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Manning the production line on the front line: newsroom management issues and the international media

Jonathan R. Woodier 19/10/2000

O for a Muse of fire, that would ascend
The brightest heaven of invention,
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act,
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!

"That's the way it is"
Walter Cronkite, CBS News

Shakespeare wrote his plays for a small stage at one end of a circular theatre, with an audience seated in the balconies and standing in the stalls. It was small and limiting, and demanded much imagination from those watching.

Shakespeare was well aware of these limitations. At the beginning of Henry V, Chorus sets the scene, with England and its king, 'warlike Harry, like himself, assume the port of Mars', set against France. But Chorus begs his audience's pardon, for trying to portray two great Kingdoms and their monarchs, the fields of France and the battle of Agincourt, with its soldiers and horses, on such an 'unworthy stage'; a 'cockpit'; a 'wooden O'.

As the managers of television newsroom, there must be an awareness that we too should humble patience ask of our audience, for our attempts to pass off what we put on the television screen; that box; that electronic rectangle, as reality.

But we tend to make no such apologies, despite the limitations of television. It is an ephemeral medium, subject to many different influences on production, with questions...
over monopoly ownership and influence. Yet as broadcasters in Asia, on the front line, as it were, amidst the huge changes going on around and within the industry, we are facing growing challenges in our attempts to create a product that is both of value and valued by its audience.

Worldwide, the technological revolution has given a huge boost to the media and entertainment industry. A new five-year economic forecast by professional services firm PwC, suggests that digital technology will fuel 7 percent annual growth, driving revenues up to nearly US$1,000 billion by 2004.

The Asian region is not likely to be left out of this growth, so long as financial recovery from the economic turmoil of the late 1990's continues. Electronic information service Reuters, for example, has mapped out an Asian growth strategy. It has taken on 200 journalists in the region in the past year, putting more than 10 percent of the company's total staff in Asia, contributing about 15 percent of global profits. Reuters says further expansion is planned, much of it focused on the Internet.

Much of the growth comes, it would seem, at the cost of independence. As governments around the world embrace the litany of the free market, media conglomerates have been able to extend their global reach. A merger frenzy fired by US industry deregulation in the early 1980’s continues today, and US legislators sit in judgement on the merger between Time Warner and Internet giant America On Line (AOL), which is set to create the world’s largest media company. The products of these transnational media companies instantaneously traverse the globe, knowing no boundaries, penetrating every realm of life in every region of the world.

This new wave of media flowing along and over the global information superhighway is often celebrated for its liberalizing, even democratizing influence. But as culture becomes an increasingly important product, and the industry increasingly dominated by Western, in particular American exports, the global media is often seen as a steamroller, laying a path for the juggernaut of cultural imperialism. Warnings abound of
destruction of traditional culture and values (under the code of modernization), and [the imposition of] a new kind of transnational, global consumer culture...\textsuperscript{viii}

At the very least, satellite broadcasting and the flow of political news and opinion, is often in opposition to the ideas and opinions of national political authorities. This results in further controversy over the sources and control of this information, with important questions raised over issues of sovereignty and the activities of transnational companies.\textsuperscript{ix}

As news broadcasters, we seem bound up in this process of agglomeration and convergence, yet beset by a future that looks anything but certain. Falling audience numbers afflict the mature markets of the US and Western Europe, and the Time Warner/AOL deal still has not received the green light from regulators. Indeed, Internet strategies are suddenly surrounded by question marks, particularly in Asia where access and content remain unresolved issues, and falling share prices have companies like Telstra and PCCW agonizing over whether they made the right choices.\textsuperscript{x}

Just as uncertain are the effects of the media products we turn out. Despite the erosion of national sovereignty by the growth of global markets, the media is not simply an avenue down which march the imperial legions of cultural change.\textsuperscript{xi} While the media has a role in cultural transformation, the process is both complicated and unpredictable.\textsuperscript{xii} At times, the media has been used to extend and consolidate traditional values, nourishing a sense of identity and sense of belonging,\textsuperscript{xiii} but it can also be seen as an arm of the modern. This can encourage strategies of opposition, from nationalism to conservative religious responses, speaking in opposition to globalization and the Western "leisure empire",\textsuperscript{xiv} despite the unbalanced flow of information and the unequal distribution of the products.

