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<td><strong>Author(s)</strong></td>
<td>Leonard, Hugh</td>
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<td><strong>Date</strong></td>
<td>1991</td>
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<td><strong>URL</strong></td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2571">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/2571</a></td>
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Future of Asiavision News Exchange

By

Hugh Leonard
NOTES FOR FES SEMINAR TALK
RE FUTURE OF ASIAVISION
NEWS EXCHANGE

Hugh Leonard
Secretary - General
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BACKGROUND

- Asiavision (AVN) was set up nearly eight years ago to promote the exchange of news among broadcasters in Asia and between the region and the rest of the world.

- This followed expressions of dissatisfaction by developing countries in Asia of an imbalance in the flow of news and the "gatekeeper" role of the major news agencies, which were western.

- It was also felt that it was illogical for a developing country to get a story of a neighbouring country indirectly via the west.

HISTORY

- AVN started with five members: Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, Brunei and Malaysia. A few months later it was expanded to include Japan, China, Indonesia, Iran, Korea and Australia (SBSA). (Korea and Australia later left for financial reasons but have recently expressed interest in rejoining).

- Asiavision uses the Intelstat System to exchange TV news items daily. Originally, each member sent items to coordinating centres (Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur). Centres packaged news and resent it to all members. Two years ago, AVN began "hot-switching", whereby each member transmits its item(s) to satellite and it is instantly received by all others. This sped up the exchange and allowed for more same-day stories.

PRESENT

- Today, AVN is taken very seriously by the major news organisations of the world. The American networks - ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN - have access agreements and regularly use material.
- AVN is also an important partner in family of regional news exchanges.

- Number of news items carried by AVN has steadily increased - now about 6,000 stories a year.

- No less than two dozen exclusives or first pictures to world so far this year - including assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, Bangladesh cyclone and China's worst floods this century.

- Usage of AVN items by members is about 50 percent. AVN stories are regularly used by Eurovision and appear frequently in CNN feeds and bulletins of other networks.

FUTURE

- With eight years experience, we face future with large measure of optimism.

- We are making efforts to increase membership. GMA7-Philippines has plans to join AVN early in 1992. Broadcasters in Thailand have expressed positive interest and the Koreans are considering rejoining.

- Fragmentation of Eastern Europe will in time raise value of AVN. Non-European members of the eastern bloc news exchange, IVN, could eventually be inducted into AVN, as could the Asian republics of the Soviet Union.

- One result of Gulf war was that the major networks saw an increased role for regional news exchanges like AVN in providing coverage of important events in their areas. With their own resources committed to the war, they relied heavily on regional exchanges.

- The war also exacted a heavy toll on budgets of networks. Days of unlimited spending on news are over. So they are becoming increasingly dependent on regional exchanges.

- We have plans to upgrade operations of AVN. Firm plans to computerise communications network, when money can be found. (At present communication is by 4-wire circuit, telex and fax).
We are also planning a change to "flexible transmission". At present, each member is bound to a three-minute fixed slot. Flexible transmission means each member given sufficient time for its contribution within the overall duration of the feed.

Also working to overcome some of AVN's persistent problems. These include lack of commitment on part of some members, lack of hard news and poor technical quality from some sources. Action is proceeding on all problems and definite progress is evident.

High telecommunications tariffs continue to make it difficult for smaller countries to participate in AVN.

Another problem is attitude of some governments, that impede rather than encourage free flow of information. We have had much success in this in a number of countries and have been able to convince some governments that it is better to have the story told by the country's own journalists rather than be seen through the eyes of outside news agency personnel.

Despite the problems, we are confident of the future of Asia-vision, which has developed steadily in its relatively short history and will continue to do so in the future.

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