

Pacific Rim Report: Broadcasting in Asia

Peter Westerway argues that broadcasters have responsibilities to their Asian audiences.

It is easy to be glib about Asia. The Pacific Rim is an area whose time has arrived and bookstalls in every airport around the world are carrying magazines with stories like: "The largest consumer market in the world". But Asia is much more than a market. It is home to hundreds of millions of people who are our closest neighbours. I want to talk about what makes us welcome as broadcasters in that home.

Asia already has more than half the people in the world, and by the end of this decade – just seven years away – two thirds of all the world's people will live there. And many of them will be well off. Some 33 million households in Asia already have incomes of more than US\$ 30 000 per year. By the year 2000, there are likely to be 51 million households in this income bracket. And another 400 million will have outstripped subsistence living and be in the market for basic goods and services.

Time magazine put it this way: "For the past decade or so the farsighted, both inside and outside the Asia-Pacific region, have been suggesting that the Age of the North Atlantic will yield in the 21st century to that of the Pacific. Seven years early, the Pacific Age appears to have arrived".

Asia as home

You may well take all this with the traditional grain of salt. After all, the heavy yen now has Japan in trouble and in several ways it has been the key player in the Asian boom. However, this is not my main point. I want to focus on Asia as the place where people live. In other words, ignore the numbers and remember the people.

To the technologists and the free marketeers – particularly those who come from very different societies and cultures – broadcasting in Asia looks pretty simple. The new delivery technologies now make it possible to provide radio and television programs direct into homes anywhere on earth. Broadcasters should therefore utilise the fruits of these technologies to

achieve efficiencies of scale and provide the peoples of Asia with a global tapestry of programs at marginal cost. Coincidentally, they will provide access to the Asian millions, so that multinational advertisers, intent on reaching these huge new markets, will homogenise their goods and services and mount global advertising campaigns.

But the fact is that Asia is an area of dazzling diversity, ethnically, socially, culturally and politically. And we ignore this diversity at our peril. As some overly ambitious broadcasters have already discovered, this means that Asians (like most people) want their broadcasting services to provide a window on the world. But it must be their window, reflecting *their* values and covering *their* world as well as the rest.

Customizing

Some broadcasters have coined a term to describe the attempt to give their services a more local look. It is "customizing". You "customize" your service when you add a few local presenters and sometimes cover events like the Asian Olympics. Personally, I have come to dislike this term, not because there is anything wrong with these things, but because it reveals just the attitude I most deplore. It is not designed to affect the fundamental nature of the programming. Instead it is an attempt to con the customers into believing that they are getting something they transparently are not.

The issue suddenly came to head just last month as Mr Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, which is Australian-based, but substantially American in its operations, paid US\$525 million for a 64% stake in Star-TV's five channel, satellite direct broadcasting service. As one Asian publisher put it: "If someone was to buy the *New York Times* and his name was Li Ka-shing, how do you think the Americans would react?" Perhaps like Malaysian Prime Minister Matahir bin Mohammed, who

complained that Western moguls were now trying to control the news Asians see.

Program standards

It is this issue, rather than the heady stuff of global advertisers and trillion dollar advertising revenues, that interests me because it takes us back to the central issue of whether broadcasting is a profession or a business. Of course, it is both, but I am old fashioned enough to believe that while viewers are customers, most of all they are people. And broadcasters are more than mere merchants. Being a broadcaster is still a privilege that carries with it the responsibility to be both sensitised and sensitive.

In Asia this means studying literally hundreds of local customs and mores. While no broadcaster deliberately offends its audience, there are traps here for the unwary. Satellite delivered services in particular have a difficult problem, because they cover so many cultures. In this context, I commend the original owners of Star-TV, for their recognition of these issues and their studied attempts to avoid giving offence on such matters as alcohol and nudity.

However, my point goes much further than merely avoiding offence. We are discussing here one of the major regions of the world – and a region destined to play an even greater role in world affairs. It is my strong feeling that broadcasters should be initiating a major debate – not with governments, but between themselves – about the issue of Asian program standards.

Cultural maintenance

In particular, I would like to see that debate cover three major issues: cultural maintenance, cross-cultural understanding and the concept of balance.