The boundaries and sovereignties of the nation state are being eroded by global communications, as national borders are violated with impunity by the broadcast of foreign news, entertainment, educational and advertising programs, but these new technologies are supporting both a concentration and a dispersion of power. In the face of the persuasive influence of the Coca-Cola culture\textsuperscript{ xv}, or MacWorld,\textsuperscript{xvi} smaller groups in
the community have found their voice, often through NGO's and interactive technologies, and they are challenging the centers of power.

Likewise, inequalities in terms of access to the global networks of communications have not prevented the emergence of local strategies, from indigenous cultural production to piracy, providing a "complex syncopation of voices" around the world.

Setting the scene - Competing for access

On the stage of media production, the contest for influence within and around the media organisations is key to an understanding of how the plot to secure control of the media space plays out. The media is seen as having a 'pivotal role in organizing the images and discourses through which people make sense of the world', yet despite intense academic scrutiny, there has been little agreement between those looking at the industry, its output and its effects.

The ideas that have emerged tend to congregate around the twin citadels of academic thought: on the one hand the liberal tradition and, on the other, its radical counterpart. The many strands of these approaches, when drawn together, go some way in tracing the fabric of media control, production and reception, providing a comprehensive picture of the ways in which media messages are produced and shaped.

Media production and reception is clearly a complex dynamic of factors at work. "It is a process of constant negotiation between personal, professional, audience, organization, and resources". The media is a contested space, subject to various pressures, from the influence of cooperate ownership and advertising censorship, through the input of staff and consumer, to the socio-political environment in which the production and reception goes on. In this battle for control, the division of power and resources is unequal, weighed towards ownership of the means production. But other groups can negotiate access to media spaces, and are becoming increasingly good at it.
The power to create and distribute meaning still resides with centers of material and political power, both within the state and amongst the higher reaches of corporate and financial authority. But this power is exercised dynamically. It is fought over, challenged, and abused, both within and without.\textsuperscript{xxiii}

Despite this, the avalanche of informational and entertainment materials bursting through increasingly flimsy national borders over the global communications system, is understandably perceived by many on the receiving end as threatening, politically and culturally. For some, television has become a ‘specter’ that now haunts the world.\textsuperscript{xxiv} Controlled by a small number of super powerful, mostly US-based transnational media corporations, it is seen to be at the center of “new modes of image production and cultural hegemony, the political struggles of various groups and the restructuring of capitalist society”.\textsuperscript{xxv}

However ambiguous media influence, and flimsy its connections with democracy,\textsuperscript{xxvi} the media, and its electronic forms in particular, is seen as extending its fingers of influence into the national political sphere in Asia. Political change in Thailand in 1992, and more recently in Indonesia, has been connected with media influence, as a 'global video howl'\textsuperscript{xxvii} wailed demonstrators complaint around the world, swirling back to engulf the political leaders in each country.

The growth of the media industry in Asia
Southeast Asia governments have been used to controlling the flow of news and information. Close associations with media organizations created during the rise of nationalism and struggle for independence was further cemented by commercial and legal means in the post-colonial era. And among many journalists around the region, helping their country develop became a priority as opposed to scrutinizing those leading the development.
Yet the 1980’s saw a loosening of these controls, hectic economic growth sprouted new local media operations, and the emerging middle classes became a target for an influx of foreign media companies keen to tap the potential market. With governments in the region as keen to reap the benefits of being part of the global economy as they were to continue to control the flow of information across and within their borders, policy confusion led to general growth in the industry in Asia and, for some at least, a brief flirtation with unusual freedom.

The late 1990's, however, marked moves by some governments to try to reign in this exuberance. This was done often by the familiar methods of commercial influence and legal controls, but also the adoption of new strategies such as diluting what was deemed unacceptable by drowning it in uncontroversial competition. In others countries, the emergence of more participatory democratic reforms have led to a burgeoning, largely unencumbered, and often enthusiastic media.

