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BEYOND SILENCE:
ASIA AND THE CHALLENGE OF THE GLOBAL COMMUNICATIONS ORDER

Ziauddin Sardar and Merryl Wyn Davies

After the second world war the Third World sought independence, whose real meaning would be national self determination. In the post cold war era this quest re-emerged as the main mission of all ‘Third World’ states. The argument presented here is that while the perennial target, real self determination, is now more clearly defined as breaking out of the dynamics of cultural dominance, the experience of the intervening half century has made the achievement of cultural independence more complex, more difficult and just as intractable as the quest to overturn economic dependence. The most significant problem in the path of cultural independence today lies in the field of communications. The threat is that globalisation, prompted by advances in communications technology, will again preempt and make delusory talk and strategies aimed at attaining autonomy. If history is not to repeat itself, we need new analyses, new models to understand the past and the challenges of the present.

National independence was in many ways delusory. Newly independent states took over boundaries created by chance and colonial convenience, boundaries that often had little rootedness in history, that became the home of many diverse peoples who had been maintained in a state of competitive tension under colonial rule. Independence released a whole range of aspirations and the desire for redress of tensions it had never been the purpose of colonialism to accommodate. Newly independent states needed to create the whole panoply and array of statehood, their first priority was the creation of a sense of nation and state that had genuine meaning for its citizens. What independence did not bring was any change in the economic status, wellbeing or the available wherewithal to immediately tackle the extensive problems of the people of the nation. The world economic order was not dented by the onset of national independence.

Communications became a central concern for achieving many of the national objectives of newly independent nations. The media were conceived of as a vehicle through which self expression and the advancement of national goals could be advanced. It is unnecessary here to rehearse the familiar litany of the critique of
development. The important point is that the problems and realities of how the field of communications developed mirrors the salient points of the critique of development. Whether in the economy in general, or the media in particular, newly independent states found themselves bound by continuing dependency on the old metropolitan powers or the super powers of their choice, or at least the super power whose dominance they could least avoid. Sovereign power meant the people of a newly independent nation could elect their own representatives to national parliaments, or have their representatives selected for them but their quest for genuine self expression was hardly advanced at all in a world where dominance ruled, and the dominant knew no more of the newly independent nations than they had of the old colonies and dependencies.

The problem is that there is more to representation than the political philosophy of national liberation acknowledged. And there are more forms and means of representation that have real consequences than any liberation movement ever dreamed of. And thus it is that decades later we are still wrestling with the first and last, the alpha and omega, of the problem of representation and self expression. The problem is not only about the embedded structures of inequality in the world order that prevented independence leading to genuine change. It is even more fundamental. The models of development which were assumed, urged and generally adopted include as a given essential elements of the enduring cultural dominance of the Occident; they presuppose that the ways of the Occident and becoming like the Occident are the natural order and only path of progression for all. The path of synthesis, honing and shaping change to indigenous patterns and requirements is equivalent to stopping the juggernaut in its tracks and turning it 180 degrees simultaneously.

It is possible to examine the global communications order according to the critique of development. The ownership and control thesis works as well with the inequities of the global economic order as it does with those of the information order. In the seventies and eighties, calls for a new economic order were matched by those for a new information order – both to as little effect. Neither the thesis nor the strategies based on it have been successful in negotiating change, which suggests far more than the conclusion that turkeys do not vote for Christmas, that those who own and control to their own benefit will not willingly relinquish their tangible rewards in favour of diminished wealth and wellbeing for themselves. It suggests a flaw, or grave
limitation in the analysis of the ownership and control thesis. Simple ownership was not an explanation for how the dynamics of control operated; a change of controlling interests did not auger genuine ownership, nor genuine operative control. Both ownership and control were more complex and more complicated in their processes of operation than a simplistic catch all theory led us to think. Dominance is a reality but if we are to work through extant dominance to a state of greater equity, fairer representation and a more just reflection of the realities of the world we need a more complex understanding of how dominance operates on which to build strategies for change.