None of these is new and none of them is easy. Take for example, cultural maintenance. Indonesia, the

Asian country I know best, is an extremely diverse and heterogeneous country. Its economy, its ecology, its religions and its cultures are based on some 300 ethnic groups and nearly as many languages.

President Soeharto has described this diversity of ethnic and cultural backgrounds as "a multi-coloured rainbow" and outside observers often make the same point. Indonesians treasure and work hard to preserve their human rainbow. But Indonesia is not the only Asian country with this responsibility. Singapore, which many Australians regard as a Chinese city like Hong Kong, has exactly this approach as the linchpin of its social policy. It values and works hard to maintain the unique blend of Chinese, Malay and Indian cultures which distinguishes it from any other place in the world – including the rest of Asia.

Somehow we, as broadcasters, have to consider how we can contribute to this multiculturalism, the world's best defence against parochialism, let alone racism and hatred. Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia, a network for which my company sells airtime, maintains an 80% local program contribution. But it may just turn out to be the case that attempting to mirror the real world pays off. I am impressed that Star-TV's Mandarin and Hindi channels have done so well. But I also have a question for Star and other satellite broadcasters in this region. When are they going to introduce a Malay channel and reflect the culture and values of more than a quarter of a billion people in South East Asia?

Cross-cultural understanding

For much the same reasons, I feel that broadcasters must approach the issue of cross-cultural understanding, acting as educators, rather than mere entertainers. Broadcasting is a two edged sword. It can educate, inform and entertain more effectively than any other known medium. And if the invention of printing created ripples of revolution around the globe, what will historians of the future say about broadcasting? Clearly it has come to be the principal medium of communication in advanced societies, vitally affecting the way we see the world.

But broadcasting can also create cultural wastelands, swamping local

cultures with a flood of material designed for totally different audiences. This material is not necessarily of poor quality. To the contrary, it is at its most potent precisely when its production values are at their highest. The highest rating program in Jakarta at the moment is not *The Ramayana*, but *Macgyver*.

Responsibility of broadcasters

I believe that broadcasters should accept the responsibility of approaching their programming decisions with the needs of the region at the forefront of their minds. The aim should be to provide a service that is tailored to the needs and aspirations of the audience, rather than a "spin off" from services devised for a totally different, non-Asian audience.

None of this is meant to suggest that Western programs should not be included. While they might not suffer much from missing *America's Funniest Home Videos*, it would be wrong to deprive Asian audiences of the wealth of first class material available from the West, whether it is rock videos, world class sports or the latest Hollywood blockbuster.

My point is rather that we have been through all this ourselves and now, as established players, we have a duty to help Asians "tell their own stories and sing their own songs". As neighbours, we should have regard for the mores of the neighbourhood. This is not to say encourage national chauvinism. For example, *The Mahabharata* (an Indian classical drama) and *Oshin* (a Japanese serial) are two of TIP's most popular programs because they relate directly to the region and therefore to viewers' shared experiences.

The concept of balance

This leads me to the concept of balance. Here my position is the same as Lord Reith's view: broadcasting's huge potential to influence comes at a cost. It places a reciprocal moral burden on us as broadcasters – and never so heavily as now, when the scope of our activities has been so dramatically extended, to girdle the civilised world. Carelessly used, broadcasting can subvert the social fabric of developing societies, encouraging expectations that they cannot possibly meet,

diverting resources and promoting conflict over peripheral issues.

Making television is not like making toasters, because we wield great influence and the privilege we enjoy carries with it that reciprocal obligation. This is particularly relevant in societies where resources are scarce and the priority task is to improve the quality of life for people who have suffered considerable deprivation.

A duty of care?

Broadcasters are surprisingly uneasy about the notion of a duty of care. We have inherited the proud tradition of a free press and our automatic response to any notion that might limit that freedom is to reject it. I do not for a moment argue that these two notions are easily reconciled. Western societies have debated for centuries whether the public's need to know outweighs the individual's right to privacy; whether national security is more important than the duty to "tell it as it is"; whether freedom of the press carries with it a reciprocal obligation to act soberly and responsibly. In Asia – and certainly in Indonesia – those same questions are alive and well.

