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The Importance Of Plurality And Diversity Of Sources And Outlets For The Communication Process In Asian Societies

By

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The Importance of Plurality and Diversity of Sources and Outlets for the Communication Process in Asian Societies.

By

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In 1950 the legendary Kurosawa made Rashomon. With that he demonstrated once and for all the importance of plurality and diversity of sources in reporting an event. The story he had to tell was the murder of a nobleman and the rape of his wife. He made each participant and witness relate it differently. The viewer got the most complete range of information on the event because the reporter, in this case the director, used multiple sources in the fullest sense of the term. Thirty-five years later, Rashomon remains a classic of reporting.

The use of diverse sources is fundamental to news reporting, so fundamental that further examination of the theories seems redundant. But there is one aspect of it that many of us have not yet fully grasped. This is the impact of the technological explosion taking place in the communication field. This is so all-embracing that our conventional theories about plurality and diversity may have to be abandoned, or certainly, altered. This we need to examine, both for purposes of understanding the seriousness of the changes taking place, and for coping with these changes.

But first we must take a few minutes to look at the background against which the technological explosion is taking place. The basic element in this background is the campaign for a New International Information Order. This has become one of the most contentious issues of our time, which is one measure of its importance. It produces as much heat as the debate over arms control and the world monetary system. A vast undergrowth of polemics and ideological rhetoric has developed around it.

We can help de-politicise the issue if we accept two facts: first, that part of the rhetoric clouding the issues is contributed by advocates of the new information order;
secondly, that opponents of the idea are being natural when they oppose it. Developing countries will have to fight their own battles.

I say supporters have contributed to the rhetoric. I have in mind those who coined the catch phrase, New World Information Order. I feel uncomfortable about this phrase because, as a campaign slogan, it is bureaucratic and negative and it conjures up visions of authoritarianism, inferiority and a lack of enterprise.

The phrase suggests a demand: we are demanding a New World Order of whom? Are we suggesting that somebody else, perhaps the industrialised countries, or the multinational news organisations, must put aside their self-interest and help promote our self-interest in a spirit of altruism and fairplay?

It's the business of the existing information order to resist a new information order. Just as surely, our business is not to ask others for favours, but to bring about whatever new order we want, in our own way and through our own efforts.

That word 'order' is another unfortunate part of the catch phrase. It implies that we can order an information system into being. Small wonder that detractors of the system quickly started equating it with government control and licencing. This in turn has forced advocates of the idea to spend much of their time and energy being on the defensive. Look at it anyway, this phrase is misleading. By popularising it, we have merely played into the hands of our detractors.

It may be too late to abandon the phrase, although it shouldn't be. I wish we could use a phrase like Freedom of Balanced Information. For that's what we really want: we want information to be balanced, and we want the freedom to access that information. It is not a dramatic phrase, but it is not peremptory either. It will not enable critics to strike a freedom-is-in-peril pose. Incidentally, it will also
give us an easier, safer acronym. Instead of the difficult MIO and the more difficult NIICO, Freedom of Balanced Information gives us FBI.

It will be foolish of course to assume that semantic adjustments will disarm adversaries of a Third World campaign for freedom of balanced information. We must realise that it is in the interests of our opponents to oppose us. There are fundamental contradictions in the political, economic and cultural objectives of the different worlds in which we live. Each world will indulge in practices it criticises in others. The industrialised world will scream that we in the developing world are encouraging government management of the news. Yet, there was very efficient government management of the news during the British adventure in the Falklands (1982) and the American invasion of Grenada (1983).

Developing countries will serve no purpose by pointing out such instances and asking the West to "correct" itself. All systems see themselves as correct. If it is natural for the Third World to seek change, it is just as natural for the established order in the West to seek perpetuation of that order. We cannot wish them away. We must rely on our own efforts to achieve our ends.

What should these efforts be? I see them across two broad fronts. First, professional standards need to be raised. Often it is through high-quality journalism that Western agencies and publications score over indigenous Third World media. Today's readers and viewers want quality, and societies that do not learn how to give it to them have only themselves to blame.

