

25 Years after MacBride Report: Asian Experience and Perspective

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Before the publication of MacBride Report (“Many Voices, One World”) in 1980, Asia had already started its efforts to assert an Asian voice in international communication. Such efforts gained momentum as Asian countries began to achieve international recognition in the economic scene since 1970s. It was against such a background that the MacBride Commission was set up as a response to the growing concern expressed by third world countries calling for a review and a New World Information Order.

The MacBride Report provided a strong impetus for the Asian media to claim an Asian voice and to be an equal partner with its Western counterparts. There was a new awareness among Asian countries to retain their respective cultural identity and to have a fair share in global information flow. Some Asian countries responded by imposing constraints, often through political means, to regulate cross-border information flow. Such protective policies had been justified in the name of preserving the country’s cultural distinctiveness, religious harmony, or national identity.

The demand to have an Asian voice and to set its own media agenda was also contextualized in the debate on *Asian values* (initiated in the 1970s). Advocates for Asian values claimed the right to have to an Asian interpretation of the concepts of democracy, human rights, and press freedom. Asian values were thus promoted as an instrument for the ideological struggle against Western dominance and control in this age of globalization. Although the Asian values debate receded in the 1990s, especially after the

1997 Asian financial crisis, it provided a political forum where Asians resisted Western ideological hegemony.

Asia (and the world) today is vastly different from that 25 years ago when the McBride Report was published. We have observed the rise of East Asian “little dragons”, the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of Cold War, the (1997) Asian financial crisis, and most significantly of all, the opening and rise of China. All of these happened during a period of time when new information and communication technologies emerged and spread to change the communication scene at both the personal and the global levels. Most countries today have achieved rapid developments in national communication infrastructure, which facilitates freer cross-media/border information flow.

This is not to say Asia today is free from the dominance of Western media. New information technology is a sword of two edges, and the freer information flow goes both ways. Some countries are more successful in taking the advantage to develop an information-rich society, while some others are forced to open their borders for in-flows of information from external sources, some desirable, while others not.

The fact remains that global broadcasting networks such as BBC and CNA continue to be the main sources of information globally and among Asian countries. Most Asian (and world) events today are still reported with a predominantly Western (and in the case of CNN, an American) angle. Information flow (via films, magazines, journals, books, computer software, databases, and international conferences and seminars) remains Western-dominated.

What is significant however is that these global networks have found it necessary to “localize” news reporting in Asia with a bigger role for Asian journalists, and to report and analyze news events with an Asian/local angle. This is

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sometimes referred to as a process of “glocalization”, ie., the need to localize within the context of globalization.

In the meantime, Asian media have enhanced its presence first within the Asian region and further by reaching out to the global media arena. Major newspapers in Asian capitals are now stationing or sending their journalists to other major cities in Asia and beyond. Major TV networks from Asia (including Japan, China, Hong Kong, India, and Singapore), while still not in a position to rival BBC and CNN, are no longer absent from reporting major world events, from Olympics, to wars, to major natural disasters. They provide news and news analysis with an Asian/national perspective. Increasingly, Asian voices are heard. Information flow among Asian countries has also improved through information sharing and exchanges. Such moves have resulted in an improvement in balanced information flow in

and out of Asia. Comparing the situation today with that 25 years ago, the trend has been encouraging, even though the situation is far from satisfactory.

Despite the achievements in the past 25 years, the battle against the imbalance of information flow continues. While new awareness and efforts among both Asian and world media are commendable, the struggle is not over. In anticipation of the growing role of Asian countries, notably China and India, in the world arena, however, we have reason to be optimistic. To the extent Asia continues to grow in economic and political strengths, to the extent Asia “matters” due to its huge population base as a potential market, we can expect the world media to deal with Asia with fairness. We will move closer to a New World Information Order, with “Many Voices, One World”.