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Cultural Sensitivities And International Broadcasting:
Australia's International Television Service

By

Alan Knight
Cultural sensitivities and International Broadcasting
Australia's international television service.

By Alan Knight,
Director (Asia),
Australian Centre for Independent Journalism

Many Australians would like to see themselves free of the lingering cultural domination of their former colonisers. The Australian government would like to form new political and trading links with those others formerly colonised, the nations of south and east Asia.

Australia Television, an offspring of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) was established to help bridge this international gap. The Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating saw the launch of the international television service as taking Australia "another step along the road towards a closer relationship towards the region":

We should be projecting to the world the truth about Australia; this is a robust democracy, a society as rich and diverse and unique as the continent itself. A people able to imagine their future and the world. A creative people, able to make things the world wants to buy. Able to deliver the information and services which the world needs. Able to deliver products of their imagination and culture.¹

In spite of the optimistic rhetoric, Keating's government was only willing to allocate A$5.5 million to the project, in a one off grant which executives from the market leader, Star Television, described as pitifully small. The government's hopes that an international network could be established on the cheap, has forced the national broadcaster, the ABC, to skimp on advertising needed to establish a profile for its international offspring, to recycle its old programs, to step up the pressure on its foreign correspondents to produce more material and to huckster for sponsors in a highly competitive international market.

Australia Television Promotional Video ²

Inside Australia, the ABC is not permitted to carry advertisements on its domestic broadcasts. This is seen to insulate the national broadcaster from economic and political pressures, so that, in theory at least, its journalists can report the news as they see it. However, such rules do not apply to Australia Television's international services. The Australia Television publicity describes itself as, "a business opportunity, you can't afford to miss".

This paper will consider whether the need to find an audience to satisfy these private backers has led Australia Television into private agreements which may have impinged if not compromised the parent broadcaster’s own practices; through agreements made not only with multinational corporations but also forged with foreign governments which censor news and jail dissident journalists.
Hello I am Karina Kelly.

In February 1993, Australia Television was launched as a free to air international television service currently reaching fifteen countries in south east Asia. As part of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Australia Television is committed to the highest quality programming and to presenting Australia and rest of Asia to our Asian audience.

Australia television's capacity to carry sponsors provides an opportunity for business to reach an increasingly sophisticated English speaking market through television the strongest medium of all.

And what better way to promote Australia as a competitive supplier of leading edge expertise and products, information and entertainment.

Programs are transmitted sixteen hours a day, seven days week off the Indonesian Palapa B2P satellite received direct to home. In Indonesia alone there are 1.3 million satellite receiving dishes.

Increasingly we are received by local cable operators as in Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines, reaching hundreds of thousands of households and hotel rooms.

Real and not "potential" audience size is critical to the survival of a service which must sustain itself on advertising revenue, and not government funding. Advertisers demand more than good intentions and rhetoric. They have been somewhat slow to join the foundation sponsors, Telstra, the telecommunications company and Qantas, Australia's international airline. Advertisers require proven audience figures. Australia Television has not been able to supply these.
Instead, the ABC's Managing Director, David Hill chose the international service's first anniversary to release figures prepared by the PA consulting group, which showed that the "reach" of Australian Television had "expanded dramatically". When the service began, the potential audience was estimated at four million. A year later, the new audit indicated that the new potential audience was twenty four million. David Hill spoke to the media after the lavish celebration held at the Sydney Museum of Contemporary Arts to mark Australia Television's first birthday. He admitted under questioning that figures proving audiences did not exist:

There are no pan Asian audience figures. None. And there probably won't be for ten years. In a few of territories we can get audience share. But they are not even countries; they are cities. If you take for example Star television which points to a 100 million audience, they haven't. All anybody in international television in Asia can tell you is the potential audience reach: the number of people who can receive the service.

Real audiences for Australia Television International are difficult to detect in Asia. While Star television, particularly its MTV Rock video and BBC services, are without question being watched by millions from India to Guandong, viewers of Australian Television appear to be few and far between. This may be a result of inadequate promotion to establish an identity. But it could also be a result of Australian specific program material which has little or no relevance to an Asian audience.