The remarkable transformation underway in the high performing economies of Asia offers a different approach to understanding the limitations of so many of the classic theories of development, dependence, and dominance. The momentum of change within Asia is a starting point for new understandings and strategies, especially in the field of studies of cultural dominance and the impact this has on the field of communications in general. At present, representation and understanding of the reality of economic change in Asia is silenced by the overlay of cultural dominance in the communications field, especially the media. Media policies within rapidly changing nations in Asia operate to increase their own silence and preempt genuine choices about the course and direction of change. Political rhetoric urges confidence based on Asian models. National broadcasting policy and media operation work diametrically against this trend, in nations where the media is seen as guided and controlled in ways that are contrary to the supposed freedoms of western liberal capitalist nations. This is neither a trick conundrum, nor a simple contradiction. It is the statement of the limitations of our understanding of the mechanics and processes of cultural dominance. A new model for comprehending cultural dominance will make clear the arena where choice can be made, change can be effected. In effect Asia has to choose whether it is ready to be globalised to death, the most likely consequence of the drift of current policy and practice. Or Asia can decide if it wants to make a new autonomous market in cultural authenticity, a choice it is now perfectly positioned to effect if the will to change is really more than rhetoric, if a popular market really does exist for *intra* Asian communication.
Self-inflicted Dominance

The central problem concerning ‘communicating across borders’ is that there are no real borders and communication is basically a one-way street. The global media market recognizes no real borders, cultural or otherwise, and caters for one single culture: the culture of western consumption. This situation is not new, it is not the consequences of the arrival of satellite communication. It has been with us for half a century. The history of television has paralleled the development of the movie industry. In the immediate aftermath of World War I Hollywood silent films became a global industry, Charlie Chaplin, Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks Snr were instantly recognisable anywhere on the face of the globe, courted and feted by kings and queens, presidents and prime ministers. The worldwide distribution of American television followed an already well beaten path. The cultural semiotics of American television is well known. In the aftermath of the Second World War it made a rapid turn around to ignore the signs and symbols of the working class, ordinary American, opting for the upwardly mobile, consumer goods acquiring worldview of the affluent achiever. This worldview is the core of cultural dominance. This dynamic has existed as much in a country like Britain, which has the oldest and strongest alternative model of broadcasting, as it has in countries which had no model of broadcasting at all and started from point zero.

There is only one thing this media worldview does not know that it does not know – and that is the rest of the world, the world other than the west, the world it continues to disenfranchise through its representations. The non west knows it is not represented by the dominant centres of media production. Yet today, Asia is the most significant market effecting trends of Hollywood movie production. Asia has even bought up control of Hollywood, in a sense, with Japanese purchase of Hollywood studios. Ownership has, as yet, done little except impoverish Japanese multi nationals and make Hollywood more determined to pander to what works in the Asian market - long on mindless action, short on script, replete with stereotyped Others, star driven blockbuster films. Increasing disposable income in Asia is being used to redouble the multiplier effect of cultural dominance and undercut the rhetoric of Asian values at source. What we are dealing with is no conspiracy theory, but, at base, a failure of self perception within Asia, a failure of understanding in Asia and an unwillingness to be unselfconsciously Asian in Asia. What we are witnessing is the worse case of succumbing to cultural dominance, that makes the economic vibrancy of Asia of
purely academic interest to the real political frontline where the future is being determined.

In effect, Asia’s ability to compete in the economic sphere has far outstripped its cultural awareness. The old lodestone of economic takeoff so dominates, requires so much in terms of ingesting unquestioned cultural dominance through the mastery of science and technology, it makes the cultural agenda a secondary sphere. The cultural agenda is also beset with profound problems that genuinely confound Asian intellectuals. Cultural dominance rules because of a lack of self confidence and an appalling case of self inflicted ignorances within Asia.

Cultural dominance works most potently at the level of process, the organisational and operational level. It works through the practical daily decisions of programme makers, everywhere, to achieve its pernicious effects. The reality is that today cultural dominance is promoted by Asians in Asia for Asians, and worst of all it is promoted, sponsored and furthered unconsciously, unreflectively and even without guilt. I will use examples from the Malaysian media to illustrate how cultural dominance works, since I am most familiar with Malaysia; but I believe these examples are by no means restricted to Malaysia and you can all provide your own homegrown parallels.

Let me leave aside for a moment the fact that an Asian grammar of broadcasting has signally failed to develop. There are no distinctive programme genres, forms of presentation, nor significant references to indigenous signs and symbols within the repertoire of television that immediately spring to mind. However, the most important place to begin is with the most serious problem: the adoption of a commercially driven model of media enterprise. The consequence has been that you pays your money and you get second rate parodies of what makes money in the American market. This is not buying in programmes, this is buying in straight undiluted cultural dominance.

