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Media And Pluralism in Asia

By

Vijay Menon
MEDIA AND PLURALISM IN ASIA

- Vijay Menon*

Asia is a continent of contrasts: of satellites and bullock carts; of some of the most productive and fastest growing economies and the poorest and least developed; of 100% literacy and shockingly high levels of illiteracy; of near-zero and very high levels of population growth. "This is where the world's economic engine is going fastest, where monumental changes in the social, economic and political structures and activities seem almost routine" (Jim Richstad, 1988).

The media in Asia mirror the continent's diversities and disparities. Across the continent, the media scene is one of hyperactivity: a proliferating press, a boom in broadcasting stations and breaking barriers and breached boundaries. Yet there are segments of the population which are beyond the reach of the media, indeed of any mediated communication.

The advance of technology and the spread of affluence in Asia have been uneven. Japan and Korea, Hongkong and Singapore are among the high and upper middle income economies with per capita GNP comparable to the countries of the North. Most of the other members of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) are middle or lower middle income economies.

The pockets of poverty are scattered across the face of Asia: South and North Asia and part of South-east Asia. But add illiteracy, shorter life expectancy, the absence of safe drinking water and inadequate sanitation and we find that the isolated and the deprived are to be found mainly among the hundreds of millions who inhabit the rural areas of South Asia and China.

Adult illiteracy ranges from 74% in Nepal to 65% in Bangladesh and Pakistan and 52% in India. The female literacy picture is dismal. It is 13% in Nepal, 21% in Pakistan, 22% in Bangladesh and 34% in India. Shri Lanka is a notable exception with literacy in the high eighties and female literacy at a creditable 83%.

There are other problems of a basic nature which afflict the countries of Asia, particularly South Asia. As against the universal availability of safe drinking water and sanitation services in the West, 60% of the population in Nepal and over 40% of the population in Pakistan are without safe drinking water. Again, over 80% of the people do not have access to sanitation services.

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The Media Mosaic

Where the basic needs of the population are not met, it is not surprising that the communications infrastructure is also found to be sorely wanting. Broadcasting, both radio and television, have recorded phenomenal growth in recent years. The print medium, particularly periodicals, has grown in numbers and circulation. There is also a belated recognition on the part of governments of the need to upgrade telecommunication facilities. Yet the situation today is less than satisfactory:

<table>
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<th>People per tel.</th>
<th>Newspapers per 1000</th>
<th>Radio sets per 1000</th>
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<tr>
<td>Bangladesh</td>
<td>568.0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>India</td>
<td>171.0</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nepal</td>
<td>686.0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakistan</td>
<td>99.2</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indonesia</td>
<td>166.0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>118</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaysia</td>
<td>10.1</td>
<td>197</td>
<td>431</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thailand</td>
<td>36.4</td>
<td>55.2</td>
<td>178</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>227</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Japan</td>
<td>-2.2</td>
<td>562</td>
<td>824</td>
</tr>
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Source: WCR 1989/Asiaweek 7/92

The print media in Asia have witnessed a decade of development. As restrictions have been removed and licensing liberalized, as telecommunication facilities have improved and computers become more affordable, countries as far apart as Nepal and South Korea have recorded a rise in the number of daily newspapers. In absolute terms, the highest growth has been recorded in India, Bangladesh, South Korea and Thailand. There has been a decline in numbers in Indonesia, Malaysia, Shri Lanka and Japan.

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The circulation picture is even more impressive. Between the years 1979 and 1986, all the major countries in South Asia recorded significant gains. The growth in Pakistan, from a little over one million copies to almost four million, was the highest. In the countries of the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) group, Thailand registered the highest circulation growth from 2.6 to 4.3 million copies. Above all, China had reason to be proud of the rise in the circulation of its daily newspapers from an estimated 14 million to over 37 million.

The broadcasting scene, traditionally dominated by governments in the region, is also showing signs of far-reaching change brought on by a wave of corporatization, privatization and expansion. The early months of 1992 saw a spate of announcements permitting more private commercial enterprises to operate TV and radio stations.