The low level of government funding has meant that Australia Television has been forced to recycle programs produced for and aimed at the Australian domestic market. In most cases material, such as that dealing with the specifics of Australian sport or politics, might simply be considered irrelevant to a wider international audience. However, in some cases, program material might be deemed offensive. For example, Australia Television re-broadcast a series on the life of the brilliant British navigator, Captain James Cook, as a fine example of Australian drama. To promote the series, and indeed the network itself, producers chose a video clip from the series which showed semi naked Polynesian women paddling their native canoes out to a technologically superior European sailing ship, "manned" by uniformed white men holding brass telescopes and sextants.

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4 Anne McCaig, Media Liaison Officer, "First Independent Audit of Australia Television Audience", (Sydney: Australian Broadcasting Corporation 17.2.94).
5 David Hill, News Conference, (Sydney: 17.2.94).
Perhaps one should not dwell on the symbolism of such a scene. However, one might remember criticisms of the negative stereotyping imposed by colonial writers who saw the non-European "other" as primitive, sexual beings. In applying symbols loaded with implicit messages, such writers preached the explicit superiority of their own culture; providing rationale for continuing political, economic and social colonialism. Writing about 19th century chroniclers of Asia, Edward Said observed that in such depictions:

The Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, "normal".6

When questioned about the Captain Cook video clip, David Hill said that he rather hoped that viewers would not be offended by islanders in traditional attire. He said that Australian program makers had "to walk a fine line between cultural sensitivity and censorship".

Australia Television recognises that such cultural sensitivities vary from society to society. It advises its program makers that they should be mindful of these concerns, particularly in the area of entertainment programs such as drama and comedy.

Examples of cultural sensitivity include:

# Most societies, especially Islamic ones, are sensitive in various degrees to nakedness of either gender, in the sexual context. There also is particular sensitivity to the public exposure of the female body.

# Religious beliefs and practices vary widely and no absolute standards are possible. However, an awareness of, and respect for, the values of the region will help to avoid unnecessary offence. For example, a foreign cooking program which showed the best way to cook a pork dish, and which was broadcast during the holy month of Ramadam, would clearly cause offence.

# Media in the region tend not to report events as sensational.

# Most Asian countries, especially Sino and Malay based cultures, do not easily accept direct comment or innuendo disparaging the authority, pride, and self respect of leaders and countries within the region.7

Our program and editorial guidelines reflecting cultural sensitivities and editorial guidelines have allowed Australia Television access some markets closed to our competitors. For example, in January this year an historic agreement was signed by the ABC’s Managing Director, David Hill with China’s major national television organisation, Central China TV.

This agreement, the first of its kind, places Australia Television in a unique position with a potential viewing audience in China of over six hundred million people. Similar agreements are in place with Vietnam and Laos.

Australia Television has sought to make the service more attractive to advertisers and offer access to established audiences, by seeking agreements with terrestrial broadcasters to downlink selected programs for re-broadcast. So far, agreements have been reached with Vietnam and China, with negotiations taking place with Indonesia, Taiwan, the Philippines, Malaysia and Burma. The standard agreements, when reached, merely require that the regional broadcaster identifies Australia Television and its sponsors and observe copyright where applicable. However, there is no guarantee that these broadcasters will not selectively edit or indeed censor news or current affairs items. David Hill said it is up to Asian broadcasters to decide what they use:

Interestingly enough, everyone wants the news. I honestly thought they would be more interested in natural history, science but everybody wants the news. That is why we are dramatically increasing news output. China say they want to have a look at it. They may well run Australia Television International news in full. 8

8David Hill, News Conference, (Sydney: 17.2.94).
However, they are under no obligation to do so. In a country which still does not admit the Tianamen massacre occurred, unrestricted international news continues to be seen as a threat to the ruling Beijing government. China failed in its repeated attempts to ban satellite reception dishes which can bring in uncensored news from the outside world. However, it appears to be able to use its growing economic power deflect the efforts of those who might seek political as well as economic liberalisation.

