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Madanmohan Rao
Group Consultant
Microland

ONLINE CONTENT ALLIANCES IN ASIA:
OPPORTUNITIES FOR NEWS PROVIDERS, PUBLISHERS
AND CONSUMERS

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Online Content Alliances in Asia: Opportunities for News Providers, Publishers and Consumers

by Madanmohan Rao (madanr@microland.net)

//This talk covers trends and best practices in the online publishing industry worldwide, with a special emphasis on implications for Asian content providers, buyers and consumers.//

Content providers and news readers in Asia have never before had it so good. As in other parts of the world, the Internet has opened up a much larger news window for news consumers, and has given them relatively unfettered access to vast quantities of up-to-date local business news, international entertainment fare, and - on occasion - even politically controversial content.

As deregulation of the ISP market and growing IPO fever spreads across the Internet mediascape in Asia, unprecedented opportunities are opening up for content alliancing between the news media, yellow pages companies, freelancers, Webzines, e-commerce sites and technology players within Asia as well as with other parts of the world.

Content created by traditional and new media players in Asia is seen as fulfilling various objectives: protecting and propagating regional cultures and business interests, attracting ad revenues, reinforcing local brands or localised sites of global brands, and differentiating between various portals and e-commerce offerings.

In fact, though e-commerce and e-business may be the hottest buzzwords of the day, many analysts predict that it may actually be high-quality, contextually relevant content that will be a key differentiator between competing e-commerce sites. In other words, we are now witnessing a "content renaissance" as site publishers and content providers focus on branded, high-value content to increase the popularity and e-commerce potential of sites.

A useful approach for conceptualising and analysing the myriad of online content alliances in Asia would be to categorise them into the following kinds, and identify trends in each: international partnerships, cross-media tie-ups, event coverage, Web suites, ISP alliances, content re-packagers, Intranet products, and device distribution deals.

1. International Cross-Media Alliances

The initial wave of international cross-media alliances for delivering news to online users in Asia was driven by U.S.-based portals like Yahoo, Lycos, and Excite. For instance, the Yahoo Asia (http://asia.yahoo.com) property based in Singapore taps news and links from Agence France Presse, Asia Pulse, Hindustan Times (India), Dawn (Pakistan), Straits Times (Singapore), Daily Express (Malaysia), and South China Morning Post (Hong Kong).

Other new media players like Hong Kong-based Orientation.com have created portals for emerging Asian economies such as Sri Lanka, Thailand and the Philippines, with travel content drawn from the Lonely Planet country guides (www.lonelyplanet.com) and technology content from U.S.-based news sites like CNet's News.com.

Among online services, America Online (which already has operations in
Britain, Canada, Europe and Australia) has struck an alliance with Samsung of Korea to bring its offerings to Korea. Another portal alliance in Korea involves Mirae Corporation and Lycos. Excite and LibertyOne of Australia have entered into an alliance for the Asian portal market as well.

Singapore-based content provider Tricast has struck regional partnerships with E! Online, MTV Asia, and CNet for the SouthEast Asian market. Japan-based Softbank is a leading Internet media player not just in the region but in the global Internet market via its equity stakes in online properties like Yahoo, ZDNet, Geocities, and E*Trade.

Wholly-domestic portals and news sites (like Rediff.com in India) will undoubtedly feel the heat from experienced players from markets like the U.S., who can leverage economies of scale across their international properties. An emerging trend among news providers in Asia is thus to form regional alliances, or enter into agreements with U.S. portals and online services.

2. Event Coverage

High-profile events like international sports tournaments and elections in Asia have spawned numerous content-alliancing initiatives. During the previous parliamentary elections in India, leading newsweekly India Today and Web portal IndiaWorld (www.indiaworld.co.in) teamed up to create a news site called IndiaVotes (www.indiavotes.com), to provide up-to-date news analysis and coverage of the elections. This year, IndiaVotes will feature news from the Free Press Journal newspaper.

In the realm of sports, newswire Agence France Presse and Chinese portal China.com have announced an alliance for joint coverage of the Olympics in Year 2000, in Chinese and English-language sites. The Singapore Game Centre site (http://Singapore.gamecenter.com) for the Asian Games late last year already demonstrated the power of online content alliances between news providers in the region.

