

Editorial Note

One of the most important areas of activity for the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation during almost 40 years of existence has been information and communication issues and their role in the development process. The absolute necessity of securing open access to information in all strata of society as well as freedom of expression as a condition for true development and democracy has been the main theme of several of the Foundation's seminars and an important component of many others.

As readers of *Development Dialogue* will recall, the theme underlying the contributions to the preceding issue of the journal (1998:1) was a perspective on society that emphasised and promoted transparency, accountability and openness in the processes of planning, decision-making and implementation at all levels. In the Editorial Note it was also argued that the assertion of these values 'becomes increasingly important—perhaps even imperative—in a world where secrecy surrounding *essential* information seems to be growing every day'.

With the background of seminars on information and communication, organised by the Foundation over the years, and the conviction that the media together with Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)—or the 'Third System', as we usually call it—need to play a more significant role in all societies in the future, the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism (PCIJ) and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation decided to organise a seminar on 'Improving the Flow of Information in a Time of Crisis: the Challenge to the Southeast Asian Media'. This issue of *Development Dialogue* is entirely devoted to the publication of a selection of the revised papers from the seminar, held in October 1998 at the Subic Freeport in the Philippines.

The contributions, which are divided into two sections—one more general, discussing democracy, globalisation and information, and one consisting of country experiences from Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines—give cause for some optimism. Thailand and the Philippines seem to have achieved basic freedom of expression and freedom of the press, and Indonesia seems to be in a transition period, often taking two steps forward but one back. Promising early indications of more openness are also to be found in several other countries in the region. Recently, however, disturbing signs of the undermining of the free press in the Philippines have been observed. This shows how fragile the situation may be even in a relatively stable democracy. These, hopefully temporary, threats seem regrettably to originate in the highest circles.

Twenty-five years ago, at the time when the debate about a new international information order started, the problems under discussion had more to do with imbalances in the South–North distribution of information than with freedom of information in individual Third World countries. The 1975 Dag Hammarskjöld Report *What Now: Another Development* had as one of its ten 'commandments' the call for improved public information, the key point being that, 'citizens have a right to inform and be informed about the facts of development, its inherent conflicts and the changes it will bring about, locally and internationally'. This section of the report stressed further that, 'under present conditions, information and education are only too often monopolised by the power structure, which

manipulates public opinion to its own ends and tends to perpetuate preconceived ideas, ignorance and alienation'; it ended by stating that 'conscientisation of citizens to ensure their full participation in the decision-making process' was a prerequisite for development in its real sense.

The 1975 Dag Hammarskjöld Report was conceived as an independent contribution to the discussions at the Seventh Special Session of the UN General Assembly on Development and International Cooperation in early September 1975 at the height of the South–North development negotiations. The Foundation convened on this occasion a seminar for Third World journalists with participation from three continents. The journalists were invited to cover, from a Third World perspective and for Third World media, a session of the General Assembly that would otherwise have been reported on essentially by Western media, despite the crucial importance of the subject matter to the Third World. But also, and more importantly, the seminar addressed the need for the establishment of a new communication order which would aim at decreasing, and finally getting rid of, the gross imbalances that dominated the global communications scene.

Thus, the battle 25 years ago was not so much about the right to freedom of expression or the importance of an independent and free press in individual countries, but a struggle to get Third World reporting and commentaries on Third World problems through to readers around the globe, in a world that was overwhelmingly dominated by the big, northern-based and northern-biased international news agencies. The recommendations from the journalists' seminar in New York were taken up and developed by the newly created Latin American Institute for Transnational Studies (ILET), under the directorship of Juan Somavía, and, in 1976, ILET and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation organised together a pioneering seminar on 'The Role of Information in the New International Order'. The papers presented and the discussions held at the seminar were published in an issue of *Development Dialogue* (1976:2) that attracted great interest around the world and was soon out of print. A selection of this material was reprinted and published in *Development Dialogue* 1981:2 along with new contributions reflecting the most important research carried out at ILET in the late 1970s. The ILET material, in turn, provided important inputs to the lively and sometimes burning debates that took place in various international fora on the New World Information and Communication Order.

