



Conference Report:

Communications, Culture and Development Conference - Jakarta - 22-24 June

Asia dips a toe into the info age

By design or otherwise, many fast developing regions of Asia have found themselves standing on the edge of Al Gore's 'information highway', of global television, radio and computer networks. Some 190 regional policy makers, academics, and industry representatives recently spent three days in Jakarta considering the economic and cultural implications of this new system.

The theme of the conference, organised by the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre, AMIC, based in Singapore was 'Communications, Culture and Development.' This inspired a diverse range of papers covering new media and communication technologies, development communication, Asian values, foreign investment in media, virtual education, public relations, opportunities for women, marketing on the Internet, and even ecotourism.

Muted enthusiasm

The overarching message of the conference was that newly industrialised and developing countries in Asia stood to gain from becoming active players in providing content for, or gaining knowledge from, the global information system. However, enthusiasm remains tempered by difficult and perhaps insurmountable, issues of intellectual property rights, 'cultural pollution' such as pornography, cybercrime, destabilising political messages, the dominance of Western culture, and the continuing gap between developed and developing nations.

As an early adopter of satellite technology and foreign investment

in telecommunications, Indonesia is an Asian innovator in communications. Indonesia's Minister for Tourism, Posts and Telecommunications, Joop Ave, told the conference: 'Indonesia is preparing herself to play a role in the modern 21st century world. We support the concept of GII [Global Information Infrastructure]. We are participating in the APII [Asia Pacific Information Infrastructure], and we want to make sure our networks will be an important building block of the GII.'

Indonesia: a player

It seems Indonesia, better known for banning media rather than encouraging new ones, seems prepared to put itself in the hands of the free market as defined at Bogor, and accept certain cultural costs, in order to become a player in the new information system. A key element of this has been to start encouraging the use of the Internet.

But whether Indonesia's stance represents a regional trend is difficult to say.

Jeffrey Goh, consultant to Singapore's National Computer Board, said Singapore was unlikely to clamp down on the Internet. 'Our leadership should be smart enough to realise that new activities will spring up around the Net, and that information industries are important to them,' he said.

However, according to the *Jakarta Post* of 2 July 1995, Singapore has stated it will take legal action against cultural and political subversion in cyberspace.

Meanwhile, China, whose Internet users number around 2,000, has an-

nounced it will limit local users' access to the network. Also, Hong Kong recently closed seven of its Internet providers for not having licences.

UNESCO believes that the curtains may soon fall on the dominance of Western-oriented cultural production. 'Recent data indicates that markets are shifting today, gradually and often imperceptibly, from the over familiar West to the as yet, some would say, undefinable East,' said Henrikas Yushkiavitshus, Assistant Director-General for Communication, Information and Informatics, UNESCO. 'Very soon the time will come for others to become senders rather than remaining as mere receivers. Asia is already considered to be a market requiring products based on its own cultural richness.'

Australia, gate crashing?

Considering Australia falls under 'other countries' on AMIC's membership application form, Australians were surprisingly prominent at the conference. With around 20 delegates, including 10 speakers (two of whom were expatriates), Australia was the most heavily represented country after host-nation Indonesia.

Conference papers are available for a small fee from Virgilio Labrador, Head SIDP, AMIC, 39 Newton Road, Singapore 1130, Singapore. Tel (65) 251 5106, Fax: (65) 253 4535.

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