Let us take the latest wave of commercialization as it appears on Malaysian terrestrial television stations. This encompasses two prime areas: direct selling by television and talk show / direct assess phone-in formats. Direct selling dilutes and debases the entire medium of communication. It purports to utilise well established, familiar documentary techniques solely on behalf of promoting a particular product. Selling is the only valued end, to further which the audience must be convinced of the importance of lifestyle choices. That these programmes are almost universally selling
products no one needs, are sold by Americans with insistent reference to American conventions of taste, fashion and lifestyle at prices which have a distinct American reference only compounds the deleterious effects of this use of television. It is a moot point whether or not it is up to the audience how to spend their own money, it is certainly not up to television to accumulate the capital of cultural dominance, which these supposed programmes represent. Such programmes do more than convince everyone they are no one unless they aspire to the home and lifestyle that has the need and disposable income to afford these products. They buy into the culture of cynicism that has overtaken the commercial media in the United States – anything for money while truth, public service and discourse on values can take a hike, they belong somewhere else not in the mainstream. All four Malaysian terrestrial channels direct sell, some with a greater vengeance than others. The most alarming development that followed the introduction of direct selling was the inclusion of, consciously or unconsciously modeled, segments in genuine locally produced documentary magazine programmes that mirrored exactly the values, worldview and presentation of the direct selling genre. Thus the absolute pits of American television is self selected as the latest hype in Asian broadcasting. It is interesting to note that regular, I am tempted to say genuine, advertising in Malaysia is required to have an Asian face. Advertisers have even been tartly reminded to include a sufficient number of Malay, as opposed to generically pan Asian, looking faces in advertisements. A prudential policy which goes for nothing when direct selling moves in. After the mindwash of early exposure to the direct from America version: “What does every American most want?” as one endless repeated sales pitch begins, having locals stand up and perform badly the self same hard sell only underscores for any sentient viewer the moral of cultural dominance. These are the practical levels at which cultural dominance really works.

The centrality of the marketplace to the new, hard won economic success in Asia has its own forms of expression on Malaysian television. Obsessive concern for the stock market is not financial journalism. The repeated focus on the lifestyles of the rich and famous business executives is hardly making economic choices and their meaning clearer. Documentary programmes are time consuming and expensive, not the profit driven executives ideal choice. But there is an easy answer, borrowed wholesale from American television, the direct access phone-in. Here the public thirst for information can be whetted, but never satisfied, by the ever wider circulation of instant disposable opinion. Questions that matter to individuals but may have only
limited relevance to more general information needs, often haltingly expressed, get answered by bemused experts, often also halting in their presentation of their expertise. The real meaning of such programming is not breeding an information society. Nor is it really about a democratic model of open representation of individual opinion, those are the non existent fig leaves that fail to cover the nakedness of what drives this new global broadcasting dispensation. Direct access is maximising the use of high cost infrastructure at least expense. High technology, high cost studios, with minimal outlay become blocked off for instant transmission time. It makes the balance sheet look wonderful, and seemingly commercial broadcasters have to answer directly for little else. The ethos of infotainment dominates, and becomes the great bastion of cultural dominance, a direct tie in to the decline and decadence of the culture of broadcasting of America, a culture of broadcasting which truly had no discernable 'gold age'. In America, this culture of broadcasting is contested, debated and bemoaned, to very little effect, because alternative poles of access to different discourses are available, for example PBS. There is dominance but the countervailing tendencies are also visible, acknowledged even at the shoddy end of broadcasting itself, because they are a cultural force. The same cannot be said in the case of Malaysia. So here one gets direct dominance unmediated as all that television can do.