3. Web Suites

Instead of setting up media properties in just one Asian country, several media groups have capitalised on regional similarities and set up suites of sites for related countries - the best example being the family of Chinese sites China.com, Hongkong.com, and Taiwan.com, which can then exploit alliancing opportunities between content providers and advertisers in each constituent country.

In addition to these portals, a site called Renren.com aims to fill the gap in community publishing for the Chinese language by creating something akin to local-language versions of Geocities or Lycos virtual communities geared at Chinese users.

4. News Re-Packagers

Numerous alliances are also emerging between creators of Asian news content and organisations who re-package news into e-mail-based newsletters, or provide abstracts and compilations of related news.

Leading publisher Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) has recently invested in local Internet startup BuzzCity (www.buzzcity.com) which disseminates Asian news to a wider audience, in the form of HTML-mail newsletters. BuzzCity also has ambitions to enter the China market, where SPH’s Chinese papers have been voted one of the top newspapers. Other BuzzCity content partners currently include CNET, AltaVista Asiawide, Shaw Organisation and Singapore Jobsites.

The U.S.-based site China Online (www.chinaonline.com) summarises Chinese language reports and translates them into English. It summarises 120
publications, publishes articles on market and economic trends for 19 industries as well as publishing analysis from more than 100 sources around the world including China-observers in leading universities.

The Washington-based Arab-American Anti-Discrimination Committee has launched an Internet-based news service, the Arab Daily Chronicle (http://www.adc.org/news/). The Chronicle is a Monday through Friday index of links to news stories, opinion pieces, features, statements, and Realaudio and video files; linked sources include newspapers, magazines, news services and agencies, and other sources from North America, Europe and West Asia.

5. Device-Driven Content Alliances

While Asia may lag behind other parts of the world in PC penetration, the reach of other devices like television, cellphones, kiosks and pagers is comparatively high, thus opening up new opportunities for news and information delivery if such devices are Web-enabled. Hence many content alliances in Asia now revolve around the Internet's "third phase" or "consumer device phase."

Toshiba and CNet’s Snap portal have entered into a distribution partnership for the U.S.-based portal. Set-top box manufacturer MyWeb has struck a deal with Beijing Telegraph and the Xinhua newswire for delivering Chinese language Internet content via cable TV. Yahoo has entered into content distribution alliances for pagers and mobile phones with SmarTone Mobile Communications of Hong Kong.

At the level of Internet kiosks, YellowPages content is proving to be very useful for "NetPosts" in Australia, designed for travelers checking for e-mail and local resources.

6. ISP Alliances

Asian ISPs, in their desire to increase "stickiness" of their sites for their subscribers, are turning to content providers to provide a more meaningful online experience for users as soon as they log in.

For instance, Indian ISP Satyam Infoway - one of the first private ISPs to begin operation after India's ISP monopoly was lifted in 1998 - offers news updates on its home page (www.satyamonline.com) with content drawn from newswire United News of India.

7. Spidering Services

As in the case of U.S.-based First Headlines (www.1stheadlines.com), sites like India's Samachar (www.samachar.com) and NewsAsia (www.newsasia.com) use agent technology to frequently extract and link to headlines of leading news sites in Asia, thus opening up opportunities for new alliances between other kinds of content packagers while also providing news consumers with a valuable "link clipping" service.

8. News for Organisation Intranets

Despite the initial hype about "push" technologies, there is still demand in Asia for news content and business information delivered directly to organisational Intranets, for subsequent access and analysis by organisational users without repeated visits to external news sites.

In Singapore, ISP SingNet has teamed up with newswire Reuters to create SingNet Newsline, a business and technology newsfeed delivered straight to organisational desktops via local Intranets.

In India, content aggregator Matrix (www.matrix.co.in) runs a site somewhat on the lines of U.S.-based Lexis-Nexis called Indianformer.
(www.indiainformert.com), whose news content can also be "pushed" to corporate Intranets via VSAT network operators like ComSat Max and Hughes Escort. News is aggregated from seven leading Indian newspaper and magazine groups, such as India Today, Times of India, and Business Standard; corporate Intranet clients currently include Castrol.

9. Other Multimedia Content

While multimedia content in areas like photography archives and maps have taken off in countries like the U.S., such offerings are still in their infancy on Asian Web sites. For instance, CyberMap Japan has only recently announced a tie-up to offer digital versions of its maps via popular Japanese sites.

