

## **ISIS Focus**

### **Second East Asia Congress**

#### **“By Asians, For Asians”: Challenges for East Asia’s Electronic and Broadcast Media**

*Marshall McLuhan coined the term “global village” to describe the trend of electronic mass media collapsing space and time barriers to enable communication on a global scale. In today’s global village, however, the news typically focuses on a few key regions – the Middle East, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Korean Peninsula and Taiwan Straits – as though the world consisted solely of these regions. Information is generated by a dominant few, mainly from developed countries. Do Asians need their own mass media to effectively portray perspectives from Asia and other areas overlooked by the Western media? Norhayati Mustapha reports.*

Session Chair Ms Lorraine Hahn, host of Talk Asia, CNN International, noted at the outset that even “those who loathe the media must use it – even the Taliban, who banned television, telephones and computers, are using the very ‘tools of the Devil.’”

With this provocative entree Hahn introduced an all-East Asian panel of presenters: Dr Jae-Taek Tak, Executive Researcher for Broadcast Culture, Korean Broadcasting System (KBS), Ms Li Xiaoping, Executive Producer, China Central Television (CCTV) and Ms Akiko Kato, Research Associate, Keio University, Japan.

#### **A common satellite broadcasting system**

In his paper “Challenges for Broadcasting and Regional Community Building,” Dr Tak cited ASEAN, the European Union (EU) and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) as good examples of localisation. Advocating a similar regional community in East Asia to promote economic, cultural and political cooperation in the region, and to enhance multilateral understanding through a cultural exchange process, Dr Tak proposed the establishment of a common satellite broadcasting system (CSBS).

As envisioned by Dr Tak, the CSBS would go beyond the present Asian Broadcasting Union to serve the following purposes: (1) disseminate information to millions across Asia Pacific & beyond, instantaneously, (2) contribute towards protecting the East Asian cultural identity, (3) promote cultural pluralism, (4) help revert the often one-sided information flow from Western satellite broadcasting systems. National broadcasting stations such as RTM in Malaysia and KBS in South Korea would play the central roles. The target audience would include foreign travellers, expatriates, opinion leaders, companies and individuals who have a specialised interest in East Asia-related news.

The programming principle, Dr Tak added, would focus on current affairs and actual information, culture and sports in East Asia. Broadcasting time would start at five hours

per day, mainly in the evenings. All programmes would initially broadcast in their original languages, with English subtitles. The CSBS headquarters would rotate annually from one member country to another, with the current host providing the necessary space and equipment and covering all costs. Constant discussions among government officials and expert groups of each country would be held, and a permanent advisory committee would be assembled.

### **A stronger Asian voice**

Ms Li Xiaoping of CCTV re-emphasised the global media's role as an essential tool for political manoeuvring, military planning, economic competition and cultural integration, stressing also that within countries, a strong information and media industry makes for a strong future.

She called for (1) an amplification of Asian voices in global information networks to effectively portray Asian perspectives and also focus on heretofore overlooked areas such as Africa and Latin America; (2) increased understanding and preservation of multiculturalism through media cooperation, and (3) a move from being a mere "onlooker" to a vital force in promoting social progress, i.e. an Asian mass media that lives up to its social responsibility in areas such as upholding justice, maintaining peace and stability, promoting prosperity, protecting the environment, safeguarding against financial crisis, and fighting terrorism.

### **The view from Japan**

Having served in Hong Kong for *Mainichi* Newspaper three years ago, academician Ms Akiko Kato noted the extreme lack of information during the Asian Crisis, signalling the need for cooperation among the media in this region. She also posed questions relating to Asian identity, contending that Asians after all are a multiracial, multicultural and multilingual society, and that the language barrier in particular makes it difficult for media to exchange thoughts, let alone editorials.

A case in point is Japan, where prestigious newspapers are printed mostly in Japanese. According to Kato, although translation into English is available in some media, the quality leaves much to be desired, rendering locally-published English newspapers unfit for intellectuals, which in turn leads to a lack of understanding of opinions and realities in Japan.

The situation is slowly changing, she conceded, due to developments in electronic media; examples include *Asahi* Newspaper linking up with CNN, *The International Herald Tribune's* local-page cooperation with *Asahi*, and *The Japan Times* linking its website with other media in the region.

Reiterating the importance of website linkage and its usefulness for journalists, academia and youth alike, Kato recommended building up our own Internet exchange service. She

recalled a unique initiative in Japan which may be emulated throughout the region – Genron NPO. This initiative (*genron* literally meaning “editorials”) aims to promote exchange of views and experience, especially in the political field. Accessible to all at an annual fee of 40,000 yen (US\$ 380), Genron NPO allows subscribers to participate in discussions and surveys of various issues such as Iraq, North Korea, and the general elections in Japan. Symposia are organised on domestic and international issues several times a year, featuring prominent opinion leaders.

Kato agreed on the need to reach Europeans and Americans, and to make our views felt outside of Asia. In addition, Kato singled out the adverse effects of media violence on children and youth, calling for greater interaction between parents and offspring, plus an enhanced role of media as educator. She lauded NHK’s “friendship boat” launched last year, where children invited from East Asian nations visited various countries for discourse on environmental issues. On a final note, she proposed a sister congress to the East Asia Congress – an East Asia Children’s Congress.

### **The CSBS – some considerations**

In the discussion that followed, Kato hinted at the impracticality of building a new system due to the potentially large costs involved, given the prestigious broadcasters already on CCTV, the existent daily NHK satellite version of the “Voice of Asia”, and the latest news on KBS. To this, one suggestion made was to let supply and demand decide the outcome, predicated on the accepted “knowns”: that programmes have to be entertaining, and that the better ones, i.e. those with an international approach, would win, as CNN did in its time.