Another sister organisation to the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, the International Foundation for Development Alternatives (IFDA), also made an important contribution to the democratisation of the transnational communication structures in an effort to meet the information needs of the Third World. In 1978, IFDA started *The IFDA Dossier* for exchange of experiences of different development alternatives and two years later, together with IPS (Inter Press Service Third World News Agency), it established the *Special United Nations Service* ('SUNS', or 'The Yellow Bulletin'), covering UN development activities from a Third World perspective.

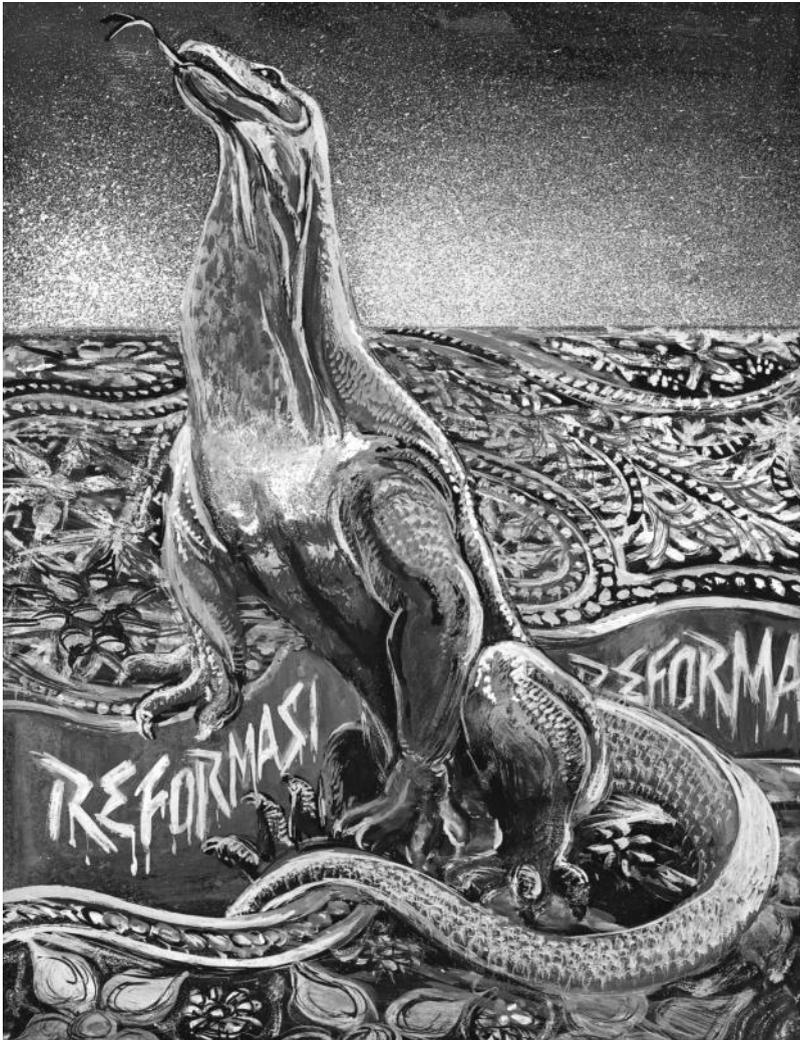
During the 1980s, the main emphasis of the international media debate changed from North–South imbalances to an examination of the situation in individual countries, a

tendency that has grown stronger with the intensified interest during the last decade in democracy and human rights issues. Simultaneously, the rapid technological development that has occurred in information and communications has brought about another set of changes. First with the fax machine and later by means of the Internet, it has become possible to communicate much more cheaply and quickly than ever before and, in most countries, to evade government censorship. Examples of this positive development are given by our contributors. However, there are also considerable problems inherent in this fast-developing information technology; these, too, are reflected in the current issue.

An example of the focus on more country-specific problems is the seminar on 'Democracy and the Media in Southern Africa' that the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation organised in cooperation with the Foundation for Education with Production (FEP) in Botswana in 1989. Addressing the crucial role of information, communication and international networking in the struggle against apartheid in South Africa, this unique event brought together, for the first time, journalists from the alternative and democratic press in South Africa with colleagues from the Frontline States. The aim of the seminar was to survey the media situation in Southern Africa and to concretise how the right to inform and be informed and the democratisation of the media could be safeguarded and supported for the future development of the region. One practical result of the seminar was the setting-up of the Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA), which has played an important role in the struggle for a free press in the sub-region.