Malaysia announced that two more television stations would begin to operate shortly, increasing the total number of available channels to 7 from 4 at present. Another 26 radio networks are also to be opened, raising the total number to 45.

The Thai government, in a calculated effort to weaken monopolies and foster pluralism, has approved plans for up to five private TV networks. These will compete with the state and military controlled stations.

The Singapore Broadcasting Corporation plans to privatize, with three television channels to be taken over by two or three companies and radio by another.

Indonesia has agreed to allow six new private TV stations to operate, in addition to the current three. While India, the government has cleared a proposal by the Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, to issue licences to private producers for programming time slots on All India Radio and Doordarshan (TV).

The number of radios in China grew from 6 million in 1965 to 262 million in 1990. In 1947, All India Radio had only 6 transmitters. By 1990, AIR could proudly claim to have a network comprising 100 primary channel stations and 75 commercial service stations (besides its external services) broadcasting 17,000 programme hours daily in 18 main languages and 126 dialects.

The rate of growth of television in Asia in the decade upto 1985 is reported to have been more than five times the world coverage of 4 per cent (South, 8/86). The pace of growth can be expected to accelerate in the decade ahead as rival satellite transmissions spark a revolution in viewing choices, habits and tastes in the region.

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Roadblocks on the Pluralism Path

AMIC's efforts over the past decade aided by a number of agencies, notably, the Communication Assistance Foundation of the Netherlands, to assist in the establishment and development of small, especially rural, newspapers, have highlighted some of the underlying problems. These appear to be problems common to the fledgling print media, whether in Bangladesh or India, Indonesia or the Philippines.

The negative factors may be broadly summed up as follows:

a. Poor circulation resulting in low economic viability;

b. Lack of sales due to insufficient purchasing power;

c. Limited access to advertising income;

d. Poor telecommunication facilities hindering speedy and accurate news-gathering and transmission;

e. Low literacy levels in some countries;

f. Relatively high cost of printing and supplies, including newsprint;

g. High cost of new technology;

h. Costly and inefficient distribution systems;

i. Markets too small to sustain local publications;

j. Multiplicity of languages and dialects;

k. Scarcity of trained personnel;

l. Hostile political environment;

m. High cost of bank finance;

n. Government restrictions (in some countries) on advertising, editions or size;

o. Operational infirmities - skills lacking in areas such as financial management; and

p. Poor standards of journalistic skills.

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While in physical terms there has been a phenomenal growth in broadcasting in Asia, the problems confronting the medium are both numerous and serious. A seminar organized by Deutsche Welle and AMIC in 1991 highlighted some of the problems faced by broadcasting organizations, particularly in the areas of career development and personnel management:

1. Unsuitable entry-level candidates due to pressure for appointments and poor selection procedures;
2. Overstaffing and uneven distribution of work;
3. Poor pay scales;
4. Inadequate recognition resulting in low motivation and migration of trained staff to more lucrative activities;
5. Shortage of trained personnel at middle and junior levels;
6. Poor facilities for upgradation of skills; and
7. Equipment obsolescence.

While many of the problems can be solved, given a spirit of cooperation and determination, social conditions such as poor purchasing power and low levels of literacy are clearly beyond the scope of the media. There is an additional threat to viability through audience and income erosion by foreign media.

The External Threat to Pluralism

The Secretary-General of the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union has drawn attention to the western media's sudden interest in Asia. "Asia has become a market for the western media. We have CNN, of course, and soon it will be up there all day long on Indonesia's Palapa satellite. Along with the American sports channel, ESPN. We have BBC via STAR TV out of Hongkong on the AsiaSat satellite, along with Prime Sports and MTV from the United States...And, we hear, the New Zealanders and the Australians are actively planning satellite services into the region".

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While it is patently unfair to expect a small, under-financed TV network in a developing country to compete with the vast resources of the BBC or CNN, viewers expect them to, and compare their standards with those of the intruders. Nepal TV is believed to have lost fifty per cent of its urban audience to STAR TV. In fact, in some countries, the multinationals can be received in places that cannot get the national broadcasters' signals.