To understand China's attitude to the free flow of information, one might reflect on the words of Jiang Zemin, after he became Chinese Communist Party Secretary. He declared that the media should operate as "the mouthpiece of the party" as well as of "the people". He claimed that some Chinese journalists' support for the pro-democracy movement was linked to bourgeois liberalisation, a product of a deviation from Marxism, which he said had created confusion among the masses. Chinese journalists were subsequently required to educate the people in the spirit of patriotism, socialism, collectivism, self confidence in the struggle, to overcome difficulties in China's way of reconstruction and reform. According to Jiang, journalism was an important part of the party's work, and had to keep close contact with the masses and fight persistently against bourgeois liberalisation.9

This year, Beijing successfully used the huge potential Chinese advertising audience, as a lever in its negotiations with Star television. The Chinese wanted Star to cease transmitting the BBC World Service. The BBC channel on Star, had offered twenty four hour BBC news, edited in London, supplemented by BBC documentaries and other programs. Prior to the negotiations with the Chinese government, Star's owner, Rupert Murdoch, admitted he had to make "an accommodation".10 In April this year, Star replaced the World Service to north and eastern Asia April with a coded service offering movies.

Meanwhile, Australia's David Hill was confident that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, which was modelled on the British Broadcasting Corporation and shared

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10 Rupert Murdoch, as quoted in an interview with the Australian's Business editor, Mark Westfield, published in the *South China Morning Post* (19.10.93) "Business" 4:
Murdoch: What the Chinese don't like is uncontrolled news broadcasts coming in from the outside.
Q: But satellite will do that won't it?
Murdoch: It could.
Q: Will they try to control your service in any way?
Murdoch: They may but I would hope we can find some accommodation.
many of its values, would never have to compromise the integrity of its information programs:

The independence of ABC News and current affairs has always been the ABC's long suit. We have been broadcasting Radio Australia into China and other countries for fifty years without any censorship. Bear in mind the ABC was filing live out of Beijing during the Tiananmen Square incident.

It should be noted at this point that Radio Australia, another ABC offspring, was like the BBC, a totally state funded service. Unlike Star Television or for that matter Australia Television, Radio Australia did not have to please advertisers seeking potentially lucrative business deals.

According to Australia Television's "Guidelines for International Reporting", there must be an identification with the target audiences in Asia and the Pacific, projecting Australian values honestly but with sensitivity to their values that exist throughout the diverse region.

# Important editorial and programming assumptions include:

# Journalists should see themselves as regional broadcasters rather than "foreigners".

# Australian domestic issues and interests should have a natural and important place on the information and entertainment agendas of the region.

# News content of bulletins should be based on a mix reflecting regional priorities, i.e. Asia Pacific region, important world news, then other Australian news.

# Some expressions of Australian culture may be inappropriate for distribution within other cultures.¹¹

To assuage concerns expressed among ABC staff that sensitivities about cultural differences could translate into censorship of views unpopular with foreign governments, the Editorial Guidelines re-affirmed western concepts of a "genuinely independent overseas service":

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The ABC recognises that the context of the material will determine its usage and the overseas services will not distort or censor program material, particularly information programs, in order to avoid the possibility of offence to one or other part of the totality of its audience. It should be clearly stated that awareness of areas of sensitivity such as those above will not mean that Australia Television or Radio Australia will be restrained in any way from the full and accurate reporting and reflection of events in the region, in the tradition of independence, authority and integrity developed over forty years by Radio Australia's news and information services.  

It may be considered that these broad, if well intentioned guidelines may have only marginal application in the day to day pressure news making. Under the circumstances, it may be that for the Chinese government at least, the critical difference between the ABC and the BBC is contained not in the somewhat hazy cultural guidelines. The difference may indeed be the fact that Australia Television material can be selectively censored while BBC material can not.

Vision

Kelly

Maps

Kelly

News Logo, including ethnic news readers

Sound

Other countries that can receive Australia Television include

Bangladesh, Burma, Cambodia, Malaysia, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau Brunei and Papua New Guinea.

As well as providing the very best of Australian programming, Australia Television's own news team is the only international service to provide a regionally focused news of interest to leaders and opinion makers, including updates in Bahasa Indonesia, Mandarin and Cantonese. And as part of this focus Australia Television also produces programs specifically for the region.
A great self creating, self defining regional community of nations.

This is Australia Television.

