Internships/Work Attachments (not just observational) -- There is tremendous value in well-planned short-term (several weeks) and long-term (perhaps one semester) internships. These are especially useful in building greater linkages between universities and industry which can feed back to research activities for example. Not only do internships provide the obvious direct link for the student into the industry, they can also help make the curriculum more responsive to industry needs.

Internships may even be more important for institutions which do not have enough resources to provide adequate training facilities themselves. This however, requires very good relations between the university and industry.
6. Continuing Education -- Media education must not be confined only to students in the traditional institutional setting. Public seminars, advanced diploma courses, training workshop opportunities for the professional to upgrade knowledge and skills (and be academically recognised for such), part-time courses and distance education efforts can add immensely to a university's relevancy to the community, industry and nation.
7. Special Projects and industry collaborations -- Making further productive use of capital intensive equipment resources and human capital of the university in service to industry. These need not necessarily be restricted to non-commercial products.

Of course, not all institutions can provide the full range of activities listed here and indeed most will prioritise many and even simply not provide for some. Nonetheless, while the university faculty is largely competent to define and provide instruction in the knowledge of media as one of their primary tasks, it is to the mutual benefit of both academia and industry to work together in defining and providing for educational needs at both formal and informal levels to eventually meet all of the

curricular objectives of media education.

One final important note in this regard: To a very strong degree, universities themselves must be more willing to recognise the contributions of its faculty in terms of promotion and tenure with regard to efforts in establishing university/industry links. While teaching, research and publications remain important criteria for advancement in an academic career, motivation to increase university/industry relations will be better realised if such activities are an integral part of the reward system.

4. MEDIA NEEDS IN SINGAPORE AND THE INITIATIVES OF THE TERTIARY EDUCATION SYSTEM

The Singapore education system still practises the somewhat arbitrary separation of tertiary education into different perceptual and actual levels between the polytechnics and universities. This leads to separate qualifications (diploma and degree respectively) which still carry heavy perceived and actual differences in employment opportunities in Singapore and opportunities for advancement in careers. Many countries, for which the education system has largely followed in the British tradition, have abandoned such dichotomies. However, Singapore continues to separate its tertiary education into these two levels associated respectively with results from the completion of studies at the "O" and "A" levels. Therefore, only those with the best results after A-levels are admitted to the university, while those with less favourable A-level results may have to resort to the polytechnics. Moreover, only good O-level results are prerequisite for entry to the polytechnics. This means that many otherwise potentially good university students are left either to pursue studies overseas if they can afford to or use the polytechnic route to get a diploma first then spend a shorter time abroad at a university to obtain a "top-up" degree [1]. The demand for degree education for many subjects within Singapore remains higher than the "seats" available and stringent entry requirements cut out many otherwise capable of maturing through the education process to reach the goal of a degree. The major emphasis at both polytechnic and university levels in Singapore is on engineering, sciences and business administration courses. Communication (and media) education is a relative new-comer to the tertiary education scene in Singapore.

4.1 Polytechnic Level

In 1989, Singapore's first fully designated programme in communication education at the tertiary level came in the form of a polytechnic diploma in mass communication at Ngee Ann Polytechnic. This three-year course, with only O-level entry requirements, has a technical and practical focus. However the popularity of the

subject saw many A-level students apply initially. The programme is aimed largely at providing entry level workers for the growing media industry in Singapore. The students graduate with a Diploma in Mass Communication and are readily absorbed for now in jobs which require at least a base level of functioning and knowledge of the various types of media organisations. These students typically can take on jobs as assistants to account executives in advertising agencies and public relations firms, production assistants in television and radio, and assistant convention and event planners, amongst many possibilities.

The introduction of the diploma course in Singapore was a welcome development in direct response to one particular need of Singapore's media industry. Several surveys were undertaken at the outset which indicated the need for the course. The results of these surveys helped in part to plan for the relative student in-take levels to meet industry needs and future employment projections as well as plan for the resources required and the curriculum needed to make the department a success. The teaching staff of the department draws on both foreign and local expertise with an emphasis on providing students with hands-on experience. Teaching staff are encouraged themselves to gain additional experience through industry attachments. A number of media practitioners also lend a hand to the course through part-time teaching and seminars. The department has also collaborated with various companies in the development of media tools. For example, a number of students were involved in creating frames for the development of the videotex system, Teleview, of Singapore Telecom. Today the Department of Mass Communication at Ngee Ann Polytechnic promises to continue to provide a much needed contribution directly aimed at the technical entry level of the media in Singapore [2].

4.2 University Level

On a more significant level, however, was the development of a degree course in Mass Communication at the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 1991 and the establishment of a School of Communication Studies at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in 1992.

