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**The Socio-Economic Impact Of Broadcast Satellites
With Reference To The Asiavision TV News Exchange System**

By

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THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF
BROADCAST SATELLITES WITH REFERENCE TO
THE ASIAVISION T.V. NEWS EXCHANGE SYSTEM

BY :

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SEMINAR ON SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT OF
BROADCAST SATELLITES IN THE ASIA-PACIFIC REGION
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DEPPEN RI - AMIC

Mr. Chairman, honorable guests, participants, colleagues and friends.

It is indeed a great pleasure for me to be here with you today. I would like to take this opportunity to relay to you at this time the best wishes of the FES Board of Directors for a most meaningful and successful seminar here in Jakarta.

I would also like to thank the host and organizers of this seminar to give me the opportunity to address you today. It is my first "direct encounter" with AMIC on its "home" ground. And while I say that I hope it won't be my last visit with you.

The one FES representative who should really be here today and address you asked me to extent to you his regrets. Reinhard Keune, my friend and colleague, has had to return to Europe last week to travel to Dakar, Senegal to discuss with our African friends if Africa will be able in the near future to have its own regional TV news exchange system, and, if so, what we can do to get it off the ground.

Luckily, we have been in the enviable position to work with the regional Broadcasting Unions right from the beginning in this area. We were there in Cologne in 1973 at the WDR Corporation (Germany's biggest TV broadcasting network) together with the Asia -Pacific Broadcasting Union and representatives of all the other regional Broadcasting Unions to familiarise eachother with the European model "Eurovision", the TV news exchange scheme which acquires, exchanges, and distributes TV news and current affairs items in a global way and learn a few very basic rules and regulation.

Let me for the benefit of those who are not too familiar with these outline a few of those very briefly.

One basic understanding among all those who participate (by now more than 30 countries in WE, North Africa, the ME, and also indirectly EE) is that every participant in the exchange is free to offer or not to offer material. Each participant decides whether to transmit or not to transmit the material offered. And every participant is free to edit, present or comment on news from the exchange as he sees fit.

Secondly, the exchanges are based on principles of equal rights and non-quantification. That is to say, those who use considerably more "Eurovision" - material than offering material in kind (for example, AVN uses more EVN material than vice versa) do not have to make offset payments.

We also were there when in 1981 here in Jakarta, the 3rd World News Conference was held, where we jointly sponsored and called on the national telecoms administrations to drastically lower their charges, and we called on Intelsat to give preferential rates.

These appeals made, I think it is fair to say, very little impression on those we called upon, but our common efforts to move towards professionalising the national news teams of the ABU member corporations in the mean time, and to train inexperienced but dedicated news coordinators to choose and compile the news material and cope with the complex satellite relay procedures culminated after years of training in the launching of AVN on January 16, 1984.

I don't want to bore you with too many details here and I also don't want to give credence to what some friends here said to me "strictly off-the-record" before this get-together ; that is, that it is dangerous to give the floor to a German for the simple reason that once he has the floor, he will never give it up - "but I think to put it all into perspective it should be noted it has only been 7 years from the first training exercise to the actual transmission of news and current affairs via satellite in Asia, an effort that deserves to be applauded.

Today Asiavision has brought together a total of 13 members, with ad-hoc participation by countries like Australia, Thailand, Myanmar, Taiwan and the Phillipines. Asiavision now encompasses a vast landmass, stretching from Iran to Japan, and from China to Australia, covering more than half the worlds' population.

The launching of Asiavision has changed the whole scenario relating to the flow of information in the Asia-Pacific region. Once a neglected vast continent, with a myriad socio-political and cultural canvass, it became a potentially powerful media force.

While Asia was once seen in a rather half-hearted and haphazard manner, where only such events as bloody political upheaval or big natural or man-made disasters were chosen as the only events that seemingly took place, which was of course sharply in contrast with Asias progress and development, its values and customs, its relentless endeavors to seek a better quality of life for its people, and, not to forget, the quiet but determined efforts that were taking place in socio-political, cultural and economic fields ; now through Asiavision, the world at large begins to look at Asia through Asian eyes.