One thing is clear, however. In Asia, as with much of the rest of the world, television stands today "at the center of new modes of image production and cultural hegemony, the political struggles of various groups and the restructuring of capitalist society."xxxviii

The trouble with television

And yet, television, of all sectors of the media industry, is a poor medium for such a grand ambition. Television, by its very nature, is selective: "ephemeral, sensational, over dramatic, simplistic, lacking in depth and interpretation".xxix MacGregor’s analysis of the television coverage of the al-Amarya Incident during the Gulf War, when the Western forces, led by the Americans, bombed a civilian shelter in Baghdad, provides sound backing for these accusations, and recent developments in the industry only show that this tendency is deepening.

In the study, MacGregor reflects on the consequences of the dominance of technology and increased commodification of news due to corporate control of news organisations and convergence within the industry. He maintains that these trends have led to an
increase on the demands on a reporter's time as they rush to meet not only television deadlines, but often those of their organization’s radio and print (Internet) operations as well.xxx

He maintains that the television journalist is enslaved by technology. Television news production is an expensive process, and logistical considerations often determine what gets covered and how. Satellite time and the demands of every more hungry news rooms, as well as cosmetic contrivances such as stand-ups, seeking to reinforce the fact that 'we are there', tie journalists to a location, and have helped encourage the trend of reporters as celebrity.xxxi

And technology is only part of a wider picture. MacGregor points to other elements of television news production, such as reporting conventions, logistical considerations, national standards in questions of taste and decency in the reporting of death and injury, and the role of those back at base, from tape editors, to managers, all susceptible to other pressures.xxxii He suggests they all contribute to making television an unsuitable medium for explanation: ‘it is not about analyzing at the end of the day, it is about perception and we are in the business of putting over perceptions...’xxxiii

Practical issues - Technology and logistics
When we turn to the practical issues of running an international newsroom in Asia, the technological and logistical considerations can dominate news coverage considerations. In addition to the many issues mentioned above, such as location and time pressures, an international newsroom in Asia can face further operational concerns. Among other things, the question of whether to send a news crew to cover an event can often depend on whether up-link facilities are available and their cost.

Satellite costs around the region vary enormously. Depending on the different elements of the transmission, costs can range from US$1,000 for ten minutes to about US$150, depending on where you are and where you want the signal to go. And having access to facilities is no guarantee that reports will then wing their way back to base untroubled.
Local inexperience can often eat into expensive satellite time, as television crews struggle with new, or old, equipment, while inadequate facilities often result in farcical situations. During coverage of the Taiwan earthquake in September 1999, one of CNBC Asia's reporters found herself reporting from a set more suited to a Mandarin version of Dallas.

In addition, in many countries around the region, the political considerations of the owners of the local facilities can mean a satellite link is not made available. During Malaysia’s political crisis in 1998/1999, when supporters of deposed Deputy Prime Minister and Finance Minister Anwar Ibrahim took to the streets of Kuala Lumpur, television news operations like CNBC Asia were not able to send pictures of the street battles back to the newsroom. Coverage comprised mobile phone reports from a journalist who was not only reporting and helping to edit tape, but also having to run back and forth to the airport (a one-hour journey, if the traffic is clear), in order to send video tape back to Singapore with human ‘carrier pigeons’.

All this is given that a crew is available in the first place. CNBC Asia, for example, often found itself short of bodies. It only took an ongoing news event, a holiday or a bout of flu, and coverage could be reduced to a short ‘on cam’ read.

Given all these elements, it is hardly surprising that news coverage tends to be skewed, enlarging events in the public eye, favoring large static ‘global’ news events, and news from cheaper satellite destinations. I would suggest that this, just as much as the advent of globally available television services, and the role these services now take in international politics, deserves the tag of the CNN-ization of news.\textsuperscript{xxxiv}

So little time and so much to fill

Time is a huge issue in news today. In the heat of competition, being first can mean everything, whether it is CNN's bombs on Baghdad, or CNBC Asia report on the first nuclear test in Pakistan.
Likewise, for a 24-hour news operation, time takes on an additional dimension. Time has to be filled. As hungry monsters, these news operations devour information and talent. Guest commentators are enthusiastically hunted down by eager news assistants, anxious to fill time and, in comparison to more mature news organisations, less choosy about the quality and coherence of their prey. When caught, the commentators often became overused trophies to hang on the newsroom wall, and to be trotted out on any and every occasion.