Still keeping our focus on terrestrial stations - we don’t need to get to satellites yet – let us consider the presentation of science and technology. Every magazine programme, and they proliferate a pace, as well as fillers between and within programmes is conscious of the rapidly industrialising nation’s need to keep up with the latest developments in technology and science. What this means is an unending parade of made in America, occasionally made in Britain or Australia, programmes that hard sell high tech. The application of science to the development of new means to solve practical problems is there, whether it be arthritis, long shelf life vegetables in the supermarket or applying computer imaging technology to industrial production needs. The important point for our analysis is that each country in Asia has its own institutes that are undertaking research and development projects in just this way. So why are all the representations on television of white Americans, Britons or Australians? A concerted exposure to this kind of science and technology time filler provides precious little information, no questioning of anything and total brainwashed conviction that the future is high tech and that future is white, already arrived and belongs to the developed nations. The truth is more than potentially otherwise, but
that truth is not represented on Malaysian television. Even worse, on many occasions one can watch a focus on science item in a news broadcast that is nothing more than an infotainment commercial for some item of computer software. Add to this programmes designed for general interest, to explain the modern world, rather than specific aspects of science and technology and again the same syndrome operates. I recall an item on printing currency and stamps, both activities occur locally, both could have been filmed locally but in fact the footage used was of American dollar bills and US postage stamps. It brings to mind the Macleans toothpaste advertisement I see regularly in Britain: a space traveler is reminded by his holographic computer to brush his teeth ‘for a whiter brighter future’. Now I see science and technology being sold everywhere as toothpaste.

Another trend in local programming is a vast increase in ‘eco fillers’, documentaries on the environment and promotional items between programmes equivalent to adverts for the wonders of the natural world. Incidentally, this trend is even more pronounced in satellite broadcasting, but it is by no means confined to satellite. The ecological agenda mirrors the representation of science and technology. The heroic upholders of eco consciousness are white Occidentals, scions of polluters and despoilers; the forces of darkness against whom they labour are the traditional peasantry of many lands, all non white and captured in acts of despoilation born of desperation. This is the representation available to the television audience in the country that spearheads the Agenda 21 movement and efforts at the United Nations to increase investment in sustainable development.

Then there is the good news - bad news syndrome. What is news is a vexed question, compounded by large measures of cultural dominance. The dominant ethos of news is basically constructed in such a way that only bad news can be, unequivocally, hard news; contest, aggression, divides of any kind are the place where real news is happening and essential to its portrayal. Added to this is the realisation that news does not sell, even if lurking somewhere is the guilty acknowledgement that its importance should be signaled – more in the breach than observance. Both dynamics collide to ensure that ever more available sources of information provide measurably declining content of actual information or news. This is true even before we begin any discussion of encoded representations, assumptions and projections of cultural dominance contained within news footage. The global phenomenon that is CNN tries hard. What does it amount to? Hours of verbal diarrhea from structurally
under informed correspondents (their patron saint being Christiane Ammanpour) – structurally underinformed because the increasing amount of time they must stand before a camera to reiterate rather than update a report is time they are not spending finding out or even experiencing what is happening - a vast preponderance of focusing on American internal affairs, over balanced by obsessive interest in the American entertainment industry, available at all times, everywhere around the globe and please be sure only to book in to hotels that allow you never to be parted from this dispensation.

How cultural dominance works through news values is too easy a question to detain us – its what journalists do. For example, I spent sometime visiting the various branches of the Turner empire in Atlanta. Everywhere one met well educated, well informed, interested professionals of a journalistic bent. With these people one could discuss events and programme ideas. At the end of the discussion there would be a pause, a ponder and a shrug of the shoulders accompanied by “what would Ma and Pa in Peoria make of this?” That is the instant of cultural dominance and new values simultaneously in routine operation. It derives from journalists being members of their own society, their mental and cultural formation according to their society’s ideas and mores and a radical undervaluing of the intelligence of their fellow human beings, especially the members of their own society, otherwise known as the audience. Add to this the career benefits and real accumulation of personal resources that come from supporting the trek to infotainment and you have the whole scenario without the need to entertain the darker elements of the ownership and control thesis. At base cultural dominance rules because journalists, producers, researchers, directors, cameramen are not merely clones and replicants but its authors.

I can never recall a time when there have not been cries for more good news. This must be balanced by the fact I have never worked in any news institution with any journalist who actually understood the meaning of the term good news, or how to translate it into the kind of item they were used to manufacturing. Good news is an even more vexed issue than what is news. Hence, in despite of a definition either of news or good news, what transpires is the proliferation of warm, fuzzy, human interest stories that tell us of things we could just as well live without knowing. Good news becomes a one legged boy skiing up Mount Everest, a sick dolphin being given a birthday party or any variation between that spectrum you care to name. Since good news ends up requiring us to remark “Well fancy that” it also underscores the
understanding that real news is harder, bleaker, and more ubiquitous than the marginal, occasional and trivial good news.