So, perhaps the first tangible and quite visible change that the AVN set in motion was that the outside world began to look at Asia more systematically and attentively. Whether or not that was intended by the fathers of the news exchange would be an interesting question to pursue. But I think I am moving on firm grounds when I suggest that we in Europe, and also those TV viewers in the United States have already benefited in a larger sense from the AVN. But that was not the main reason for AVN, although in the discourse and disputes in the 1970's for the "New-World-Information-Order" a more equal and balanced flow of information was called for.

I happen to feel that the fathers of Asiavision quite strongly believed that it should become an outspoken tool for people in the region to get to know each other better and to contribute to the socio-cultural and economic development of all Asians.

Has it done so today? Or has Asiavision been a failure in this respect. Has Asiavision, in other words, turned into an instrument of developmental policies, perhaps even non-formal adult education, because broad masses of people are hearing more about developmental matters in the region, developing more understanding for other forms of societies?

In the early phases of AVN one could only make assumptions about these issues, but one could make them already with a few encouraging indicators.

Today, the professional observer no longer depends on random samples and subjective impressions of what Asiavision does and does not do. He has more precise data before him.

The findings of a first empirical viewer analysis and survey in four selected countries (China, India, Sri Lanka and Malaysia) carried out by no other institutions than AMIC are available since early 1989.

The study, commissioned by the ABU, served the purpose of identifying the impact of Asiavision on the minds and perceptions of viewers. The researchers tackled this difficult task in a cautious and circumspect manner, keeping in mind that the impact of the media's influence on the individual can hardly be distilled in a pure form without regard to other social, cultural, political and economic factors governing a given society. The findings, however, indicate that there is a widening knowledge of and understanding for other countries of the region and their problems due to the exposure to Asiavision, at least among those who are frequent viewers of newscasts.

And while this finding is encouraging, I think we owe it to the rigor of scientific methodology and reflective consideration to dig deeper. And once we do this we find a less encouraging picture before us.

Let me point out three basic considerations:

First of all, those who watch the regional TV news exchange are primarily those we consider opinion leaders, educated urban professional; in other words, those who have access to a wider range of information anyhow, information which has more impact on their attitude and behavior as does a still relatively virgin TV news exchange scheme like Asiavision.

Secondly, there is the question of range. How deeply does the AVN-signal penetrate into the periphery of the urban dwellings or, even more so, into rural

settlements. Here we have undoubtedly a wide variation of range and potential impact.

Thirdly, we are told by regional academics and media and press professionals that due to historic reason and questions of ownership the press wields considerably more influence on what we are discussing than any electronic TV news exchange system can muster. Asked, why the ownership question is so important in this regard, we have learned that by-and-large the press is more complete and free to cover the relevant questions than the electronic media - and by extension - Asiavision as well.

When we raised these questions in meetings with the appropriate representatives of the ABU General Secretariat and Heads of Broadcasting Organizations and Corporations in Asia, we heard that the socio-economic and political as well as cultural impact and success of a TV news exchange scheme depends primarily on constantly effecting significant improvement not in the technical ability to handle satellite broadcasting but in the ability to report freely and extensively about all the relevant facets of the entire spectrum of human life.

What I think our friends were telling us is that no news and current affairs exchange is worthwhile or acceptable and therefore is bound to fail in the long term when it is not capable of disseminating events and happenings in a full and timely perspective, without restrictions or prejudices.

When a regional TV news exchange scheme like Asiavision fails to offer important items with the necessary context and background, commercial news film agencies, having their camera crews almost at every

corner in Asia these days will most certainly exploit the opportunity and, in the end, the events will definitely have a slanted, distorted version.

In this age of rapidly changing technology, with hundreds of communication satellites reigning supreme in the skies, it is almost impossible to deflect indefinitely the attention of the issues of today.

I think what all this boils down to is that broadcast satellites in the context of TV news exchange systems as such will not have a considerable degree of a socio-economic impact because they are content-free; the question, aside from the footprint, infrastructure on the ground etc. is what kind of information are we to feed them with and, secondly, what mix has the "software" to consist of to gain and to retain an acceptable amount of credibility with those who can have an impact to improve the lot of the people.

I feel what is needed also in this context is a constant need for a dialog between all those who can effectuate positive change in this field.

In all I believe there is plenty of interest and opportunity to do so and, in addition, our friends in the field commonly feel that we have just barely begun to tap the vast potential to positively accelerate the development of the region and have a significant impact in the socio-economic environment.

Thank you very much for your attention.