The second front where effort is needed is in fighting a rearguard battle against our own governments. Some of them would like to make the prophecies of doom come true, and run the communication business strictly according to their lights. The West may not see it, but media professionals in developing countries are second to none in wanting to
achieve the freedoms necessary to practise their craft. Western media itself is in no position to take these freedoms for granted. The recent BBC protest strike over a banned IRA interview showed that First World governments also have the same instincts our governments are accused of. It is a global occupational hazard and we must resist it as best we can.

This then is the background — the campaign for freedom of balanced information and the need to de-politicise it; the importance of raising professional standards; and the ever-present need everywhere to ensure an environment of freedom in which we can operate.

Against this background we must assess the technological explosion now under way. This is a much-laboured point, and a much-laboured phrase, but we really cannot emphasise it too much. Technology is drastically changing the parameters of communication. Any attempt to cope with modern communication must start with an understanding of these changes. We must understand how these changes affect even those of us who are concerned with the "software" end of the business such as gathering news from a diversity of sources.

In a nutshell, not only have dramatic new processes of communication spread around the world; it has become possible for developing countries to plan ahead quite realistically on the assumption that these up-to-date processes can be introduced without first going through intermediate infrastructural stages.

Everything is changing. The word information itself is no longer a simple word with a simple meaning.
I use it here in its modern 1980s sense, the way it is used by the MacBride Commission: that is, anything that can be reduced to bits and bytes and passed along telecommunication networks to emerge in the form of newspapers, magazines, broadcasts, videotexts, transmitted computer data, voice mail and a host of other electronic applications. In short, practically everything except person-to-person conversation.

Until now, we in Asia had to confine our thoughts on these matters to metropolitan centres. Not any longer. Thanks to satellites and transponders, vast countries like Indonesia and India are able to provide national TV hookups and thereby completely transform the information and communication scene. Those of us in the business are the ones who must adapt to this enormously expanded capacity to disseminate information. For we have entered an age where receiving news and spreading it is both easy to accomplish — and difficult to prevent.

That is the meaning of the new methodologies. Just this week the magazine I work for has been testing a new method of transmitting information from our correspondents to the editorial headquarters in Hongkong. Under this system, to give an example, the correspondent in Kuala Lumpur will compose a report of today's proceedings of this seminar and enter it into his small computer here. Then the report will go via Malaysia's telecommunication lines to Singapore where it will be beamed 36,000 kilometres into space and then down to an central earth station. (It doesn't matter much where in the globe the earth station is located because distances in space have no meaning; the one in our system happens to be in Toronto, Canada.) From Toronto the report goes up again to a satellite and then down to Hongkong and along the phone lines to the computer in the office of our Chief of Correspondents. The amazing thing is that the report will reach the Chief of Correspondent one second after the correspondent in Kuala Lumpur pressed the "enter" button on his keyboard.
Take another example. Just a few days ago in Hongkong I noticed a TV advertisement for a cordless cellular telephone. It weighs just 28 ounces and hangs on your belt, or fits into your pocket. Cellular transmitters have already been installed all over Hongkong. So this telephone means that a person sitting on a bus can talk to one party in Singapore and simultaneously with another, in a three-person conference call, in Tokyo. Only ten years ago, this sort of thing was the stuff of comic book heroes. We have already entered an age that has been promised for years in science fiction—the age of universal personal communications. Provided one has the right equipment, anyone on this planet can talk to anyone else, any time.

I must strike a note of caution at this point. I am not a technical person. Computers and word processors give me that uneasy sense of things galloping along somewhat faster than I feel ready to handle. So I am ill-equipped to engage in discussion about the technical, as opposed to the philosophical, nature of the Information Age. But oddly enough, that's immaterial. No matter how well or poorly we as individuals cope with the pace of change, change dashes inexorably on, gathering momentum as it goes.

This change is both vast and sensational. Ten years ago, when a small team put together the first issue of our magazine, none of us dreamed that within a decade, our correspondents would be bouncing information off satellites, or that distances would cease being a factor in communication costs. This newfound ease and speed of transmission is absolutely central to the new perception of diversity and plurality of information sources.