Information and communications are not new topics for the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation in the Southeast Asian context either. The decision to hold the media seminar in the Philippines came out of the relations established with the PCIJ in connection with the seminar on 'The Role of National Drug Policies in Social Transformation: A Challenge for the Media', which was held in Manila/Tagaytay in 1992. The main features of the 1998 seminar were planned jointly by the two organisations, but the detailed planning and implementation were mainly handled by PCIJ. Furthermore, the basic editing of the contributions published was undertaken by Cecile C. A. Balgos and Sheila S. Coronel; the illustrations are by the Philippine artist Nonoy Marcelo. PCIJ has published the material independently under the title *News in Distress: The Southeast Asian Media in a Time of Crisis*, mainly for distribution in the region. The Foundation has chosen to publish two contributions—Walden Bello's and Philip Bowring's—in *Development Dialogue* 1998:1, while eight contributions are published here.

It is the intention of the partners behind this project to continue the cooperation and explore the possibilities for follow-up work. A second seminar, provisionally entitled 'The Southeast Asian Media Emerges from Crisis', has been suggested. Such a seminar might adopt a more comparative approach and would be likely to include assessments of the coverage of the financial crisis and discussions on how to take advantage of opportunities created by the crisis; it would also aim to identify successful initiatives in the area of media ethics, training, ownership and freedom. The meeting would be another important step towards establishing 'the right to inform and be informed' more firmly in the region.



Introduction

In 1996, when we were planning a conference that would examine information flows in Southeast Asia, the phrase ‘economic crisis’ was not yet synonymous with the region. The Asian tigers were still roaring and not yet in distress. The waves of democratisation that swept Indonesia in May 1998 and the street protests that took place in Malaysia later that year were then unimaginable.

How things have been changed since then! In many countries in the region, old truths have been turned inside out, and if there is a consensus that seems to have emerged, it is that old ideas have to be re-thought. By the time we held a conference and gathered 30 Southeast Asian journalists at the Subic Freeport in the Philippines in October 1998, such notions as transparency, freedom of information and access to information were already being preached as part of the solutions to the Southeast Asian economic malaise.

Southeast Asia is a region of paradoxes. Freewheeling democracies and brutal dictatorships exist side by side. The extremes are well represented in the region: rambunctious press systems like those in the Philippines and Thailand stand in stark contrast to totally controlled presses, for example in Burma, where even the ownership of computers and modems has to be registered.

The conference, from which the papers in this volume were collected, brought together journalists representing a wide range of experiences and a diversity of voices from all the countries of Southeast Asia except Brunei. During the meeting, these journalists discovered that despite their differences they were also bound by common aspirations: for a free and responsible press and for societies that are both prosperous and free.

This collection reflects the themes that were discussed at Subic. It starts off with an overview essay that describes the state of the media in a region currently in the throes of an economic—and information—crisis. The second essay looks at an important development in Southeast Asia: the waves of democratisation that enabled countries like the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia to enjoy previously unimagined freedoms. A free press, these countries have found out, is certainly a blessing, but it can also be a curse.

Another paper looks at the challenges posed by the forces of globalisation to the Southeast Asian media. In some countries, access to the global media has meant being flooded with information that titillates and amuses rather than enlightens. In others, it has opened up a new avenue for dissent and opposition.

This collection of material from the Subic seminar continues with case studies on the media in four countries. The Burma case study describes in detail draconian state controls on the press, while the article on Malaysia looks at how repressive laws and media ownership by firms affiliated with the ruling coalition have muzzled the press. Two papers look at Indonesia, where dramatic changes in the media environment have recently taken place. The first looks at the important role played by independent journalists' organisations extending the boundaries of freedom, while the second one examines the exciting possibilities of the Internet as a medium of dissent.

The paper on the Philippines is aptly titled, 'The Problem with Freedom', as it examines the dilemmas faced by the Philippine media 12 years after the restoration of democracy.