Made for Television

Before I come to how all this is reflected in news coverage in Asia let me add another salient point of how the agenda of news is being set, for a global audience today. It is being afflicted by the ‘based on a true story’, made for television global overexposure to American films. This major industry works in concert with special interest groups and all varieties of non governmental organisations that campaign on issues of social concern, such interests and organisations - whoever, whatever or wherever - retain large accumulations of radical chic, and hence news cachet. It also relies on the conventions of sociological analysis that extrapolate the concepts of modern society from the experience of western nations and project them as the uniform problematique of the global condition. The worldview of this cinematic industry centres on human drama, hence it unquestionably makes what is known in the trade as ‘good’ television, just as its natural corollary is ‘real’ news. It seems that when America is confronted with a ‘problem’ it rushes to make a television film or mini series about it, the new Pavlovian response. What are the problems: child abuse, incest, sexual harassment, rape, divorce, drug abuse, violence among teenagers, the decline into violent anomie in the urban environment, particularly in the educational sector, or straightforward evil from serial murders to random violence to total strangers, all going along with miscarriage of justice. I am sure you know the kind of films I mean, most of them are lifted direct from newspaper stories and items on television news and many spawn whole genres of subsequent items in newspapers and television news, we could call it the ‘Wayne Bobbitt syndrome’. Such television films are the most easily available items that fill the acreage transmission hours of global television; there are more of them, they are not star driven, made more cost effectively and sold more cheaply than cinema films. I see them in Malaysia and then see them again in Britain or vice versa. My point is not that these films feed off news. It is the growing awareness that what constitutes news is as much driven by these films as any assessment of what is happening out there in society. Today the entertainment industry drives news: this week the hot Q&A topic on CNN was dinosaurs, courtesy of the movie Lost World. The compound result is an agenda, or rather the cultural dominance that creates the certainty that these concerns are the agenda, whether this is
actually applicable or not. The problem is that singularity is being converted into normality, and no-one anywhere seems to be questioning this conversion, nor asking for any kind of substantiation. It is a work of cultural dominance, it is a work of the thralldom of the cultural dominance of the ethos of news. It is an unholy alliance repeated until it is as thin as reality, real because it is everywhere, at least in the consciousness of those looking for a story.

I contend that all of the above is to be found in the news business in Malaysia, compounded by a number of local factors. Forms of news presentation and techniques are appropriated wholesale from western models; the pretty presenter rules, authoritative commentators are virtually nonexistent. The mythos of critical, investigative journalism haunts individual professionals who have been convinced that is what real journalists do and are – mainly because western journalists lie so convincingly to themselves. Yet this exists in tension with a sense of being controlled and circumscribed. The investigative, polemic model of the media marks an earlier stage of Asian experience, nation building needs something else, that something else remains an undefined ambiguity. The inhibitions of journalists act as a potent form of self censorship and self restraint. These centripetal forces translate into the ‘let the leaders speak’ syndrome, let us be publishers who facilitate direct communication and a wholesale retreat from the concept that the media can be an interpretive medium. Television is not an ideal explicatory medium, television images are more powerful than the battery of explicatory techniques that accompany the images. This is not quite a council of despair, it should be a spur to innovation and creativity, most often it is under appreciated or simply ignored. The consequence is the news presented as an unending round of news conferences on issues that are seldom explored for meaning. The media does a great deal to publish and broadcast the views of political leaders, makes slogans familiar indeed ubiquitous but does far less to stimulate informed social debate on how to accomplish the meaning and intent of the slogans.

Meanwhile, at the workplace there is the insistent need to fill news pages and transmission times. In news and current affairs of all varieties the easiest access, and given the dimensions of confusion, the safest option is trying to give people more ‘news’ from prepackaged sources. So in comes the agenda which ultimately is sanctified by the culture of the social concern telemovie, the sociologists agenda of the problems of change and the global vested interest of the network of non governmental agencies. This takes its place alongside the whole panoply of more
information about the world at large means more reliance on the news agencies and television services of metropolitan centres: Visnews, UPITN, Reuters, CNN recycled, Agence France Press and so on. What I am pointing to is that in many instances the products and ideas of cultural dominance are positively selected by Asians for Asians because in real ways they are easier than resolving inherent local confusions with a genuinely self determined Asian or national media ethos. The products of the global order of the dominant media are selected positively because they are considered necessary – the audience needs and deserves to know. What the audience can ultimately extract from this service is the imminent death of diversity and celebration of voicelessness.