And then there are the reporters: reporters used to just report, but now they also comment and they perform. All in all, it must be said, reporters spend too much time being part of the news, rather than reporting it.

For companies like CNBC Asia, despite the potential of linking up with parent and sibling in the US and Europe, repeats are one of the main ways to fill this time. Although CNBC Asia does not have to pay for CNBC Europe content, it does have to pay to show the US product. This led to an annual juggling festival, as managers attempted to ensure they were able to show as much US programming as they could afford, in order to cover as much US market news as possible (something which is, naturally, in hot demand in the region), and to take some of the burden off their producers in the newsroom.

As for information, as electronic sources like wire services increase in cost, newsrooms have had to turn to the public relations industry. In Asia, it is disturbing to those who believe in the importance of independent news reporting, that many newsrooms have show little reluctance to fall into this easy reliance on public relations companies and government agencies. Yet, rip and read, with the added push to be first at all cost, can have some serious problems, particularly in an understaffed newsroom of the young and inexperienced, too overworked to have time to check facts. Electronic information provider Bloomberg is currently being sued by a Boston law firm, accused of disseminating and reporting a fake press release that sent the company’s stock price in a headlong dive at the end of August.”xxxv
A question of content - Quantity versus quality
Repeats of news items and programming, the ever present commentators, and the
tendency to do too few original or exclusive stories (which take up so much time and
resources), does not make for quality content. Much has been done, however, to try to
keep the product looking interesting. Style over substance, yes, but some interesting
experiments with the look and feel of the news.

Lack of pictures from the field, and the demands of 24-hour news, makes the job of
turning out a product that will keep the audience tuned in, pretty difficult. I would
suggest this is particularly so when it comes to business news. 24-hour talking heads is
bad enough, but when its is numbers they are spouting, it could be terminal.

As a result, newsrooms along with their graphics departments have come up with some
interesting sets and great looking graphics. Led by CNBC in the US, the genre also has
cleverly used locations within the newsroom and cameras in financial trading rooms and
the like in order to encourage flow and movement in order to maintain the viewer's
interest.

Diminishing resources
At the heart of many of these problems, at least in many of the newsrooms of
international operations in Asia, is the lack of resources. Money is short, and where
available, often spent on the look rather than the content.

Not only does the lack of resources limit coverage, but it also tends to mean newsrooms
are staffed with the young, the inexperienced and the cheap, while what money there is, is
spent on ensuring the news is fronted by photogenic anchors.

Inexperienced staff at the worst means mistakes, at the best means stories tend to have
less depth and context; even the real news stories are too often shallow and lacking what
interpretation might be possible. News organisations fall easy prey to the accusing
fingers of bias pointed by the critics of the "Western" or "Foreign Media; all too often guilty as charged.

And given the lack of resources, there is little real training or career development provided for staff. What learning there is, is done on the job and in a hurry. As a result, staff become expendable, easily replaceable with another set of bodies, cannon fodder for the battle lines of news production. Besides, given the work pressures, staff burn out quickly: sick leave is commonplace, and the unhealthy rate of staff turnover, seems to be accepted with resignation by newsroom management around the region.

Instead of looking at more positive ways to retain staff like benefits and deliberate rather than haphazard training, CNBC Asia's recent answer to dwindling staff numbers was to include a clause in the company's ever more onerous employment contracts, tying all staff into a three-month notice period.

Of course, in many cases, even when there is money, there is a serious HR issue in the region. The availability of talented and experienced staff is severely limited. As you go up the ladder in Singapore from TCS, through CAN and CNBC to CNN, each company uses the company below as 'academy', poaching staff that have received some training at any opportunity. Likewise, in the search for Asian faces, companies like CNBC try to attend industry events in North America, hoping to attract new talent.

And at CNBC Asia, at least, there was little point in turning to the US, hoping for a 'sugar daddy'. While the Dow Jones Group provided access to its journalists worldwide, seemingly understanding of the need for information and resources (and keen to advertise its products, of course), the same could not be said for CNBC in America, and its parent the huge US network NBC.

While CNBC and NBC in the US expected CNBC Asia to provide resources like studio time upon request, there was little in the way of help flowing the other way. With Asia
little more than an irritating cost centre on the other side of the world, CNBC Asia got about as much attention as its financial muscle could demand.

