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Culturally Insensitive Or Politically Oversensitive?

By

Peter Gerdes
This is a plea for less apprehension and more education in the area of cultural understanding.

Most people have become blase about the speed with which communication networks are being established around the World. Computers, information super hype and global television rule. Few take time to sit back and evaluate what we are so blase about - and what the consequences of this attitude might be.

"The information age" has become a buzzword. "Information" cannot be slowed down, let alone stopped. Unfortunately, form seems to matter more than content. Marshall McLuhan's concept of the "Global Village" had one major drawback: it celebrated form only and did not take into account content, i.e. the fact that the world is made up of different cultures. The suggestion that the world could become a cozy little village where everybody knows everybody else and everybody understands everybody else (apart from the occasional misunderstanding) is fundamentally flawed. It disregards the fact that the world's cultures are extremely complex structures which cannot be forced to adjust to each other. Communication signals reach every corner of the world, but acceptance and comprehension of the content of those signals lag. Almost everybody can send, most can receive but few can understand. The result: accusations of cultural insensitivity, of bully-boy tactics. And these are particularly prominent in the Australian-South-East Asian region.

"Foul"? Not really!

Any student of the relationship between the Australian media and SE Asian politicians would do well to read the introduction to Edward Said's "Orientalism", first published in 1978. He points out how the West became fascinated with the "Orient" and how the term "Orientalism" itself "connotes the high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century European colonialism" (Said, 9). He also stipulates that "ideas, cultures, and histories cannot be seriously understood or studied without their force, or more precisely their configurations of power, also being studied". (Said; 5).

Many of those high-ranking SE Asian politicians who complain loudly about the Australian media have studied extensively at the best (Western) academic establishments. (1) They may even have studied Australian history and politics. We may assume that they are fully aware of Western perceptions of the media, of concepts of individuality and freedom of expression. On the other hand, most Australian media workers who cover the region or who involve the region in their artistic work have a reasonable knowledge of the history and current politics of SE Asian countries. (2) Most know about cultural sensitivities, about different perceptions of political systems and concepts of law and order. Most know that Indonesians would not be very interested in a wet t-shirt contest, that Chinese would be shocked by seeing a prime
minister being grilled in a current affairs program and that a film about sex-crazed teenagers arguing with their elders would go badly with Malaysian authorities. They do know that different countries have different outlooks on life.

But "having" knowledge does not necessarily mean having "internalised" knowledge. And in the hotbeds of politics and media, irrational reaction to the perceived rational handling of an issue happens easily. It is difficult to eradicate the notion of the "Orient" after it has been preached for 200 years in Australia. It is equally difficult to eradicate the notion that Australia is trying to bully other countries into its own view of correct behaviour. Many Asian politicians see Australia as part of the colonial powers which ruled for so long over a great part of the region. In fact, both sides react against the same past. Australia was also a colony and is still in the process of finding its own identity. SE Asian countries, too, suffered under colonialism, and although they do stand on their own feet now they are still suspicious of a neighbour who is seen as a sign of what colonialism stood for. Australia is being mistaken for what she suffered herself under: a colonial power!

Time to admit it: all countries in this region are still growing up. They behave like teenagers trying to establish themselves. Insults are not always to be taken at face value, neither are cries of agony.

No worry! It's more talk than potential!

In a few years, the region will be covered by innumerable TV programs from all over the world, and by communication networks which are able to carry any imaginable program, from the educational to the perverse. Australia will also be a player in this game, albeit a harmless player, seeing that she is hardly able to establish a basic cable or pay-TV system herself. Even in Australia exist big plans to cover the planet with a TV footprint reaching as far as the Middle East and Eastern Europe. But there is no need to worry. "Australia Television" which began on February 17, 1993, is at present still fighting for basic funding and will, at least in the near future, be less of a danger than Mr Murdoch's "Star TV", for instance. (3)

Australia's media systems, particularly in the early days, suffered from the domineering attitude of the US media. When they grew up, they fought against this dominance, with some remarkable results: local products became popular, even gained cult status overseas. Now that they have reached a certain maturity, they want to play in the big league. This means marking a presence around the world; if that is not possible, at least a presence in the region.

Fact 1: Australia is politically and strategically a minor player in world politics. Hence TV material, particularly news and current affairs, are of little relevance to anyone outside Australia.

Fact 2: Within the region, Australia does play a certain role but the country is, Prime Minister Keating's views notwithstanding, not Asian, hence culturally outside the mainstream. (It must be noted that New Zealand knows her place much better.) Keating's attitude is typical for the superficiality with which Australian politicians approach complex cultural issues. How can Australia be Asian? Does he want Asian values in Australia? Personally he might feel happy about the lack of press freedom in some regional countries but would he want to have such restrictions incorporated in Australia's constitution? But first, Canberra has to improve at home. A recent study published by the Asia-Australia Institute and the Academy of Social Sciences comes to the conclusion that the Federal Government's use of language and logic
developed in the Cold War is undermining its understanding of the Asia-Pacific region. ("Cold War attitude "hampers analysis"", in The Australian, May 10, 1994).

The "Embassy" and its criticism.

If ever one needed proof for Lee Kuan Yew's statement that "Asian people are intense people by culture" (21 April, 1994, Press Club Canberra) one need not go any further than the screening of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's television series "Embassy" begun in 1990, with a second series following in 1991 and a third in 1992.