Beyond news and current affairs there is what television does most, there is entertainment. Despite concerted efforts to increase locally produced content, prime time television is still dominated by bought-in products: Hollywood rules OK. Beyond that there is an obsessive concern to give prominence to the American entertainment industry. No public holiday in Malaysia is complete without at least one programme on ‘the making of …’ some Hollywood film. Then there are the award programmes, Oscar, Emmy, Golden Globe all reiterating the message that Hollywood is central to a global contemporary consciousness. The films and television shows represent a rapacious imperialistic cultural dominance that is redefining all history, all stories as real only when located in America, appropriated by America and spoken with an American accent. They represent a visual imagery of American concerns as the only global normality and they are pumped out by Asians on Asian television ad nauseam because they attract a market share. Cultural dominance breeds yet more homogenisation of a global popular culture whose message and effect is nothing but cultural dominance. If it’s not the cinema star system or the latest hot television show then it’s the pop music business. We all know it happens, we all know why it happens – it gets ratings. The only point I would make is that effective audience choice is only demonstrated about what is available, it can never be demonstrated for what is not produced and transmitted. The effective audience for an alternative is always hypothetical, potentially non existent, likely to take time, creative effort and a lot of money to build and deeply unattractive to advertisers. Ultimately the advertisers are the voice of consumerism whose native interest is in selling life styles, fashions and choices that are directly related to the pattern that has generated the current cultural impasse of the most developed nations. There is no reason here to spare the print.
media. They reflect the habits of television perfectly. Their own special contribution is the beauty contest. I can think of nothing less culturally compatible with Asian values, yet one simply cannot get away from extensive, perennial coverage of every beauty pageant available in Malaysia's English language press. Who led whom to the logical culmination when MetroVision, the fourth terrestrial station, sought to broadcast coverage of a local beauty pageant on television?

Then let us turn to the most neglected audience in Malaysian broadcasting, an audience that is of supreme importance: children. The only thing that passes for children's programming is an undiluted diet of imported cartoons, almost exclusively American. Need I detain anyone by repeating the analysis that cartoons are the most consumerist driven form of entertainment on the face of the globe through their direct links to merchandising? There has been a recent move to answer this predicament, which answer is to import some American children's programmes. *Sesame Street* was a wonderful initiative, but it became inherently merchandising. *Nickelodeon* manages to strip the enamel from my teeth, a personal response to a particular brand of self conscious American worthiness. The point, however, is that such programmes are more geared to imprinting cultural dominance than any other genre of television, precisely because they are intended to form young American minds. As an answer to the different values, conventions and attitudes of Malaysia they are indeed the defeatists answer to national broadcasting. Quite honestly, I sometimes wonder at the appalled concern expressed in Malaysia about the problems of 'the youths' when the reason for the problem has been broadcast on locally run and managed terrestrial television stations for years. And the prognosis is getting worse not better. The tally is simple: nowhere on nationally run, privately or publicly owned media can Malaysian youth find reinforcement for Asian identity, culture or values as something pertaining especially to themselves. Youth inhabits the bright lights of mass pop culture, the already homogenised, globalised to death dispensation. Young people identify with it, eat it, act it out, and seek to emulate it because that is what media professionals, even their own parents, offer to them.