The sensational nature of these changes is obvious.
A colleague of mine, one of those who delight in innovations, recently told me of a computerised translation process he witnessed in Tokyo at a major electronics firm. A typist entered English sentences on one side of a screen, and a Japanese version appeared on the other side. The system was still experimental and no more than 90% accurate, but it demonstrated one of the most profoundly pivotal electronics communication possibilities in the pipeline. It may finally provide what the MacBride Report called a "cross-cultural communications bridge."

My colleague also observed a computer taking verbal dictation and printing it out, correctly punctuated. He described to me laser scanners that could read the pages of old books and newspapers, and even hand-written letters, and convert the contents into editable copy on a computer screen. Think of it: once these techniques are improved and made widely available, I might be able to place my long-dead grandfather's correspondence, written in Malayalam, under an electronic scanner, and read it, should I so wish, in English.

What do these techniques and methodologies mean to us? Apart from their obvious importance to the way in which we carry on our business, I suggest we can use these techniques to achieve the objectives we have in mind -- be it the freedom of balanced information, or a guaranteed multiplicity of sources in news gathering.

We all know how global news is dominated by Western wire services and how they suffer from inaccuracies and poor comprehension of cultural nuances. I believe that nothing is to be gained from complaining about Western slant or misconception innocently spread abroad. And let's make no mistake, the ignorance is innocent, at least most of the time.

Only rarely is Western media's misinformation disinformation -- that is, malicious attempt to deceive.
We have naturally been bemoaning the dominance of Western agencies. But how often have we reminded ourselves that this is less a matter of cultural domination than of organisation and corporate structure? Editors in Asia have been talking for long about cooperating to get an Asian perspective on news. What has been lacking is not the will, but the organisation. No system exists, to my knowledge, that can come close to competing for efficiency with the profit-motivated international corporation.

We must accept that, after all, the four big Western wire services and the half-dozen major feature services have not obtained their dominant position through force. They do their job primarily for their own purposes. They make their services available to all comers, and for various reasons editors everywhere have been buying their services. No Third World system is able to provide similar services at similar prices. Hence our dependence on Western sources.

So far, there has been little we could do about this. The idea of a news pool hasn’t really given us a viable alternative. But new technology could make the task a lot easier.

Think of the day when every editorial office in Asia will be fully computerised. I don’t mean the 1970s style of centralised videowall that are now extensively in use. Full computerisation is when every writer and editor has his own intelligent system at his fingertips, and every editorial research department and library has its own storage and retrieval system; and every publication has the capacity to communicate electronically with outside sources. Then, intra-regional information services will become a de facto reality. The remarkable feature of this burgeoning Information Age will be the simplicity of communicating, and the readiness with which information can be made available from one electronic system to another. Might this not form a last, a realistic basis for editors in Asia to cooperate in exchanging sources of news?
We could best do it by selling information to one another at the touch of a button, which will be less cumbersome and more practical than setting up a central pool. Publications in different countries can exchange news and features on a bilateral basis; reporters in one country can contact sources in another on the cellular phone. Technology makes all impossible things possible. What is required is commitment to the ideal of plurality, and recognition that it is now within reach.

There is another side to the coin. What flows effortlessly in one direction, goes back with equal ease in the other. Not only has it become so much easier for central sources to gather information, but it is also easier to distribute it to individuals in their private homes and offices. Technology is going to free the dissemination of information from the constraints of logistics and handling restrictions. In other words, prevailing methods of controlling the flow of information are going to become meaningless. This has several serious -- not to say disturbing -- implications for the media, for governmental authorities, and for society at large.

There has been a spurt of interest, among profit-scenting corporations, for network systems that can be used for dissemination of information to individuals and offices. Outlets have suddenly become more important than sources. Not traditional outlets like newspapers, but new-fangled outlets like private homes. Already, some essential information services, including news briefs, are being marketed to private subscribers in Singapore, Hongkong and Tokyo. Before long, individuals may have the choice of getting their news either from newspapers or magazines, or from some electronic reading device. The meaning of this is as clear as it is sobering: It is becoming more difficult to prevent news from reaching whoever wants it.
In much of Asia, governments consider it their prerogative to determine the suitability of information, and to take measures to ensure that only suitable information is available to the public. Authorities make their judgements on the basis of official and social attitudes, and they prohibit accordingly. Until now, we as communicators have been addressing this issue in terms of whether it is desirable to enforce codes of information. That is becoming immaterial now. The question to be addressed from now on is whether it is possible to enforce information control.