We hope that these papers will give readers a better understanding of the complex forces that shape the media in Southeast Asia, the problems that the media face especially during the economic crisis and the opportunities for change that the crisis has made possible.

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The Information Crisis

By Sheila S. Coronel

For all the advantages offered by the Information Revolution, Southeast Asia was caught unawares when many of its economies suffered severe reversals of fortune beginning in July 1997. Despite the deluge of information issuing from the Internet, satellite and cable television and numerous publications, the region's hundreds of millions of people were unprepared for the impending disaster. Almost two years later, the causes of the crisis, and how and when it will end, are still debated.

In this article, Sheila S. Coronel writes that while the media proliferated in the region during the economic boom, the information they gave proved lacking in substance, often pandering to the whims of the market and of those in power. Many of the so-called 'tiger economies' had unapologetically muzzled their media, arguing that dissent and criticism could not possibly help bring about order, as well as economic prosperity. But even in countries where the flow of information was unhindered, what was emphasised too often was the sensational, not what the public genuinely needed to know.

The crisis, however, may yet bring about improvements in the Southeast Asian media as public demand for news that is accurate and relevant grows and governments are forced to be more transparent and accountable. The challenge for the region's media is how they can meet this demand while competing in an increasingly tight market.

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Not too long ago, not many people in Southeast Asia thought about such issues as freedom of information, access to public and private records, and government transparency and accountability. But since July 1997, when the fall of the Thai baht precipitated a region-wide economic crisis, these issues have topped the list of prescriptions made by those diagnosing the Southeast Asian economic malaise. What many journalists have known all along—the important role of a free press in ensuring governments and institutions are held accountable—was suddenly being preached by experts as if it were an original notion.

The Western media's metaphors for what is happening in the region—contagion, meltdown, tremor—do not adequately describe the complexity of the crisis and its devastating impact. Since late 1997, regional currencies

have fallen by up to 70 per cent, 10 million Asians have lost their jobs, and economies have shrunk by as much as 15 per cent.

Officials and experts are still arguing about the real causes of the affliction. Some, like Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohammad, blame Western manipulation of Asian financial and currency markets, while others point to how a combination of liberalised capital flows, weak financial monitoring systems, corruption and crony capitalism have undermined the foundations of the once-booming 'tiger' economies of Southeast Asia.

Almost everyone was caught unawares when the first signs of distress became apparent. After all, the region was supposedly the site of an 'economic miracle' and had experienced in the last 20 years one of the most impressive bursts of growth in human history. In the decade before the crisis, many Southeast Asian economies were enjoying double-digit growth rates and were bracing not for hardship but continued prosperity. Pundits in both East and West were hailing the beginning of the 'Asian century', citing record economic growth and improved living standards. How could the miracle so quickly turn to dust?

There are no easy answers to this and other questions. Some critics point out that the so-called economic miracle was so much hype in the first place. Others have cited factors far short of the miraculous—state support for business, the vitality of ethnic Chinese capital and the proximity of Japan, among others—as having contributed to the region's phenomenal growth.

For Southeast Asia, the end of the 1990s is a time for questioning the old orthodoxies and searching for new solutions. Amid the rubble of bubble economies, one thing seems clear: side by side with such spectacular growth were monumental complacency and ignorance. Across the region, officials, businessmen and ordinary citizens have acknowledged that they were not armed with sufficient information to be able to anticipate the crisis, understand its causes, and deal with its impacts.

Why the economic crisis is also an information crisis

Since then, the tide has changed. Even the least likely institutions have become champions of a free press and accountable government. The International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank, with their own secretive and publicly unaccountable agencies, are now pontificating on the virtues of transparency and the free flow of information. Even hedge fund managers and investment bankers, the last bastions of global capitalism, are talking about the need for more information. Jolted into

reality by the crisis, they have realised, belatedly, the link between capital flows and information flows.

From important sectors within increasingly restive Southeast Asian societies, there comes a similar demand to free up the flow of information. Media audiences—particularly the middle classes, which have benefited the most from the prosperity of the boom years—are asking for more. It is they who have been visibly at the forefront of the movements for democratisation—and freer information flows—that have swept the region since the mid-1980s. Today as the times become harder and ordinary people are feeling the pinch, the crisis, its effects and the possible ways to resolve it need to be more clearly articulated and explained.

