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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
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PROBLEMS WITH AN ASIAN VERSION
OF THE ‘GLOBAL NEWSROOM’ RESEARCH:
CRITICAL/CULTURAL VS
EMPIRICAL/BEHAVIOURIST APPROACHES

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ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to raise questions about how using the tried-and-tested quantitative research methods may not be adequate in an upcoming NTU study of the news flow in Asia. Communication studies in Asia have to take into consideration Asia's uniqueness as well as diversity in its socio-economic, political and cultural panorama.

The NTU research project will study the flow of television news in Asia as part of an international comparative project on the Eurovision News Exchange (EVN) examining the metaphor of a global newsroom. It is aimed at searching for comparable, if not universal, rules governing the operation of newsrooms around the world.

However, European countries tend to be more similar historically, politically, economically, socially and culturally. As a result, the study of EVN and how its members work together in a "global newsroom" was more straightforward. A study of Asian television news with the same objectives is more complex because Asian nations are much more heterogeneous. Their social, cultural, historical, economical and political diversities are additional factors that need to be considered when it comes to these countries' selection of news as well as their interaction with Asiasvision News Exchange (AVN).

This paper aims to raise questions to force us to look for ways to catch what could have been easily left out by a faithful replication of the previous study and to make adjustments in our plan to accommodate those differences which we know will affect the findings.
Problems with an Asian Version of "Global Newsroom" Research: Critical/Cultural vs. Empirical/Behaviourist Approaches

By Hao Xiaoming & Vivien Chiong

Introduction

This paper sets out to raise questions rather than to answer questions. It is our belief that raising the right question can be as important as, if not more important than, answering the question in scientific research. This is especially the case for communication research in Asia, which is a relatively young field.

There is no denying that the output of communication research dealing with Asia has grown by leaps and bounds in the last two decades or so. More and more Western scholars have turned their attention to Asia as this continent began to experience its phenomenal economic growth that made it count more heavily in global affairs. In addition, more and more Western-trained Asian communication scholars have returned home to practise what they learned in the West. As a result, more articles on Asia have begun to appear in communication journals or have been presented at international conferences. While these studies have certainly helped us better understand the communication scene in Asia, they tend to be limited by their Western perspectives.

Although there is a widespread feeling among communication scholars in Asia that there is a pressing need to re-examine Western communication theories in the light of Asian cultures and traditions (Menon, 1988), not much has been achieved for various reasons. For Western scholars, they tend to take a "parachutist" approach to communication research in Asia. Very few of them have lived in Asia long enough to really understand the local context. While we do not deny that they may discover something new since they can offer a different perspective, we have to admit that they tend to deal with problems and issues on the surface rather than what the root causes are in an Asian society. As for us Western-trained Asian scholars, we are known for being too respectful and too timid to challenge our professors. As a result, we tend to focus more on what we learnt in the West by re-testing what has already been proved.
or disproved in the West rather than developing original ideas suited to local needs. In general, there is more imitation than imagination in the way Western-trained scholars conceptualise our research.

It must be made clear that it is not our intention to downplay what we have accomplished in the past few decades. While we want to emphasise that Asia is unique in many areas, we have to acknowledge that scientific research is aimed at principles that are universally applicable. Therefore, re-testing what has been done in the West is an important part of communication research in Asia and can definitely contribute to our field of study. To contribute more to communication studies, however, communication research in Asia must jump out of the Western conceptual framework for communication research, identify new areas of interest and search for new explanations on the basis of Asia’s uniqueness. To do that, raising new questions has thus become more important than answering old questions, but it is in the latter that Asian scholars tend to do better.

Based on such beliefs, we proceed to use a particular case to illustrate how the replication of Western studies in Asia may become problematic because of the changing context. It is our hope that by examining the potential problems arising out of such a replicate study, we can see why communication studies in Asia have to take into consideration Asia’s uniqueness as well as diversity in its socio-economic, political and cultural panorama.