Now we should turn to satellite broadcasting. Cogently argued concern has been expressed about satellite broadcasting. It is the visible intrusion of globalised communication into the national media equation. Visibility has focused the arguments. However, any review of satellite broadcasting must allow for the following facts. There are no major series on the prime English language satellite
channel, appropriately renamed recently as Star World, that have not already been shown on Malaysian terrestrial channels. There is more diversity on Star World than TV1, TV2, TV3 and MetroVision combined since Star World actively seeks to broadcast British and Australian programmes alongside the standard American fare. Star World itself edits for transmission, and all satellite programmes received in Malaysia are delayed transmissions for censorship purposes, making them indistinguishable from the terrestrial broadcasts. I am still unable to figure out why *Third Rock from the Sun*, despite being regularly advertised on Star World almost always fails to materialise on the screen. But the even more egregious *Ellen* is available on TV3. The first episode of *Ellen* I saw concerned the discussion and approval of a casual sexual relationship for transient, leisure time entertainment: the human turned on the fact it was the woman who was exploiting the man. Where exactly does that fit in the discourse on Asian values? But then Malaysian censors are nothing if not a totally unfathomable body of people. Nothing on Star World can compete with the breathless hype of MetroVision, the terrestrial station whose promotional announcements stress they are bringing to the screen salacious, titillating ‘sizzling’ material that cannot be watched anywhere else. Terrestrial stations are busily vying to rebroadcast material from across the spectrum of satellite programming including MTV and Channel V. Finally, to my knowledge Star World has never attempted a feat accomplished by TV2 which broadcasts the series *Silk Stalkings*. *Silk Stalkings* is an American phenomenon. It was specifically made, by the Stephen J Cannell battery production unit, to service American cable television stations. It was intentionally designed to be salacious, titillating and go further than anyone thought they could get away with on prime time American television. It is a police drama, by genre. The format is to find ever more arcane, explicit and vicariously sexy ways to get the victim murdered. Its stock in trade is a world populated by pimps and hookers, casual sex, kinky sex and perverted sex, with acres of almost revealed flesh. It is the most successful series ever broadcast on cable in the United States and has spawned its own extensive website on the Internet. When this is being broadcast, admittedly cut almost to the point where it is difficult to follow the action or what passes for its logic, on terrestrial Malaysian television who needs to worry about satellites and their supposed tsunami of cultural dominance? The inundation has already happened. All the points that have been made about terrestrial channels of course apply to satellite broadcasting over Asia. But the point is the issues
are the same not different. Satellite broadcasting introduces nothing new, nothing that is not already being done to Asian audiences by their own broadcasters. The answer to the problems of broadcasting are to be found not in banning or restricting satellites but resolving the confusions of Asian broadcasting itself.

**Resistance and Renewal**

My purpose is not to be disparaging but to put forward the dilemmas that operate and the rationales which underpin what exists. These dilemmas and rationales are compound products of genuine, concerned professionals, undoubtedly committed to national and regional causes and on reflection opposed to cultural dominance in the abstract. That cultural dominance results from their decisions in routine ways in doing their jobs represents a debate that is not happening, an Everest Malaysia, indeed Asia as a whole, has not yet scaled. Further, I wish to make it absolutely clear that many aspects of this problem are not peculiar to Asia, or even the Third World. Commercial driven, rating chasing television has taken over everywhere, and the issues it brings are debated as much in Britain, France and throughout Europe as they are in Asia. Or think of Canada, where deregulation consigned their enterprising multicultural broadcasting to a commercial infotainment limbo Canadian commentators describe as ‘so far from God, so near to the USA’. It was newly elected French Prime Minister Lionel Jospin who recently warned that globalisation is threatening civilization as we know it. It is France which has most resolutely battled the commercial cultural hegemony of the United States cinema and television empires. Asia is not alone in its problem. Asia has to determine whether it will generate its own distinctive solutions.

We began with the concept of self determination. Parts of Asia have been extremely successful in accumulating the means of economic growth, the beginnings of the accumulation of the influence of relative affluence. However, self determination and genuine self expression can now be seen to be and mean something far more profound and far reaching in terms of the internal dynamics of a nation and culture, in the life of a people. It is important to stress that the argument for self expression, the desire to break out of the stranglehold of cultural dominance is an argument for plurality in the 21st century. It is not a simplistic argument against the west, not a post independence reflex of anti colonialism. It is the argument for a multicultural world, which alone holds the promise of global stability, equity and sustainability for all. If our analysis is right, simplistic anti Occident reflexes have no
place in the contemporary world - the work of cultural dominance is now undertaken in Asia by Asians, it is self inflicted problems we are pointing to. Further, the problems we identify are not solely problems of Asians in Asia - they are also problems of the West within the West. To think of the concerns of cultural dominance in simple bipolar terms that allow a reject and regroup logic of resolution is to totally misunderstand the problem and thereby probably misconstrue the strategies for remedy.