**Celebrity journalism**

Unfortunately, the 'on-air' talent is also increasingly eating up the meager resources available to staff newsrooms in companies like CNBC Asia. In true US network fashion, the tendency is to pay top dollar for the pretty face and the 'big hair', rather than either spread the money for hiring across the newsroom, or pick up talented journalists.

This process, unfortunately, only encourages the trend of celebrity journalism, and the anchor as prima donna. It also does little to help reverse the 'dumbing-down' of news output. While these anchors might look great on camera, they are often poorly informed and ill-prepared.

This can also lead to mistakes on air that can have financial ramifications. A number of times during CNBC Asia's confrontation with the Malaysian Government over its coverage of the Anwar political crisis, mistakes were made which not only led to a further deterioration of relations, but also to threats of possible legal reprisals which would have been particularly costly to the organization.

**Management and shareholder issues**

Management is likely to bear the full brunt of the criticism for such mistakes. Yet, they too, tend to be stretched. Limited themselves by time and resources, it can mean management is reactive rather than proactive. At CNBC Asia, attempts to provide staff with performance appraisals tended to wax and wane with bursts of enthusiasm, and lack of time.

Another challenge they face is management from a distance, a thankless task of attempting to keep bureau expenses down and demanding journalists happy. Every word is easily misconstrued, and messages rarely taken at face value, as reporters in the field and stringers, try not only to secure what they regard as their share of the media space,
with as little editorial interference as possible, but obsess over what everybody is saying about them and their work back in the newsroom.

And proximity does not mean the newsroom escapes the concerns of reporters for their professional competence and ethics, or just for their vanity. The competition for the media space within the newsroom is fierce, and a heavy editorial hand, whether expressing local political or cultural sensibilities or just ensuring grammatical or stylistic standards, is rarely well received.

Newsroom management also tends to be unhealthily close to the commercial demands of the advertising dollar. In the search for profit, the advertising and marketing departments too often influence editorial direction. At CNBC Asia, Malaysian news coverage was toned down after threats to both advertising and distribution in the country. On a lighter note, programs such as Asia In Crisis and Dot.Com were forced to change their names (the former to ‘Asia, the Road to Recovery’, the latter to Dot.Commerce) to what were meant to be more saleable monikers. Ironically, neither attracted sponsorship. All too often, senior management is not there to shelter the newsroom from these commercial pressures.

Protecting the brand also been a major issue in Asia, particularly where corporate growth strategy revolves around franchising the business. Brand, after all, is what distinguishes you from the crowd. It provides a coherent signal that stands out from the white noise that is the mass of media content currently on offer. Trust is part of that brand, although given the way audiences are often treated, you would not think so.

During the late 1990's CNBC Asia grew its business not only through cable distribution agreements, but also through franchising its product by means of partnerships and alliances in countries like Japan, India, Pakistan and Taiwan. In many cases, the local partner needed constant scrutiny to ensure it was not diminishing the value of the NBC 'peacock' in anyway. This could be anything from changing the look of the ‘peacock’, to
broadcasting programs of questionable quality under its auspices. Again, monitoring these issues took up valuable time for a small management group.

But all too often, newsroom management can come down to trying to ensure the company does not get into trouble. This can be very difficult, particularly when broadcasting in countries where the legal niceties are, at the very least, obtuse. Again, it is difficult for newsroom management to ignore commercial pressures from senior management and shareholders. The owners of the means of news production, particularly in non-unionized Asian newsrooms, can and do flex their overpowering muscles in ensuring they control the media space.

Profit is a powerful motive. In countries where political offense can lead to both expensive legal cases and limits on distribution, perhaps it is no surprise that there are still "striking cases where sections of the international press are prepared to make adjustments at the editorial level in an attempt to advance broader commercial interests."xxxvi

Of course, local sensibilities are an important consideration for the manager of any newsroom. At CNBC Asia, removing offensive jokes about Iranian leaders and the Sultan of Brunei's Brother (would anybody in America really have understood that one), from the NBC Jay Leno Tonight Show and the Conan O'Brien show, could offend few journalistic niceties.

And the boot was often on the other foot: the tendency of local video tape editors and news assistants to allow through violent footage, for example of the race riots in Indonesia, had to be kept in check. Pictures of such a graphic nature might be acceptable in Singapore's Straits Times newspaper, but they did not pass the sensitive judgement of CNBC Asia's foreign management.