The Project

A joint project was initiated in 1998 by the School of Communication Studies of NTU and an international team consisting of four leading communication scholars, two from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in Israel and two from the University of Maryland in the United States. It aims to study the flow of television news in Asia as part of an international comparative project examining the metaphor of a global newsroom. As the first part of this international project, the four-member international team examined the role of Eurovison News Exchange (EVN), the journalistic arm of the European Broadcasting Union, in television news exchange among its various European members as well as a few non-European members such as Israel. The study, conducted through three phases from 1987 to 1993, examined the following:
1. The information news flow – how the exchange works;
2. Content of the news – marketplace of ideas;
3. How the audience perceives the news – local viewers in the global village.

Using the empiricist-behaviourist approach, the investigators employed various methods in collecting the data, including interviews, surveys, field observations and focus group studies. The results led them to conclude that the global newsroom of EVN is characterised by a tension between the particularistic and the common; the shared world and the divided one; the efforts to defend cultural borders and, at the same time, the efforts to blur them (Cohen et al; 1995).

In proposing our collaboration in this new project, we expected to make no drastic changes in the original research design to make it comparable. We thought we could focus on Asiavision News Exchange (AVN), the Asian counterpart of EVN, in the same manner as the European study and find a number of representative countries in Asia as our sample. After all, the study is aimed at searching for comparable, if not universal, rules governing the operation of newsrooms around the world. Therefore, the two projects and ensuing ones should adopt an identical or similar approach in both conceptual framework and methodological design.

**The Critical/Cultural Perspective**

The empiricist/behaviourist/quantitative approach used in the European study has proven to be successful in collecting meaningful data for interpretations and conclusions, but will a replicate of the European study be equally successful in Asia? The positivist social research methods employed under the influence of the empiricist/behaviourist approach are preconditioned on the comparability of news production process of different newsrooms. They tend to proceed with what is easily observable, objective and comparable. The patterns or trends identified as universal or prevailing will then be assumed to be the rules or norms. Exception to such rules and norms will then be regarded as deviance or alienation.

Such an approach may be seen as problematic by the critical/cultural approach to media analysis that originated from Western Europe, the United Kingdom, and Latin America. The critical/cultural approach is “culture centred” in an expansive
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sense, looking at institutions, historical contexts, aesthetic levels, and collective outcomes (Real, 1989, p. 44).

Combining aspects of political economy and the Marxist structural perspective, the critical/cultural approach does not see media as independent institutions in society as the media often claim to be. While the ruling powers cannot directly supervise the media, they can use ideology as a unifying force to govern the media according to the critical/cultural perspective. Media institutions serve a hegemonic function by continually producing a cohesive ideology and a set of commonsensical values and norms, that serve to reproduce and legitimate the social structure through which the subordinate classes participate in their own domination (Gramsci, 1971; Gitlin, 1980).

From such a perspective, the production of news obviously cannot be understood by examining the journalist, the newsroom, the media institution or the audience alone, whether individually or collectively. As news production is seen as heavily influenced by the structures and development of the economy, politics, philosophy, history, culture, etc., news production has to be explored by examining all the social relations surrounding news production. However, the problem of conceptualising the social relations may defeat small-scale empirical analyses (Turner, 1996, p.28).

While we do not believe that we can easily find a way to solve the problem after identifying the complexity of the issue at hand, the critical/cultural perspective does provide us with a different perspective to evaluate the research design of our project. If we agree that news production is culturally centred, we should be able to see some potential problems with a simple replicate of the original research design since Asia, if nothing else, is culturally more divergent than Europe.

**Potential Problems with Asian Study**

If news production can be affected by all kinds of social relations beyond the newsroom operation itself, differences between Europe and Asia in such social relations may cause potential problems for a replication of the previous study in Asia.

For a start, European countries tend to be more similar historically, politically, economically, socially and culturally. As a result, the study of EVN and how its members work together in a “global newsroom” was more straightforward. A study

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of Asian television news with the same objectives, however, is much more complex because Asia nations are much more heterogeneous. Their social, cultural, historical, economical and political diversities are additional factors that need to be considered when it comes to these countries’ selection of news as well as their interaction with AVN.