The Australian Broadcasting Corporation boasts of the most extensive network of Radio and Television news bureaux in Asia. Foreign Correspondents are based in Hanoi, Singapore, New Delhi, Beijing and Bangkok, with part time "stringers" located in Kuala Lumpur, Phnom Penh and Manila. Most of these reporters serviced the ABC's three domestic radio networks, as well its international service, Radio Australia. Until last year, television for almost all of the region south of China, was serviced by the Hong Kong based correspondent, Sally Neighbour.

The introduction of Australia Television has required all of these journalists to add to their already substantial duties and produce stories of interest to an international as well as a domestic television audience. These items are processed by Australia Television's small news staff, headed by Executive Producer, Prakash Mirchandani, and located in the remote Australian city of Darwin. The team which also included two presenters and about four producers were expected to select material to fill two regionally focused bulletins each evening.

Unrequited demand for more television footage led an Australian Television executive to tour the region in April, 1993, unsuccessfully seeking stringers willing to shoot stories using hand held home video equipment. The ABC subsequently directed its radio reporters to supply television on a needs basis, supplying them with home video cameras to provide vision. ABC Radio's Bangkok based correspondent, Evan Williams, found that he was required to learn camera work, television production and presentation "on the job":

Television work is time consuming, and Evan gives every appearance of being the proverbial meat in the bureaucratic sandwich as he tackles the often conflicting commitments of on going obligations to radio, with the increasing demands of television. As his positions still totally funded out of the Radio budget, it's not hard to imagine the long hours and

13 David Hill, "Speech Notes" (Sydney: ABC Corporate Relations 27.3.94).
14 Eric Ellis, the Australian Financial Review's correspondent in Hong Kong, claimed that Mirchandani proposed a deal which would require the stringer to purchase a high quality, home video camera to record news. In return the ABC would purchase stories at the rate of A$100 per item. Ellis described the proposal as "laughable".
organisational frustrations that are inevitable in any attempt to begin satisfying everyone, particularly when regional stories regularly make world headlines.  

In the case of Vietnam, the need to support Australia Television has led the ABC to intertwine its "independent" news operations with aid deals struck with the Hanoi government. The Australian Broadcasting Corporation has solicited and won a contract to train Vietnamese government "propagandists" to be more effective program makers. The Voice of Vietnam training program is part of a A$5.5 million package provided by the Australian International Development Assistance Bureau (AIDAB) for the governments of Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

The gift to Vietnam coincided with agreement by the Vietnamese government to accredit the ABC's first correspondent in Hanoi. The journalist, Chris Kremmer, might see himself as an independent reporter. But he shared his Hanoi office with the training program and, under the terms of David Hill's agreement with Vietnam, Kremmer was required to work while being watched by a translator from the Vietnamese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

David Hill took a strong personal interest in the Vietnam project from the start. He made a series of private visits to Hanoi in 1992 and 1993 for talks with Vietnamese government officials. The ABC subsequently recognised the friendship with a gift to the Vietnamese government controlled Voice of Vietnam; handing over studio equipment rendered superfluous by the closure of the ABC's William and Forbes Street radio complexes in Sydney.

Voice of Vietnam and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation are both funded by their respective governments and in a sense, both government broadcasters. However, while it may be true that David Hill was a political appointment of Prime Minister, Paul Keating's ruling Labor faction, ABC news and information services are intended to be insulated from government intervention by legislation (the Australian Broadcasting Corporation Act 1983), an appointed Board, stated policy and ultimately staff practices.

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16The ABC's new Ultimo complex was constructed around the purpose designed and built OUIJA computer screen studio control system, which was designed to make analogue equipment of the sort given to Vietnam, obsolete.
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The Australian Broadcasting Corporation, under the terms of its Charter, is required to provide:

(1) broadcasting programs and television programs that contribute to a sense of national identity and inform and entertain, and reflect the cultural diversity of, the Australian community;

(2) broadcasting programs of an educational nature.17

The Voice of Vietnam (VOV) in contrast, was intentionally established as the voice of the government of the communist nationalist leader, Ho Chi Minh. Indeed its name was selected on 5 September 1945 by Bac Bo (North Vietnam) Propaganda Department.18 It’s first English language bulletin, containing Ho’s declaration of independence was made ten days later. It remained, like the Vietnamese revolutionary press which preceded it, tightly under control of the Vietnamese Communist party’s most senior cadres. According to Terry Hartney, an Australian journalist now employed to edit its English language news programs, VOV’s propaganda role is still considered so important that remains under the direct control of the Prime Minister’s department, providing not only closely vetted news but also the state’s delayed reaction to international events.19