10. Business Listings and Trade Hubs

In addition to news and archival content, huge opportunities are opening up for alliances between portals and news sites on the one hand and creators of business listings (like YellowPages directories) and trade inquiry services on the other.

For instance, trade news and information publisher AsianSources.com uses content about import/export opportunities and trade shows as an attractor for regional e-commerce players. Seattle-based directory services company—InfoSpace.com has expanded its offerings to Britain and Canada, and is now exploring opportunities in Asia as well. SESA SEAT Yellow Pages of India has launched a Web site (www.indiareference.com) for its directories of over twenty Indian cities.

11. Niche Portals

In addition to country-specific portals, growing Internet populations are also being accompanied by city-specific portals, such as LasVegas.com and Boston.com. These are particularly viable business models for cities which are popular tourist destinations and can thus appeal to local and outside populations. Sites which can couple local news content and business/travel information with e-commerce offerings like hotel room reservation are bound to do well.

Such sites also lend themselves to economies of scale, such as Microsoft's Sidewalk, Britain's TownPages, and America Online's Digital City. Such trends are also appearing in Asian countries like Singapore and Japan.

12. Cross-Media Alliances

While print and wire news agencies have been among the first to leverage Internet publishing, broadcast media like radio and TV have been slower to react. Leading news organisations like the BBC are still formulating their Internet strategies for the next century, and U.S.-based TV networks like ABC, NBC and CBS have only recently moved seriously into cyberspace.

CNN's tie-up with computer publisher IDG for online news in English, Spanish and Portuguese was one of the first major cross-media alliances between traditional media players. Yahoo and Reuters announced the first major tie-up between a newswire and an Internet "pure-play." More recently, traditional competitors Reuters and Dow Jones have announced a joint product for online business news.

Disney and ABC networks have taken a stake in ESPN SportsZone and Infoseek, via the Go.com portal. NBC networks has announced a tie-up with CNet's Snap portal and community publisher Xoom.com. CBS, for its part, has a stake in MarketWatch, Sportsline and Medscape.

Radio and TV stations have sometimes teamed up for online offerings with local newspapers in parts of the U.S., for sites like Boston.com and
13. Press Releases Online

The power of the Internet to allow users to bypass traditional media gatekeepers has opened up a huge audience for companies in the press release content business, such as PRNewswire, BusinessWire, and InternetWire, all of whom have content-rich sites on the Net. Some of them are also exploring tie-ups in other emerging markets; BusinessWire already offers some press releases in Spanish.

14. Content Syndicators and Marketspaces

The second generation of business models on the Net (after media-driven content publishing) has involved the creation of online marketplaces (eg. through sites like VerticalNet) for products like electronics goods, pharmaceutical, industrial products - and also content. The best examples of such hubs for the online buying and selling of content include ContentExchange.com and iSyndicate.com, which open up new opportunities for organisational and individual publishers and syndicators of content on sites ranging from corporate Intranets to community member homepages.

15. Other Drivers of Online Content Alliances

Government agencies in many countries are also driving the publishing of content on the Net, which often involves inputs from multiple content providers. For instance, the Singapore government is pushing the adoption of business community sites like CoolConnect.com; Sweden's government has founded the CultureNet Sweden site; and the Chinese official news agency Xinhua is helping government agencies come online.

On a heartening note for smaller content providers, even students have teamed up to create useful sites, such as HotNoodle.com by Asian students in Australia, and CollegeClub.com in the U.S.!

Opportunities and Challenges

All this may sound like music to the ears of media organisations, freelance journalists, content players, and multimedia artists in Asia. But challenges remain in the areas of finding a sustainable business model for online media properties, especially due to the recent economic slowdown. Other unresolved issues include unchecked copyright violations as well as disputes between headlines spidering services and the original news sites in terms of inclusion of links and fair share of ad revenues.

Still, consumers and purveyors of news in Asia now have access to an astonishing diversity of news which their parents' generation could never have dreamt of.

Concerns also arise - especially in more authoritarian media environments - that such unfettered access to online content may expose their populations to "undesirable" or "objectionable" content, with possibly harmful political effects. Nonetheless, the explosion of Internet access and content driven in part by regional and international alliances continues unabated.