Partly because of such diversities among Asian countries, the role of AVN is nowhere as important as its European counterpart. While EVN already boasted more than 60 members representing the overwhelming majority of European countries in the mid-1990s, AVN so far has only ten members representing less than one-third of the Asian countries (see Appendix for list of AVN members). As a result, AVN plays a much smaller and less influential role in the news exchange in Asia compared to EVN. Therefore, the focus on AVN in the current project should be much less in exploring the globalisation of television news in Asia.

In Asia, there are many parameters that can divide or unite the continent. Economically, Japan is different from say, Bangladesh. Religiously, the predominantly Buddhist countries such as Thailand and China would be different from the Muslim countries such as Malaysia and India. Singapore, which is multi-racial and multi-religious, offers yet another spectrum. Such differences often result in social conflicts, especially when racial differences are mixed with differences in religious beliefs and inequality in socio-economic status. The recent riots in Indonesia are typical examples of such a problem.

These differences plus a lack of tradition in democracy and free expression make many Asian media particularly sensitive towards certain issues. This is partly because a publish-and-be-damned policy that the Western press frequently adopts in their “search for the truth” would be disastrous in a potentially inflammable mix of race, religion and politics (Gans, 1985). “If a bus collides with a bicycle, we can’t say the driver was Chinese and the rider was Javanese,” said Aristides Katoppo, senior editor of Jakarta’s Suara Pembaruan (Datta-Ray, 1998). Such considerations at times weigh more than the press’s freedom to report or the people’s right to know. Censorship is not only more likely to be enforced but also to be supported by journalists and the public in Asia. “National loyalty is a common thread throughout Asia, so is a heightened awareness of the community with which the media interacts”, observed Datta-Ray (1998).
Asia is also marked by its political diversity. Its political landscape covers all sorts of political systems, ranging from the libertarian democracy of the Philippines to the communist extreme of North Korea, and from the theocratic Republic of Iran to the military regime of Myanmar. The media are expected to play different roles in these varying political entities, in many of which the media, especially the broadcast media, are owned directly by political powers. Operating within different political environment means that news cannot always be accidental, natural or objective; news can be political or imbued with political interpretations. For example, the way Malaysia’s RTM attributed the cause of the haze started by forest fire in Indonesia was clearly different from that of Indonesia’s TVRI. RTM positioned the haze as a natural phenomenon while TVRI framed it as a crisis, which is a problem not just for Indonesia but the whole of ASEAN as well.

How political stand could affect news exchange was clearly demonstrated by an episode described in the EVN study. A Libyan contact ignored a request from BBC and the Norwegian Television for footage of executions in Libya by pretending to be absent when the request was made but re-surfaced two minutes later when a news item of his interest was on offer. With many of Asia’s media acting as political arms of the state or nationalistic standard bearers, such hide-and-seek tactics are expected to be used more often when dirty linen is asked to be washed in the open.

Another difference between the European countries and Asian countries is that they tend to occupy different positions in the world system. As a result of such a difference, European and Asian countries tend to catch different amounts of media attention according to their importance in the world capitalist system structures (Chang, 1998; Chang, Lau & Hao, 1999). There is a tendency for Asian countries to not only give more attention to Western countries but also ignore one another in reporting news. How does this affect the work of AVN or international news exchange through other channels? It is no surprise that the inequality of countries exists in Asia as elsewhere in news presentation. For example, some AVN members, such as Singapore’s TCS, are contributing almost nothing to the exchange (1% of the total number of items). Japan’s NHK is the clear leader in terms of the number of news items offered, making up 22% of the total.

1 Percentage of AVN members by members from Jan to Aug 97 in an unpublished study by Ivan Kwek (1997).
In the meantime, some AVN members may look at the exchange as merely a public relations gesture to improve their country’s image. Lansipuro (1987) suggested this through his series of content analysis studies: Jan to Sept 1985, Nov 1986 and July 1987. He found that politics was always the dominant category, with a lot of news items about government activities and a heavy dose of official visits. Could it be that in Asia, “face” is such an important factor that it leads to a more PR slant to the news items that are offered to AVN member countries?