To get an idea of the feasibility of the CSBS, it would be worth watching the progress of Malaysia’s soon-to-be launched MiTV, a network which will supposedly feature links to 100 different channels (including some in Taiwan, China and Japan).

It was also noted at this point that, despite Asians’ reluctance to talk due to culture and upbringing, and despite their perceived lack of fluency in English, CCTV is already beaming worldwide, as predicted at the previous East Asia Congress by ISIS Malaysia Chairman and CEO Tan Sri Dr Noordin Sopiee. There are English programmes on CCTV, with the slot for “CCTV Night” noted by some to be even better than “CNN Night”.

On the financing of the CSBS, Dr Tak pointed out that existing satellite-driven networks such as CCTV, KBS and NHK require support from both public and private sectors. On the related question of how independent CCTV is, Ms Li responded that its leaders are appointed by government, although it raises funds independently via advertising. Sustained by both the government and the market, CCTV practises self-censorship.

On the difficulty in getting member countries to come together, Dr Tak reminded all that the 25-member EU started out as the EEC 51 years ago with only six members. He

also referred to systems, similar to the CSBS, that are already implemented in Europe, one example being ARTE, a French-German collaboration.

One participant likened the Asia-Europe comparison to that of apples and pears, given the differences between Asia and Europe. Acknowledging these differences, Dr Tak nevertheless maintained that a common interest among nations is essential. He suggested a step-by-step approach, bearing in mind that mass media information is public opinion-forming, and should be free from commercial, capital and government control.

One participant suggested that if the proposed CSBS were to be led by public authorities, a dwindling audience might be anticipated; a private-led system might therefore stand a better chance of survival. Although the status of ownership, whether public or privately owned, would be hard to determine at this juncture, Dr Tak was inclined to CSBS being “public-owned”.

With the prospect of creating a CSBS appearing daunting, one participant suggested we focus first on cooperation, which after all was an oft-repeated concept in all three presentations. For this, we might start with exchanging media correspondents and encouraging national media to report more on East Asia.

### **The power of CNN – and the power to switch it off**

At a suggestion that the media had been “strangled” by the US Administration after September 11, (recalling the Private Jessica Lynch story, later found to be false), Chair Lorraine Hahn pointed out that post-September 11, subscription to Al-Jazeera (founded in 1996) had in fact tripled.

On a different note: what, really, do viewers see? A varsity representative from China commented on the younger generation’s perception that every media is biased. The perception also exists that media is largely market-driven; viewers, for their part, believe only what they want to believe (e.g. outsiders’ view of China as having only bicycles, and no cars).

A Japanese observer noted that in Japan, many local papers did not report on-the-ground happenings in Iraq; only Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya provided this information. He further noted the Japanese tendency to always look through the eyes of the West, without paying much attention to Asian events.

To counter the broadcast influence of CNN, BBC and the like, someone suggested simply turning the channels off. An alternative suggestion, however, called for viewers to adopt an attitude of maturity and apply one’s judgment. Rather than switching off, it was deemed better to have a multiplicity of views. Kato concurred with not switching off, as both CNN and BBC cover news about Japan not reported in the Japanese media for sensitivity reasons (e.g. the illness of Princess Masako).

The Chair noted that the real reason we turn on to international networks is that we lack the physical capability to deploy staff around the world to report back, whereas CNN is there at breaking news. She suggested CNN invite representatives from different countries to come along, but acknowledged that this may take some time to materialise.

### **Value systems: media as community builder**

On the issue of sensationalism in journalism, the question arose as to who should see to the dissemination of good values. Kato pointed out that the print media (if not its broadcast counterpart), frequently offers deep, insightful stories on why things happen. As for values, she reiterated the important role of parents and teachers alike in educating the young.

Lee Sang Seok of *Korea Times* emphasised that the media should constitute an integral part of community-building. The media, he believed, is not playing its role fully in terms of promoting peace and friendship, i.e. the building blocks of the East Asian Community. Some papers are too nationalistic, jingoistic even (e.g. in Korea), and these pose an obstacle to community-building. He called upon the media to be a harmonising, not antagonising, force.

Lee emphasised that because the power of the media lies in its ability to set an agenda and influence leaders, it must be brought into the nation-building process. He urged us to encourage greater participation of the media in this forum, promote the exchange of journalists, and consider setting up a media training centre for East Asian Community journalists.

### **Censorship and freedom of the press**

As explained by Kato, the largely private media in Japan appears to operate in an environment of emerging press freedom. That said, one component of the journalistic landscape consists of the press clubs in ministries, where journalists are used to getting information, as opposed to seeking it. Nor is it common for contemporary journalists to interview. Recalling the implicit “gag order” on news relating to the Royal Family, Kato concurred that while there may be no government (and therefore no political) censorship in Japan, censorship related to Asian values does exist.

Bunn Nagara of *The Star*, Malaysia, noted that the local tendency is toward political censorship, unlike elsewhere, where censorship occurs more on a legal or social basis, to avoid libel suits and to avoid offending anyone, respectively.

### **Recommendations**

Chair Lorraine Hahn remarked before closing that at the core of discussions lies the issue of trust. Can we trust our media? Can we be sure that the news we read, hear or view is trustworthy? Kato reminded journalists to listen to the people’s voice, not their own. She also repeated the need for the Asian voice to be heard in the world. Dr Tak highlighted

three pillars the media should uphold: correctness, objectivity and neutrality. Li underscored the importance of giving the audience the freedom of choice.

In a nutshell, the session advocated for East Asia the following: a common satellite broadcasting system (CSBS), website linkages, greater participation of media in the East Asia Congress, the exchange of journalists, and a media training centre.