But self-censorship, which tends to be a consideration in many international newsrooms in Asia, does little service to its audience. In Malaysia, bowing to government pressure
has meant the mainstream media is loosing its audience, which is increasingly turning towards the more uncontrolled Internet space.

**The troubling trend of infotainment**

Perhaps the most worrying trend in television, which only plays into the hands of those who wish to ensure the media remains domesticated and feeding easily from the hands of the elite in society is the move towards infotainment in news production.

With infotainment, of course, there is little chance of trampling delicate political or commercial sensibilities. Indeed, some companies like CNBC Asia, Star Television and Channel News Asia often appear to be suggesting that it is serving the demands of the Asian audience; providing the Asian version of the news.

While television has to be highly visual and it is, by its very nature, drawn toward compelling and dramatic events, pictures should serve the news, not the other way around. And although the short attention spans of audience will certainly not be challenged by the snappy fast news items, there is too often not only insufficient space, but no real attempt to inform.

For a newsman, it is an uncomfortable experience to watch news broadcasts in the US, Europe, Asia and Australia, and be able to virtually predict the order and content: The crime story, the health story, the water-skiing squirrel. For an audience, these pasteurized news products are like processed cheese. Sure, you can get it everywhere, but it all tastes the same, and is mind-numbingly boring.

Kellner suggests "television news elevates personality over professional complexity, image over discourse, style over substance, and simplicity over complexity." I would go further. In Asia, the pasteurization of news is dangerous. It plays into the hands of those who would for political and commercial purposes sanitize coverage and remove controversy, for fear they or theirs might be the subject of its scrutiny.
Conclusion: meeting the challenge of falling audience numbers

Many of the problems at CNBC Asia can be seen as directly linked to its parent NBC. Andy Lack, NBC's President of News, is often hailed as the guru of MTV-ing of news, and criticized for 'bulldozing TV journalism'. But even America seems to have had its fill of fast food journalism. The trend towards tabloid news seems to be backfiring, with audience figures now dropping, particularly among the young and educated. Unfortunately, they do not seem to be heading back to what serious news there is.

The industry is in trouble. As CNN celebrates its twentieth year, it has announced that it is redirecting resources from its television to its Internet operations, after the lack of 'big ticket news items', and a paucity of American-led wars to cover, has led to falling audience numbers. Even the BBC in London is mired in a dispute over the times of its evening news broadcasts, as it tries to compete with the commercial channels.

And at a time when the Internet is raising major questions over the delivery of information and entertainment, and a reality-TV program, Survivors, manages to secure an audience the size of Britain for its final episode in the US, there are some major questions facing broadcasters and news producers everywhere.

There is a need to remain strong in the face of pressures to entertain rather than to inform. A combination of a strong editorial team, backed by a strong management prepared to provide both direction and protection from outside influences, whether from shareholders or advertisers, and a real commitment to the training of staff and their education in the professional ethics of their trade are a minimum. Otherwise, we are merely becoming news and infotainment factories; sweat shops of underpaid youths, churning out poor quality soft news stories to fill the odd gaps between serious entertainment programming; providing time for people to make themselves a cup of tea between advertising slots.
Perhaps, as MacGregor suggests, we get the news we deserve, and that it is as viewers 'an abdication of personal responsibility to expect television news (or any other media source) to provide us with a complete view without any effort on our own part'.

As people in around the region struggle with economic survival, as well as the ideas of transparency and accountability, it seems the worst time for one of the most influential sections of the media industry, television, to do its audience such a disservice.

After all, it is difficult to argue with the fact that, while media criticism will not always be informed or fair, it is a vital part of the process that makes the 'good and the great' accountable, reining in those too voracious for power and advancement: 'I would much prefer a society in which the great are occasionally humbled to one in which they are allowed to bask unchallenged in their triumphs, their virtues and omniscience.'

- End -

2 ibid., p. 551
pp. 120-137, pp. 132-133
13 Ibid., p.194
15 Majod Tehraman *Global Communications and World Politics: Domination, Development and Discourse* Lynne Reiner, Boulder Colorado and London, 1999