Lansipuro (1987, p.50) observed that “every member is all for increasing the hard news content of AVN, when it comes to covering other countries. Hard news from one’s own country is always a problem... When it comes to economic development news, the roles seem to be reversed. Every organisation is ready to offer but others are not keen on receiving and using these items.”

Such a phenomenon seems to tell us that the AVN functions very differently from its European counterpart. It is taken much less seriously as a source of television news even for its member countries. If that is the case, are we going to look at the wrong direction if we put too much emphasis on the operation of AVN to the neglect of other channels for the exchange of news among Asian countries?

Another factor that distinguishes the processing of news in Asia from that of Europe is the open resistance to Western influence in news exchange. While exchange of news and information is welcomed in Europe for its utilitarian function, the inflow of news from the West is quite often regarded with suspicion by many Asian leaders, thanks to the argument for “cultural imperialism” in the last two or three decades. With many Asian countries being former colonies of European powers, a hate-and-love relationship tends to exist among people of these former colonies. On the one hand, they admire their former colonial masters for their scientific and economic achievements and see them as models for their own development. On the other hand, they often blame the West for their exploitation and the erosion of their indigenous cultures through the West’s domination in all spheres of influence, especially in trade and cultural exchange. As a result, Asian journalists are often reminded of their role in filtering out undesirable Western influences. Many Asian journalists see their duty to play a gatekeeper role in the selection of international news. This has been further enhanced with the more recent Asian value debate, through which some Asian leaders called for conscientious efforts from media people to resist Western influence. Asians were said to particularly uphold values
such as respect for authority, desire for harmony, the importance of "face" and the importance of tradition (Dissanayake, 1988). As a result, a mechanism against foreign influence may exist in the selection of news in Asia and affect the flow of international news, at least at a subconscious level. Although domestication of foreign news was found to be an important feature in processing foreign news in European newsrooms, it is done with much less political considerations in comparison with the efforts of resisting Western influence in Asia.

When we read or watch news from country to country, it is not difficult to find a lot of differences as well as similarities. This is especially the case in Asia. While we acknowledge that journalists as a profession must share some basic instincts and professional values for news (which contribute to the similarities), they are also heavily influenced by their cultural background (contributing to the differences). The fact that the training of journalists is relatively new in Asia compared with the West allows more diversity among journalists in terms of how they handle their job. The diversity in political, economic, cultural and professional working environments of Asian journalists further distinguish them in terms of news coverage as they add their cultural perspectives to news selection and encode them into the news. As a result, we should expect to see greater diversity in the international news presented by Asian television stations, but how should we incorporate this into our research design in order to catch and interpret such differences?

Our arguments and assumptions about the globalisation of TV news are often so imbued with the spirit/vision of the "global village" that they ignore the counter-pull generated everywhere by audiences situated within their own cultures (Ferguson, 1992). The audiences, who in the final analysis determine the real influence of media presentations, interact with the media and influence the news selection process. In addition, the reception analysis, an approach based on the critical tradition, believes that the audience plays a very important role in the communication process because the "text" has to be actualised by the audience (Bondebjerg, 1988). As Stuart Hall pointed out, just because a message has been sent, there is no guarantee that it will arrive (Turner, 1996, p.83).

Because the audience cannot be seen as a single undifferentiated mass, there is bound to be a lack of fit between aspects of the production and reception processes (Turner, 1996). If the audience plays such an important role in mass communication, we have to think in what ways our Asian audience may differ from the European
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audience and how such differences affect the news selection and interpretation processes. Generally speaking, television is not as widespread in Asia as it is in Europe, and Asian viewers tend to be less educated than their European counterparts. This does not mean they are ignorant of, or less exposed to, foreign news. If a cross comparison is made, we are likely to find that the Asian audience may know Europe much better than the European audience knows Asia. Part of the reason is the unbalanced flow of news exchange and the more important role Europe plays in world politics, economy and culture, etc. In addition, the European audience is also more homogeneous than the Asian audience, who remained isolated of one another for a much longer period because of their political, economic and cultural diversities. How do these differences affect the news exchange and how should we incorporate them into the current study?