Under the Vietnamese communist model, reporters and sub-editors are expected, if not required, to act as the propagandists of the “national liberation”. They are supposed to model themselves on “the great revolutionary journalist, Ho Chi Minh” who often urged colleagues to use “pens as weapons to struggle for the development of the country”. They are expected to proselytise government policy which is still seen as synonymous with the national interest:

"the common task of all media workers is to join the people in rebuilding and developing the country, in restoring the economy, doing away with all cultural vestiges of the old regime in the south, building a new political system and a new economy, forming new people, and getting ready to fight in defence of the country. The information network is a means for the people to exercise their right to mastery. It is a bridge from the leadership..."
to the masses, and an important channel to supply the leadership with feedback from the masses and reality.\textsuperscript{20}

While liberalising controls on the economy, the Vietnamese government remains intolerant of criticism and political dissent. Amnesty International reported that there were still as many as 70 prisoners of conscience in Vietnam in 1992.\textsuperscript{21} These included Doan Viet Hoat who was sentenced to 20 years jail in 1993 for publishing an unlicensed newsletter named Dien Dan Tu Do (Freedom Forum). He was also found guilty of sending articles abroad which were critical of the Vietnamese government.

Speaking at the official opening of the ABC's Hanoi Bureau in December, 1993, David Hill said the ABC had developed "very strong and valuable ties with Vietnam". "The development of these important initiatives has occurred in a short period of time, made possible with the support our friends in VTV (Vietnam's state television), the Vietnamese Ministry and the Vietnamese government", Hill said:

Vietnam is rapidly developing and will become increasingly important to the region and to Australia. It is the role of the ABC to keep abreast of these developments - through news and current affairs and information programs that people are aware and informed on what is happening in our world and our region.\textsuperscript{22}

In 1993, Vietnam was not regarded by ABC International news executives as a major source of the sort of conflict oriented news which continues to dominate Australian reporting. Vietnam had a stable and authoritarian government with little organised internal opposition to generate criticisms which under western journalism practices might generate stories. There was little reported violent crime to be reported. The country was grindingly poor yet there was little evidence of "newsworthy" famine. The only possible international flash point was the long running dispute with China and the Philippines over the ownership of the Spratley islands in the South China sea. Much of the news emanating from Vietnam could be expected to be about economic development; an issue which does not rate particularly highly with the news and current affairs programs being serviced. As a result, a number of senior ABC journalists claimed that Vietnam could best be covered by a journalist with regional responsibility.

\textsuperscript{20}Phan Quang, "The 120 years of the Vietnamese Press", 
\textsuperscript{22}David Hill, "Speech Notes: ABC Hanoi Bureau Opening" (Hanoi: ABC Corporate Relations, 18.12.93)
David Hill intervened and overruled them and Chris Kremmer was appointed to open the ABC’s first bureau in Hanoi.

So what news would the new correspondent seek? Chris Kremmer told me the major story was “Vietnam’s acceptance by the rest of the world”.

We are looking at a country which has been diplomatically and economically isolated from the rest of the world for two decades and which is now emerging from that isolation and is now in the process of weakening one party control of areas of life, particularly in the economic sphere. We are also looking at the fact however, that the Vietnamese communist party wants to maintain one party rule in Vietnam. We are real observers of this experiment. How do you have a free market economy in an Asian country with a Soviet style government?

While Kremmer might seek independent news, sources of information remained tightly controlled in Vietnam. Hanoi did not offer the multiplicity of opinions which a journalist might find in Hong Kong, Bangkok or Singapore. Vietnam still practiced strict censorship, in an attempt to stop its population being exposed to outside ideas and criticisms.

When you move to Vietnam, you find you can receive lots of things from the outside, but books and video tapes are a problem. They have to be formally checked through a government ministry. I have spoken to Vietnamese people and have told them what a silly idea I thought that was, but they replied, “No! There could be anti-government material in them, material hostile to the government of Vietnam”, material criticising the government is often interpreted as material hostile to the government itself. That is not a concept we are familiar with and I don’t think it is a concept that we will ever embrace.