Singapore's development of communication education at the University level had been uneven and largely insignificant until this time. Communication courses were first offered in the early 1970s at what was then the Nanyang University (NU) and the University of Singapore (SU). A formal programme in mass communication was started in 1975 at NU but only lasted five years graduating about 100 students.

This programme was subsequently closed when NU merged with SU to become the National University of Singapore in 1980 (Kuo, 1993).

By the late 1980s, however, communication (and media) education was put on the right track again largely in response to requests from the media industry. From what proved to be a popular enrichment programme begun at NUS in 1988, the way was paved to establish once again a formal communication programme. This track evolved into the establishment of a well-endowed Department of Mass Communication in 1991 at NUS. However, it became clear that an even greater effort would be needed and that resources should be consolidated. Thus, Singapore's first substantive and long-term commitment to a four-year communication degree was established in the School of Communication Studies at Nanyang Technological University (NTU). [3] The Department at NUS (now called the Mass Communication Programme), which just graduated its first degree students this year, is being merged with the School at NTU. The Government's financial commitment to this School in terms of its new facilities (S\$21m) is indeed impressive. The curriculum has, in part, developed out of the experience of many from around the world. It blends the best from curriculum developed elsewhere with the local needs of Singapore and the region, while keeping an eye toward future developments. Faculty are currently being drawn from Singapore, other Asian countries and North America. Hiring criteria is based on academic as well as professional experience. A number of 'memoranda of agreement' have been initiated with other universities to take advantage of mutually beneficial resources. This evolution from enrichment track to degree programme at NUS and now on to a complete School of Communication Studies at NTU, provides an unparalleled example of a new and exceptionally strong commitment to communication education in the whole of Southeast Asia.[4] And indeed, meeting industry needs is one very important part of that commitment in Singapore.

In terms of the curriculum structures to meet media education objectives listed in the previous section, the following outlines some of the School of Communication Studies' progress to date:

An advisory panel of communication industry leaders has been established to work with the School to develop its programmes.

A commitment by some of Singapore's media industry players toward the establishment of skills training facilities at the School.

The establishment of four divisions within the School to shepherd various academic and training specialisations.

The development of a course curriculum which embraces the core of intellectual development in communication studies as well as provides for a breadth of knowledge and a depth in communication research. This is accompanied by a strong, but not overriding component in directed workshops and skills training.

The development of a number of industry-related research projects have ensued since the establishment of the programme at NUS and will continue to expand with the School at NTU. These research projects include, amongst many others, investigations into the development of telecommunications policy in Singapore and the region, various aspects of press policies in Singapore, public relations and corporate images, media censorship, and the role of media in national elections.[5] While a research tradition per se is yet to be firmly established, the School will play a leading and coordinating role. It will be concerned with broader research issues in intercultural and international communication as well as social and economic impacts of new communication and information technology.

A working paper series has been initiated of staff research work circulated both internally and externally to foster the research environment.

The establishment and expansion of a semester-long internship programme for final year students of the School. Short-term industry attachments are provided currently to the students of the NUS programme. Also, an international exchange committee has been set up to assist students with overseas internship placements.

The establishment of short-term courses, in collaboration with other universities and industry to meet regional professional education needs.

Conducting joint industry-university colloquia and seminars as part of the outcomes from joint research activities.

The establishment of on-going guest lectureships and seminars with industry professionals and invited part-time teaching of courses. For example, two professional trainers from the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) taught part-time in the Mass Communication Programme at NUS in 1993/94 and continue there as guest lecturers.

A campus-wide newspaper, *The Nanyang Chronicle*, has already been established. There will also eventually be a student-run radio and television station amongst other projects.

In terms of physical facilities, a new building, presently under construction and due for completion in early 1996, will house an eventual faculty of about 40 lecturers and 400 undergraduate students. The building will also contain complete facilities for major aspects of media training from print to electronics, a library and research facilities. The Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC) will also be housed in the new building. [6]

The School has also begun and is currently developing a formal masters level programme and envisions the eventual development of continuing education and doctoral level degree programmes. Overall, the School has embarked on a path which will hopefully see its eventual positioning as a regional resource base for communication education in Southeast Asia.