It may sound contradictory to say that a TV message is open to various readings, but at the same time composed of highly conventionalised codes that make it unlikely for viewers to decode it in a way not intended by the creator of the message. Hall deals with this by arguing that the television message may be polysemic but it is not totally pluralistic (Turner, 1996, p. 85).

This notion is important because it stresses that dominant meanings are not irresistibly imposed. They are only preferred. "Encoding TV discourse is the process of setting some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate. If there were no limits, audiences could simply read whatever they liked into the message (Hall, 1980, p.135).

AVN and other regional news exchanges arose out of NWICO debates which criticised Western journalists for focusing on negative news such as crimes, wars, disasters, famine and political corruption in covering the 3rd World countries. It would be interesting to study AVN to see if it can disrupt the metaphor of the global newsroom by rising to be a regional newsroom. As AVN is linked to EVN and subscribed by CNN, ABC, NBC and CBS, can it help to propagate a new code for the reading of Asian news?

But first, given the heterogeneity of the Asian countries, can the exchange facilitate the development of a code that will help bring out preferred readings in the news audiences in Asia? To make that happen, the differences among AVN members have to be overcome first. Although the differences among AVN members themselves may be smaller than their differences with EVN members, their internal
differences are far greater than those of EVN members. What impact should we expect of such a phenomenon? To what extent can we attribute our findings to such differences? Such questions are important for understanding news exchange in Asia.

**Conclusions**

As far as news is concerned, the structure of mass communication seems pretty clear as a diagram can be easily drawn to link up the events, journalists, media and the audience to show how news originates and reaches its targeted receivers. The actual processing of news, however, is much more complicated and remains mysterious to us most of the time. That probably explains why communication scholars cannot even agree on a particular way of examining and interpreting the process.

The critical/cultural approach championed by European scholars and the empiricist/behaviourist approach based on the American tradition compliment as well as conflict with each other although it is the latter that we hear more often about. Proceeding from the cultural perspective, we have illustrated that what could have been considered an easy replication of a previous study may become complicated and questionable when it is going to be done in a new location which is different not only geographically but culturally as well. If we understand news as a product of social relationships as well as one of the newsroom, we can better see how the change in setting causes so many potential problems with the original research design.

As mentioned above, Asia is not only different from Europe but also much more diverse than Europe in political, socio-economic and cultural systems. All these differences outlined in this essay may affect the news operation in Asia. Since news is a social as well as an institutional and personal product, its selection is bound to be affected by its social environment. As a result, the news exchange among Asian countries may differ from that in Europe in operation and function as well as in content.

While the research design is yet to be revised to accommodate all the concerns we have raised, we have at least achieved what we set out to do, that is, to raise questions rather than answer questions. Raising these questions is aimed at forcing us to look for ways to catch what could have been left out so easily by a pure

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replication of the previous study and to make adjustments in our plan to accommodate those differences which we know would affect our findings.
## Appendix A

### List of AVN Members

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<tr>
<th>MEMBER</th>
<th>COUNTRY</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bangladesh Television (BTV)</td>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
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<tr>
<td>China Central Television People’s Republic of China (CCTV)</td>
<td>People’s Republic of China</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doordarshan (DDI)</td>
<td>India</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (IRIB)</td>
<td>Islamic Republic of Iran</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nippon Hoso Kyokia (NHK)</td>
<td>Japan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio Television Brunei (RTB)</td>
<td>Brunei Darussalam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio Television Malaysia (RTM)</td>
<td>Malaysia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sri Lanka Rupavahini Corporation (SLRC)</td>
<td>Sri Lanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS)</td>
<td>Singapore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Televisi Republik Indonesia (TVRI)</td>
<td>Indonesia</td>
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References


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