It is ironic that Southeast Asians are realising how little they know in an era when, throughout the region, citizens are being deluged with much more information than ever before. The Information Age is indeed full of ironies. The Asian crisis made this profoundly clear: for how can a prosperous region be so clueless and ill-informed about the state of its economy and the fragility of its prosperity?

Such ironies are rooted in the contradictions in Southeast Asian societies. On one hand, the booming countries of the region had opened their economies to transnational capital flows, encouraged foreign investments and embarked on an ambitious path to growth based on integration into the global economy. Without exception, economic prosperity brought about a media boom in Southeast Asia, creating new audiences for newspapers, radio programmes and television shows that scrambled to fill enormous demands for all sorts of information.

Yet, at the same time, in some of these countries, long-reigning leaders have tried to keep their citizens on a tight leash, restricting freedom of expression and flows of information that they think would threaten their regimes. Singapore, Malaysia, and until recently, Indonesia stand out as prime examples of how draconian laws, intimidated journalists and obedient media owners have combined to produce glitzy but pliant presses that please the authorities but keep citizens ill-informed.

The good news is that there have been dramatic changes in Southeast Asia's most populous countries. In the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia, authoritarian regimes have fallen and the media have been set free. In these countries, many journalists and media agencies helped the democratisation process by writing, despite the risks, on the abuses of authoritarian regimes

and reporting on pro-democracy movements. Today the media in the region's democracies are powerful, shaping the political agenda, catalysing reforms and forcing the resignation of erring officials. There is broad support for an unfettered press and attempts to restrict free expression are met with public disapproval. The press is seen as an important democratic institution, and despite its excesses, its watchdog role is appreciated and deemed essential to the functioning of democracy.

The bad news is that even in countries where the media are free and state-imposed restrictions minimal, the press has not always been up to the task. In the din of the media marketplace, sober and comprehensive explanations of the crisis are not heard or sometimes have no place. In the Philippines after the fall of Marcos in 1986, in Thailand after the 1992 uprising, and in Indonesia after Suharto's resignation in 1998, the new freedoms gave birth to the 'euphoria press'—hundreds of new newspapers reporting with unbridled, and unaccustomed, freedom.

Today the danger is that intense competition in a crowded and unregulated market would mean newspapers and television programmes that pander to the taste for the sensational. In Southeast Asia's democracies, the problem is not so much the tyranny of the state but the more amorphous tyranny of the market, that brings with it such problems as irresponsible reporting, ethical lapses and trivialisation of the news.

The rest of Southeast Asia, meanwhile, has largely been sheltered from the crisis because of relative isolation from the global market. The countries of Indochina—Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia—were held in the confines of socialism for decades, while Burma is in the throes of a repressive and isolationist military dictatorship. Among these countries, only Cambodia has a free press, which was possible only because the elections, supervised by the United Nations, ushered in a liberal democratic regime in 1992. The others suffer from stringent controls that have trapped their media—and their citizens—in a Jurassic age.

The demise of 'Asian values'

For most of the 1990s, as the political clout of the Southeast Asian tigers grew in direct proportion to their economic might, the region's most articulate leaders have argued that political and press freedom need to be curtailed to ensure economic prosperity. They coined the phrase 'Asian values', which they say guarantees the development of the community by sacrificing individual rights. Exactly what constitutes 'Asian values' remains fuzzy—the concept is often associated with the primacy of the common good over individual rights,

but can also include an emphasis on family, hard work and 'clean living'. The term was popularised in the early 1990s, when Southeast Asian countries began trumpeting their economic success as a consequence of the superiority of their societies and the values that hold them together.

The notion of Asian values provided an ideological justification for authoritarianism, even if the concept contradicted the historical experience of countries like the Philippines and Burma, both of which had democracies that were brutalised by dictatorships. In these countries, authoritarian rulers curtailed individual rights without delivering prosperity.