5. SUGGESTIONS FOR GENERAL DIRECTIONS OF MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION EDUCATION

In an ever changing and challenging world, communication plays a significant, indeed a central role in human activity. The need to keep pace intellectually (if not necessarily in terms of technology on hand) is paramount if our education systems are to remain relevant. A constant vigil needs to be kept in terms of evaluating and changing the curriculum in the dynamic realm of communication and information technology as it is embraced to ever greater degrees. No university system can afford to become a static knowledge base, which by definition, becomes obsolete even as it is imparted to others. There must be continuing debate, open discourse and policy re-evaluation on social, economic, political and cultural aspects of the media if new technologies, systems and services are to attain their oft-stated hope of contributing significantly to the advancement of society. This may be particularly true for many Asian countries where the political culture exerts influence over the degree of openness of intellectual discussion, especially in areas such as the media which are regarded with some anxiety. With the source of financing for media education being overwhelmingly from government funds, the implicit control of any particular dominant political culture may influence the outcome of the media education endeavor. This can result in biases which may only exacerbate anxieties rather than provide an educational environment leading to a greater maturation of society.

What directions, then, should future media education take in the face of new and ever changing social, political and technological challenges? There are many possible answers to this question, as many as there are situations and contexts of which media education is a part. However, let me offer but three possible avenues.

First, an increasing focus needs to be placed on the professional application of media technologies. This would not only involve preparing students for possible careers as media professionals per se, but also provide for training in the increasingly important dimension of all disciplinary studies, the communication of information and knowledge. Admittedly, this first direction can have very heavy capital costs attached. New and innovative strategies will have to be created to overcome this. One way would be through intensifying the links between the media industries and education. Media industries need to be co-opted into media education.

Secondly, media as a subject of description, research, and analysis needs to play a larger role in primary and secondary education as well. This may be for no other better reason than to acknowledge its increasingly central function in our daily activities and the lives of young people in particular. It would also provide a means by which

lateral thinking skills can be fostered if we are to take strategic advantage of information as a resource.

Thirdly, the structures and processes of education itself need to take greater advantage of new communication technologies. This might come in the form of providing the communication environment that students will likely face in their future endeavors including, without a doubt, a greater reliance on non-co-present network activities. Information and its use are no longer location specific. Network environments through the use of new communication technologies may also be used in this sense to evolve the education system itself away from its current and increasingly obsolete time and location specific status. Indeed communication (and media) education should play a leading role in this regard.

And, while we have the crystal ball on the table, might it really be altogether too far-fetched to see a major reversal in the power-dominant roles of countries of the past century even as it applies to education itself because of the shifts in information dominance? For example, might not one day a student in London, New York, Sydney or Tokyo earn his or her undergraduate degree via sophisticated communication links to the School of Communication Studies in Singapore? If indeed militaries and the technologies of 'defense' are giving way to information and its technologies as the world's dominant power resource, then new communication technologies and the media will increasingly be the distribution tools of wealth and power.

The challenges are formidable, resources notwithstanding. Educating leaders to the necessity of quality communication (including media) education is essential. In return, communication education can provide a sustainable avenue of evolving not only communication and information technology systems and services in positive, society-advancing ways but evolving positively, society's ability to deal intelligently and openly in all realms of communication from interpersonal and intercultural levels to international, indeed global levels.

ENDNOTES

- [1] A number of students also use the polytechnic diploma as a short-cut to gaining a university degree outside of Singapore typically in a "top-up" degree. This is an alternative to the degree path within Singapore wherein the O-level student can obtain a degree by completing a three-year diploma course in Singapore and then spending one-year at certain universities abroad. This is in contrast to the recognised university route in Singapore of successfully completing two years of A-level study after O-levels, and then proceeding to a three- to four-year full university course either in Singapore or abroad. Unfortunately, the top-up route to a degree means the student will not have the opportunity of the enrichment provided by the breadth and depth of a full university study experience.

- [2] Dr. Victor Valbuena has been named Head of the Mass Communication Department at Ngee Ann Polytechnic as of July 1994. He was formerly with the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Center (AMIC).
- [3] Professor Eddie C.Y. Kuo is the Dean of the School of Communication Studies at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) on secondment from, and concurrently as, the Director of the Mass Communication Programme at the National University of Singapore (NUS). This latter programme will be completely phased-out by May 1996 when the last group of NUS honours students graduate. The School, which is in its second year of operation, is temporarily housed in the Museum building on the NTU campus.
- [4] A number of other private diploma and degree programmes have been started in Singapore riding largely on the coattails of the University and Polytechnic programmes. These private programmes are essentially catering to a resultant strong student demand for the subject. As entry to the University and Polytechnic programmes are quite competitive, other programme providers have been able to capitalise on the excess student demand but largely lack industry links.
- [5] For a select bibliography of mass communication research in Singapore, see Kuo, 1993.
- [6] The Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC), in an agreement with the Government of Singapore and NTU, will be housed in the new building of the School of Communication Studies beginning in 1996. AMIC will occupy parts of the second and third floors of the new building, with separate entrances, and will share some conference and library facilities with the School. The School of Communication Studies at NTU and AMIC already jointly edit and publish the *Asian Journal of Communication*.

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