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Welcome Address

By

Vijay Menon
Consultation on "Television Development in the Asia-Pacific Region", Jakarta, Indonesia, December 8 – 9, 1994

Welcome Address by Vijay Menon, Secretary-General, Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC)

I am delighted to welcome all of you, on behalf of AMIC, to this regional consultation on "Television Development in the Asia-Pacific Region".

The theme of our seminar, Television Development, is both topical and timeless. As technology advances, borders evaporate and television, terrestrial and satellite, surges relentlessly forward, there is a need, a compelling need, to review and research the regional impact of this phenomenon of our times.

We are glad that this meeting is jointly organized by the Information Research and Development Board of the Department of Information, Republic of Indonesia, and AMIC. This is the happy outcome of an agreement of cooperation signed with DEPPEN two years ago, thanks to the inspiration and support of the Honourable Minister of Information, Harmoko. We are deeply gratified, Honourable Minister, that you have been able to join us this morning to inaugurate this important meeting. We would also like to thank the participants who responded to our call at fairly short notice.

The era of transnational satellite and borderless television has given rise to concern about unwelcome social, cultural and political changes in a largely tradition-bound Asia.

A year ago the Asian Wall Street Journal enthused: "Today, Asia has joined the global village. In less than two years, satellite television has transformed the Eastern Hemisphere. A torrent of news, sports, music and soap operas is loosening government controls over the media and spawning spinoff industries...Viewers are changing habits, and advertisers are revamping strategies".

In the countries covered by the expanding satellite footprints, the reaction of officialdom and academia has been noticeably cooler -- even tinged with anxiety. Said Prof. Shamsul Majid Haroon of Dhaka University's Mass Communication Department: "We are being invaded from the sky. Our nation has been caught in the middle of a great war among media giants. We are still not prepared for it and, consequently, will be facing multiple problems and losses".

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A Thai academic has expressed her apprehensions at the value conflicts induced by the whole range of new programmes. Some of the traditional pillars, such as authority, seniority and gender relations, she feels, are being seriously eroded.

A media scholar in Singapore, on the other hand, sees the "threat" posed by extra-regional media sources as being "a wake-up call for the Asian media". He asserts that "just as there is no conclusive evidence to show that the impact of foreign media is harmful or 'hegemonic', there is also much disagreement over the influence of 'invading' messages on local culture...the charge of 'westoxification' of local cultural identities, which remains a concern of Asian governments, is slowly losing its legitimacy with the Asian audiences...(which) are far from being passive recipients of the western culture aired through the electronic media as there exists a tendency to import cultural content and develop local imitations".

The reaction of the region's broadcasting professionals to the phenomenon of satellite broadcasting has generally been less passionate and more practical. A seminar on "The Social and Cultural Impact of Satellite Broadcasting in Asia" in February 1993, noted that transnational satellites are a reality in Asia and growing; that positive and negative impacts are inevitable; the aim should be to increase the positive and reduce the negative.

The seminar recommended the establishment of a pan-Asian public broadcasting satellite channel and investment in research to study the economic feasibility of such a channel, acceptance by viewers of programmes from other Asian countries and social changes resulting from satellite television.

A recent seminar in Kuala Lumpur on "Transnational Satellite Broadcasting" concurred with the earlier meeting that in preference to a legal framework, steps should be taken to encourage exchange of locally-produced programmes and co-productions, training courses to upgrade quality and the formulation of guidelines for ethical conduct.

We would earnestly endorse the call for research, especially into the viewing habits of children. Asia has the largest number of children in the world -- almost 500 million. Levels of literacy in many countries are low while poverty is high. The children in these countries constitute a vulnerable audience. We will be glad to offer our resources to conduct such a study.

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The Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre is a regional body based in Singapore and supported by the Government of Singapore and by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung of Germany. AMIC, to use our popular abbreviation, is a non-profit, non-government organization dedicated to promoting mass communication in the region. Our activities cover documentation, publications, research, seminars, workshops and institutional development programmes.

Today's meeting is one of seventeen workshops and seminars organized in 1994. These are made possible by the funding support provided by agencies such as The Asia Foundation, Jakarta, and the collaborative assistance of a large number of institutions. We value equally highly the moral and material support of government agencies of which DEPPEN is an outstanding example.

We thank you, Honourable Minister, for joining us this morning to formally inaugurate the consultation. Your presence will be a source of added encouragement to all of us to work for the successful attainment of the meeting objectives.

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