If breaking out of the dynamics of cultural dominance is not simplistic rejection then what can it mean? I would refer you to the debate on Asian values and in particular the concept of Asian Renaissance being urged here in Malaysia. I would describe the concept of Asian Renaissance as a quest for synthesis, a critical, creative fusion of past and present to author a distinctive future that is markedly autonomous, self expressive and prepared to embrace difference. The hallmark of such a renaissance is the determination to root synthesis in authentic Asian harbingers of modernity, to patriate the concept with home grown thought and precursors. It is not surprising Malaysia should be the place where this quest is most determinedly underway. As a nation Malaysia has struck its own unique path in resolving the question of diversity. It has become the one genuine example of real multiculturalism in the teeth of persistent criticism, misunderstanding and misrepresentation. The social compact on which Malaysian democracy is founded was far from easy to effect and is underwritten as a living reality by a commitment to economic growth. The result is that the cultural identity of each distinct community is guaranteed and each community is assured of a stake in decision making as part of the political coalition, a coalition that has earned its endorsement through the ballot box.

The question now is not where Malaysia has been, nor even how it has got this far. The question is, by what means is Malaysia to get to where it is determined to go? The most salient point about Asian Renaissance is the need to balance economic transformation and growth with commensurate cultural renewal, to balance the equation of change. It is more than symbolism, though it is potent symbolism, to focus on Asian precursors through a series of crossborder conferences that introduce Malaysians to the ideas of Jose Rizal, Alama Mohammad Iqbal, Rabindranth Tagore and Sun Yat Sen, or to found an Institute for Civilizational Dialogue which seeks to foster direct discourse within Asia among Asians, such as the dialogue between Islam and Confucianism. These discourses seek Asian commonalities that it has never been
the work of the dominant culture to explore, appreciate or further. The reality Asian Renaissance must wrestle with is that Asia is the most complex region on the face of the globe. It is a mosaic of ancient civilizations with equally ancient networks of intercommunication that have been undergoing purposeful deconstruction for half a millennia. Recovery of the facility for peaceful interaction, mutual cross fertilization of ideas and the ability to sustain interaction through difference is the recovery of history every bit as much as it is the recasting of future potential.

The simple fact is today cross border communication is nonexistent. We have one directional communication, the ghettoblaster monotone of global mass culture which is reiterated endlessly within national communication orders. This dynamic is unsustainable and unhealthy for everyone concerned. It means Asia does not represent itself to the West any more than it represents it own authentic identity to itself or across borders within Asia. A civilization that does not reinforce and express itself through cultural communication in a host of fields of human endeavour is steadily eating away at its own foundations, preparing the means for its own collapse, no matter how long it has endured under whatever unfavorable circumstances. To succumb to the withering of autochthonous cultural expression is to consign one’s future to extinction. There is great resilience in Asia, there are distinctive ways of creative thought in Asia which have contributed much to all of mankind, far more than is readily acknowledged; there are artistic and aesthetic traditions in Asia which are a product of distinctive creative sensibilities. To promote these home grown achievements is not to reject the dominant culture it is to educate it to the possibilities of a plural future. The educative force, as well as the only practical models for a plural future, can only come from Asia. They have never been part of the civilizational and cultural repertoire or experience of the West. To cherish history, to give the recovery of history a place in the products of contemporary communications is not to turn one’s back on the present, its is to refine and enrich the present. The outpourings of the dominant culture today cause extreme disquiet in the West because they seem obsessed with a glorification of the demeaning, the debasement of the human character and an intoxication with the conundrums of meaninglessness that embraces the willingness to express no moral or ethical choice. Such trends appear to many in the West to demonstrate cultural forces that have lost touch with the gentler sensibilities and ennobling aspects of creative thought.
The technological possibilities now exist for genuine cross border communication to be realised. It is the messages, the things to say through and with the technology that is in doubt and seemingly recognisable only by its absence. A reaffirmation of Asian history, culture and distinctive expression can only be made by Asians. It must be made into an exchangeable commodity that can create a new communications market across borders in Asia. It is the essential ballast to the open trading world of Asia, indeed the open global trading order. More even than that, it is the last best hope for sanity in the global order.

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