The short answer is: No. We can already see why. Information control was possible and easy till now because it only meant controlling printing presses, broadcasting stations, cinemas, establishments of live entertainment, public meetings and missionary activities. The arrival of the videotape upset this situation. How do you control someone watching a video in the privacy of his home?

At the moment, governments are still trying to do this by preventing entry at customs barriers of unsuitable foreign tapes. But as we know, only a single tape needs get through and any number of copies can be made. This can be done not necessarily in clandestine studios where people breaking the law with sophisticated equipment stand a good chance of being apprehended; it can be done in ordinary living rooms. Short of stationing a policeman in every home, there is no way of preventing a person with two VCRs from copying tapes, and lending, or giving, or selling the copies to others.

This is one of many instances. At another level, we already have a problem of "software piracy" or the unauthorised copying of computer programmes without payment to those who developed it. This is what is called theft of intellectual property. That was the term used once for photocopying pages of copyrighted books. But it is rarely used any more in that context because copying machines are now ubiquitous, and
the copying process so much taken for granted, that those who once tried to prevent it have long since given it up as a lost cause. So how much more futile is the attempt to protect software rights when the programme can be copied on a second disk on the same computer, in a few seconds.

Published authors among us will know how terrible it is to be pirated. Yet, enforcement of intellectual property rights, for all its moral justification, is proving to be a hopeless task. An acquaintance of mine compares it to an architect trying to copyright the view of his building from the public thoroughfare.

Technology provides no solution to this problem, at least not so far. It is interesting that, while enormous R & D costs are going into devising ways to facilitate communication, very little research is being done into ways to impede it. Certainly little such work is being done on a commercial scale in the big electronics corporations of Japan, Europe and America. The most progress in this field is reputed to be in the Soviet Union.

So, Asia's decision-makers must ask themselves whether attempts to control illicit information may not turn out to be a futile exercise. And if it proves impossible to monitor information realistically, how should governments conduct themselves? What stand should they take? I have no ready answers, because the issue has become less of a moral matter than a technical one. I suspect the answer, when we find it, will fall under the jurisdiction of the ministry of education rather than of law enforcement. In other words, protecting our societies' value systems will become -- by default, and not necessarily by choice -- a matter of persuasion rather than of compulsion.

By any yardstick, this is going to be a major challenge. In some areas it has already taken an acute form. Direct broadcasting from satellites, for example. This is an exciting development, but it is also disturbing and insidious.
Much to the irritation of the French Government, French people are tuning in their television sets to programmes broadcast by a satellite privately owned by a certain not-unknown Australian media magnate. The satellite, 36,000 kilometres up, beams its programmes to anyone who has invested in the appropriate receiving antenna.

The lesson here is that technology does not respect national frontiers, any more than it conserves cultural heritages. The French have done studies on a policing system. This is based on spotting the tell-tale receiving dish on rooftops. But many legal experts doubt not merely the legality of such measures, but their logistic feasibility.

What might direct-broadcasting technology mean to Asia? It means that any owner of a satellite will be able to put his programmes in our living rooms, if only we are willing to turn a TV knob. And the satellite owner can be a commercial genius, or a government. The programmes may be deemed wholly unsuitable for a variety of reasons — cultural, linguistic, political, or moral. But what can be done about it? Initially, bans on antenna sales may work. But it is well known that the bigger the satellite, the smaller the receiving dish. And the smaller the dish, the more difficult it is to detect it or control it. Jamming technology, being far less in demand, runs far behind broadcasting technology. So, suppose North Korea wants to broadcast television programmes to Indonesia; suppose the Libyan Government starts a programme for Filipino viewers; what can Indonesia or the Philippines do? Frankly... nothing.

For the first time in human history, we are about to see total and complete individual freedom of information.

Is this going to be a good thing or a bad thing? It is going to be both, and we will be debating it for a long time.
What is relevant to our purpose today is that we are right in the middle of cataclysmic changes. This new technology forces upon us the ultimate plurality. It renders academic the notions that have so far guided us in striving for diversity of sources and outlets. What is happening now is the unmistakable extinction of non-plurality. We better prepare for this because this is revolution.