The series is set in the fictitious country Ragaan "based on about 20 other countries", according to its producer Alan Hardy. (Sydney Morning Herald, 9 July, 1991). However, it is situated in SE Asia, "sandwiched between Burma, Malaysia and Thailand". The country is made up of people of diverse racial origins and has a military government headed by General Mahmoud who tries, among other things, to keep fundamentalists under control. Occasionally, Ragaan runs into conflict with neighbouring Mendaka (mainly over potential oil reserves) and sometimes with Australia.

At the centre of the series' activities lies the Australian embassy and its employees. "The Australian "General Mahmoud get on well with each other in private but inevitably have to defend their respective cultures, their social, economical and cultural politics. Episodes deal with such issues as malnutrition, lack of medical facilities and supply of arms through the Australian government. Some critics accused "Embassy" of racism. "Yet nowhere did Embassy suggest that all Asians were like or unlike the people of Ragaan. Its originators went to great pains not to typecast anyone as good or evil, inferior or superior, on the grounds of race. The Australians' strengths and weaknesses were more often the theme than were those of the Ragaanis." (Alison Broinowski, Sydney Morning Herald, 22 March, 1994).

The Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir decided to claim Ragaan as his soon after screenings began. He implied that Ragaan stood for Malaysia and took offence. Official visits between the two countries came to a halt at the end of 1990. Had he ever watched a series, I wonder? Because a close analysis shows that, as Broinowski said, the series was in many regards more critical of Australian attitudes than of Ragaan's. As a matter of fact, Asian viewers could have gained great insights into Australian society and how Australians interpret their own weaknesses. The episode "Does Anybody Know the Words" provides an excellent example.

The Department of Foreign Affairs has sent Australia's greatest living poet on a cultural mission. Dave Bailey is an ex student rebel, into alcohol and a young mistress. He represents the classical example of the unwelcome (yet frequently found) Australian missionary for Australian values. From his arrival, when customs confiscate some of his magazines, to Australia Day, when he recites from a banned book during the official reception, he is trouble, speaking out of turn and insultingly. At one stage, the Ambassador says: "You were here for two days and you think you know". And the media attache reminds him: "There was no need to make a fuss at customs. Ragaani people are proud and polite." (4) Bailey is locked up, threatened with imprisonment and caning. Mahmoud makes sure that he is set free - but the price will have to be paid by the Ragaanis. Bailey has raised the ire of the local fundamentalists, enemies of Mahmoud himself. To satisfy them in the end, Mahmoud has to give in to some of their demands, such as closing all liquor outlets. Result: many little shopowners will be deprived of their income. It is absolutely clear who the guilty party is and the
moral "don't go and try to preach your own values in another country" is convincingly presented.

Censorship, old, tried and useless.

Why Dr Mahathir wanted to feel insulted, is difficult to understand. Perhaps it was political expediency. In 1990, ATV did not yet exist, hence Malaysians had no way of getting to see "Embassy". Today, this would be possible. So what are countries who fear material such as "Embassy" going to do? The obvious is censorship. An old and tried and, as experience has shown, a pretty useless method. Even more useless today. In an age in which the information super highway is more than just fanciful talk, keeping information and entertainment away from any country in the world seems to be rather futile. Murdoch was right when he said that satellite technology posed an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes (there was no need for China to take offence). He could have said an unambiguous threat to any culture, government and religion.

But such threats cannot be fought with bans and censorship. The forbidden is particularly attractive, curiosity is one of the most powerful motivational forces in human beings. If you fear information, what do you make of ignorance? Anyway, as far as Australia is concerned, there is no need to panic in the region: Canberra's media mandarins are becoming more and more moralistic. Open and hidden censorship in all aspects of life is being tightened daily. Political correctness rules.

Don't just sulk - educate!

Political shouting matches or censorship do not provide a solution. Media (including television) embrace the world, and not one single politician is going to stop them. This being the case, the world will have to come to terms with the fact that teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic will have to be supplemented by the teaching of "Understanding Media" or "The Meaning of Cultural Diversity". There is no reason why we should refuse to teach children methods of deciphering cultural concepts and images and sounds when we already accept the fact that they have to learn computer languages. Vijay Menon put it succinctly in the introduction to "Press Systems in SAARC": "The search for an Asian perspective does not imply the total rejection of the Western perspective. It should take whatever is useful and put this in the context of that society's social structure, cultural value and religious belief." (p.xii).

And such teaching can take place irrespective of the economic status of a country. The issue is a political one. You either accept the fact that the media and information in general have become instantly and universally available and hence the dominating force in the world or you stick your head in the sand. Since human beings are not ostriches, you risk to die of suffocation.

NOTES

(1) Ironically, in spite of the heated arguments, recent research has shown that "Malaysia continues to see Australia as a home of quality education". See "Malaysia's smart move", Financial Review, May 3, 1994.

(2) There are exceptions such as the makers of the film "Turtle Beach", directed by Stephen Wallace in 1991. At least they suffered their own, immediate, punishment: the media panned the film for its ridiculous script and potential racism and it vanished without a trace. Films thrive on myths, stereotypes and cliches. And on "oriental" settings, hence "The Year of
Living Dangerously" (1982, Peter Weir) or "Far East" (1982, John Duigan). See also Chua Siew Keng, "Reel Neighbourly. The Construction of Southeast Asian Subjectivities" in Media Information Australia, No. 70, November 1993.


(4) In another episode, "Hanky Panky", there is talk of a sex scandal breaking. General Mahmoud tells the Ambassador in no uncertain terms that "what Westerners might regard as a trifling peccadillo, we Muslims view more seriously."

SELECTED READINGS:

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- Media Asia Vol 21 No 1, 1994
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