According to Kremmer, Vietnam still lacked “a culture of news and information” which western journalists employed to find stories:

We get the Vietnam News Agency here which is regurgitated in most of the Vietnamese language newspapers. By and large ninety percent of it is not usable. It does give you interesting pointers to what this one party society thinks its problems are, what it wants to focus on. Currently, it is focusing on trying to clean up the system, trying to get a market orientation, and as you might expect, [trying] to maintain national sovereignty and political stability. [It does so] not always that people in the west would think was a fair or good way to go about it.

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24 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
Reporters operating in Hanoi were forced to rely on personal observation, and local contacts to help make sense of what it being reported in the official press. Yet to do this, the ABC correspondent is required to use a government official as a medium:

Vietnam is a communist country which has a very much Soviet style information department. We are required by the Vietnamese government to have a member of the Foreign Ministry press centre staff stationed in our office. They offer this person as a service, as a facilitator. Whenever we want to talk to a government office, a Minister's office and an official of any kind, he acts not only as our interlocutor but also as our interpreter of Vietnamese. That system, to the surprise of myself and many of my colleagues, actually makes life somewhat easier than you would expect.

But what happened when the reporter wished to ask difficult questions? In a country which until recently had "re-education" camps, could the presence of a Ministry official intimidate some interviewees? If the reporter did not speak fluent Vietnamese, could he guarantee that the answers and even the questions were being appropriately translated?

There would be a case, I think for getting some sort of independent monitoring of the translations we are getting. But as in all communist countries, if you are going to be on the playing field, you have got to accept the rules and try to work around them as best you can, because something is better than nothing.

Kremmer argued that his own professional ethics and his devotion to his perceptions of the "truth" would guard against his reports being compromised. However, the Australian Journalists Code of Ethics in practice, provides for fairness in reporting individual stories rather than reviewing a stream of reports. Its Judiciary Committees fail to deal with those stories which fall outside agreed or imposed news values and are not reported. Whatever the individualist aspirations of western reporters, they exist and work within a thicket of institutional restrictions. Herman and Chomsky argue that this process of ensuring conformity is so powerful "as to be internalised largely without awareness". They suggest that western media differ from the propaganda system of a totalitarian state, in that they permit and encourage criticism, debate and dissent: provided these remain within the system of principles and presuppositions that constitute an elite consensus.

A journalist or commentator who does not want to have to work too hard, can survive, even gain respectability, by publishing information (official or leaks) from standard sources; these opportunities may well be denied to

26BID.
27BID.
those who are not content to relay the constructions of state propaganda as fact. The technical structure of the media virtually compels adherence to conventional thoughts; nothing else can be expressed between two commercials, or in seven hundred words, without the appearance of absurdity that is difficult to avoid when one is challenging familiar doctrine with no opportunity to develop facts or argument.29

It would be very tempting for a less ethical journalist than Chris Kremmer to produce unchallenging reports on Vietnamese affairs. If he wanted a peaceful life, he could stick to recycling the strictly censored reports in the official media. He might seek alternative information from dissidents. But if he were to find them, he would need to remember that he is required to use the Ministry "translator" who works in his office, to speak to them. He would then have to be careful that critiques of the Hanoi government, sensitive as it is on human rights issues, might upset the ABC's aid project to Voice of Vietnam. Perhaps most importantly of all, he would need to be aware of his Managing Director's close personal interest in the Hanoi posting.

Australian journalists might not go to jail for transgressing Chomsky's invisible boundaries. But their appointment, promotion and even continuing employment can depend on staying within the consensus defined by their employer. In the case of Vietnam, it could be argued that the parameters of Kremmer's reporting are implicitly contained by the business agreements made between his employer and the foreign government about whom he is employed to report.

If that were so, the guidelines guaranteeing the "independence, authority and integrity" of the international news services would be little more than a convenient fiction allowing "a business opportunity, you can't afford to miss". In that case, the information bridge to Asia would have opened a two way traffic, where Australian concepts of free and critical reporting could be compromised in the name of cultural sensitivity.

ENDS.

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29 Herman, Chomsky (1988) 303.