But the concept of balance does not take away our freedom to choose. It suggests that we make our choices carefully and with full awareness of possible consequences. In the particular context of Asia, it must be understood that until now broadcasting has worked at two quite distinct levels. At the level of satellite dishes and global information flows the diet of Western materialism common to our television which has been offered only to the affluent.

But the kampongs are a different story. While they have twitched whenever some sceptical report has highlighted their shortcomings, the power holders have only been irritated, not destroyed. We are now entering a phase of broadcasting technology in which no regime will be able to block access by even the poorest and most underprivileged to an undiluted flow of information.

As a democrat, one's first instinct is to cheer. But our recent experiences Europe should sound a warning that it

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World Review

A survey of some recent international developments

British Telecom and MCI Communications have announced that they have formed an alliance to provide worldwide value added telecommunications services.

- In order to stimulate the development of Russia's domestic telecommunications infrastructure, the Russian Ministry of Communications has announced that it is postponing the issue of licences to develop international communications systems.
- Nine Asian carriers have signed a Memorandum of Understanding to build the Asia Pacific Cable Network – cable which will link Singapore with 8 other Asian nations. It is envisaged that the fibre link will be

over ten thousand kilometres.

- Telstra's hopes of operating a second general carrier licence in Malaysia have been thwarted by the Malaysian Government's decision ruling out full deregulation of their telecommunications industry.
- The German Government has revealed plans to privatise Deutsche Bundespost Telekom and its related postal companies, whilst the French Government has also announced that France Telecom will be privatised and the country's telecommunications sector will undergo a major overhaul.

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information is true. The Government agreed for the above reasons and this became the test in the Act.

The second point is a little more subtle. The Commissioner for Equal Opportunity commented that the requirement that the person genuinely believe that the information is true created an unfair distinction. The distinction is best put as follows:

"As a matter of fairness it would seem to me that the Act ought to protect the fair-minded and objective person, who is unable to make up his or her own mind about the truth of the allegations, to the same extent as it protects the person who rashly accepts and believes everything he or she hears."

This point was accepted. Accordingly, the test of belief on reasonable grounds is supplemented by an alternative as follows:

"... is not in a position to form a belief on reasonable grounds about the truth of the information but believes on reasonable grounds that the information may be true and is of sufficient significance to justify its disclosure so that its truth may be investigated."

It will, of course, be necessary for a public awareness campaign to educate the public about the legislation. I look forward to co-operating with all concerned parties in that process.

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Prosecutions

The New South Wales legislation provides for a two year limitation period in which proceedings are to be commenced. The written consent of the Attorney General is required before proceedings can be instituted.

Most of the State Acts provide for fines or imprisonment or both as penalty for breach of the provisions

discussed above. In New South Wales, the maximum fines range between \$4,000 and \$10,000 for individuals, depending on whether the conviction is summary or on indictment and \$50,000 for corporations. The maximum sentences range from 2 to 5 years.

In *Miller's* case, which was decided in 1988 under the New South Wales legislation, the journalist was fined \$500 after the court took into account her character, her belief (based on legal advice given to her employer)

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is not quite that simple. I believe that while these countries feel their way towards a free society, we need to take this concept of balance into account. Sometimes broadcasters will make exactly the same choice they would have made in Australia, Britain or the USA. But every now and then they may feel that reality is literally millions of people working desperately hard to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps and hesitate to set fire to their world.

Indonesia has surprised me by its sheer diversity. Secessionism is not abnormal – it is endemic. And I sometimes wonder how anyone can run the place at all. Another surprise has been how fiercely proud ordinary Indonesians are of their nation. We won our independence too easily to care so deeply.

Conclusion

As a codicil to all this, let me anticipate some reactions and say that I am not suggesting that existing regimes should be sacrosanct. Nor am I saying that governments should be encouraged to tell broadcasters what to say and how to say it. This is not a disguised plea for censorship. But I do feel that the more we understand our neighbours, the less comfortable we will be with "publish and be damned". That might just turn out to be prophetic.

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that she was not breaking the law and the fact that the legislation was relatively new. This penalty was upheld on appeal in *Donaldson v TCN Channel Nine* in 1989. The production company was fined a total of \$25,000 for the offences of causing the use of a listening device, possessing the tape recording of the conversation and communicating it to viewers.

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