The external threat takes many forms. In Indonesia, the threat of a trade war has compelled the government to agree to a policy shift despite its crippling effect on the local film industry.

To quote Asiaweek: "The U.S. Motion Picture Export Association threatened to complain to battle-ready U.S. Trade Representative, Carla Hills, whose office has the power to include Indonesia in a "watch list" of unfair markets. Jakarta caved in. In May, it gave the U.S. film industry greater access — in return for a 35 per cent increase in U.S. quotas for Indonesian-textile producers...Local film makers see it as a death blow".

If we shift the focus to Children's TV, there is still cause for concern. The potential viewership is very high as over half the population in South and Southeast Asia is below 15 years of age. The material available for viewing includes old Disney and Hanna-Barbera cartoons, new generation cartoons such as Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Japanese Robot Fantasies and Sesame Street for countries that can afford it. This is the programming pattern for children whether in India or Indonesia, in the Philippines or Thailand.

If we turn to advertising, the main source of revenue for most mass media, we observe a similar phenomenon of western domination. The top agencies are in all the South and Southeast Asian countries where collaborative ventures are permitted. A study of the top three advertising agencies in six Southeast Asian countries showed that with a single exception, western-based multinational advertising networks topped the agency rankings in each country.

The Doctrinal Divide

Many western proponents of pluralism seek to promote western-style press freedom in Asia as an antidote to government ownership and as a check on government. But this is often at variance with the Asian view.

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Indonesia has shaped its social, political and cultural institutions within the framework of its Pancasila philosophy. Pancasila stresses religious beliefs, humanism, national unity, consensual democracy and social justice. It does not support individualism and individual rights.

Malaysia's national ideology, Rukunegara, emphasises national unity, democracy, social equity, progressive thought and traditional culture. Singapore's core values also stress the community, family, consensus, and racial and religious tolerance.

The differing perceptions of the role of the media as between the West and Asia are not confined to officials but are also shared by the region's journalists. At the Asia-Pacific Conference of the International Federation of Journalists in Hong Kong in 1987, an Asian journalist proposed "an Asian model of journalism in which the press worked with the government to build a national consensus".

He said that the western-style press freedom which stressed confrontation with the authorities was not in harmony with the traditional Asian values and milieu. The role of the press in developing countries was to promote team work which was necessary for political development and nation-building.

Another Asian delegate echoing this view said that the national press should be an instrument of national development and nation-building, and must support development efforts.

Singapore's Minister for Trade and Industry summed up the Asian sentiments when he said that "value systems or political structures cannot be transplanted from different societies, take root in a totally different environment, and solve problems for which they had never been designed...No single system of government can suit every nation, and no single model of the press can serve the purpose of every society".

Dr. Godwin Chu of the East-West Center has pointed out that the Western perspective of communication is an individually oriented perspective. But he is careful to mention that the search for an Asian perspective does not imply the total rejection of the Western perspective. Rather it will take whatever is useful but at the same time it should take into account the social structural contexts, cultural values and religious beliefs.
Conclusion

The thrust towards media pluralism in Asia has acquired a momentum which will continue to propel it forward in the years ahead, as literacy levels rise and economies and popular expectations grow. As Maslog has mentioned in his study, "5 Successful Community Newspapers", a sense of commitment, a deep conviction and a determination to serve the community are necessary for the success of a community paper. To these qualities must be added a conscious striving to improve staff professionalism, attract the right talents and foster a sense of involvement through a sharing of prosperity.

The emerging media in Asia must be supported in their efforts to acquire the professional skills and management expertise necessary to ensure their viability. This calls for a long-term programme directed not only at the media but also at the universities and other institutions which impart training, at press institutes, NGOs involved in media-related activities and bodies such as the national press councils.

A comprehensive plan, a clear time frame and close monitoring are essential to ensure steady progress on the road to independent and pluralistic media.

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References


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