The current crisis, however, is undermining the legitimacy of the 'Asian values' argument by showing that these same values may have contributed to the current economic mess. After all, a shackled press and a cowed citizenry allowed President Suharto's family and cronies to plunder the Indonesian economy. And in Malaysia, the suppression of criticism gave Mahathir free rein to embark on ambitious projects that made questionable economic sense. Even in democratic regimes, citizens are suffering from faulty economic decisions implemented with little press or public scrutiny and from sweetheart deals between governments and well-connected businessmen made without full disclosure.

Not surprisingly, the crisis has resulted in a clamour for more transparency, increased access to information and more freedom. In Thailand, citizens reeling from hardship elected a new, more open and more responsive government in late 1997. In Indonesia in May 1998, the crisis caused the unravelling of the 32-year-old regime of Suharto and forced his successor, B.J. Habibie, to be more sensitive to the agitation in the streets for more freedom. In Malaysia, where the economy contracted by 6 per cent in 1998, long-reigning Prime Minister Mahathir is facing demands for political reforms from professionals and white-collar workers who had benefited the most from his rule.

The role of the media becomes more important during crisis. More than ever, citizens need to understand what is going on around them, who is responsible, and what can realistically be done to improve the situation. But like officials and businessmen, journalists have failed to explain adequately to their public the causes of, and the solutions to, their distress.

The link between information flows and crisis has been demonstrated. Economist and Nobel laureate Amartya Sen argues that economic catastrophes such as famines are caused by censorship and political decisions that

go unchallenged. For example, he says China's 'Great Leap Forward' famine that killed more than 15 million people in the 1960s would not have happened if the Chinese people had had free access to information. 'Famines have never afflicted any country that is independent, that goes to elections regularly, that has opposition parties to voice criticisms, that permits newspapers to report freely and to question the wisdom of government policies without extensive censorship', Sen wrote. Certainly, a muzzled press, as in Burma, where the military junta allows the dissemination of only official versions of events, and until recently, in Indonesia, cannot guard against the excesses of power and leaves societies unable to fend off the consequences of such excesses.

A free press makes people aware of the issues and forces that have an impact on their daily lives and gives decision-makers the inputs they need to make policy or institute reforms. But freedom is no guarantee that citizens get the information they need, as unbridled competition and a race for the market often result in sensational and shoddy journalism.

Crisis, however, creates new opportunities and provides openings for change. When so many stakeholders are interested in pressing for greater freedom, there can be more pressure on governments for less restricted access to information. Multilateral donor institutions and business people want information to flow freely so markets can function without the distortions caused by manipulated or inadequate data. With more information, entrepreneurs and fund managers can more accurately weigh risks and decide where to put their money. But for the long-term development and democratisation of Southeast Asian societies, information must also be accessible to a broader public so ordinary citizens can participate more meaningfully in determining their own future.

The Southeast Asian media, however, have lacked both the freedom and the capacity for the sophisticated reportage needed in a more complex age. Many journalists do not have the training to deal with complex issues and processes, even if they have the liberty to do so. Throughout the region, journalists have realised the need to enhance the media's ability for more analytical and investigative reporting, particularly on economic issues.

Certainly, there is a need to hone critical faculties as well and to jolt journalists out of the complacency to which they have been accustomed. As Walden Bello pointed out in his paper published in *Development Dialogue* 1998:1, 'Speculations, Spins and Sinking Fortunes', the crisis has exposed the complicity of Southeast Asia's business press in creating a 'psychology of

boom'. By uncritically reporting the pronouncements of gung-ho leaders, fund managers and multilateral donor institutions, business newspapers—themselves the products of the bubble era—have contributed to the 'herd mentality' that drove foreign funds into Southeast Asia during the boom years, and out of it when the first signs of crisis became apparent. Business journalists, like fund managers, ignored the warning signals and were therefore woefully unprepared when the crash came. They were among the first casualties as well, because the crisis caused the closure of many business newspapers, forcing journalists out into the streets, jobless.

The other Southeast Asia

While the Southeast Asian tigers are mired in crisis, the less affluent countries of the region are also suffering from economic malaise. Indochina represents the other face of Southeast Asia. After 30 years in the confines of socialism, the countries of Indochina are being integrated into the world market. Economic liberalisation has opened up the resources of Indochinese countries to exploitation by more affluent neighbouring states, such as Thailand and Malaysia, whose companies are now mining and logging in previously closed economies. Indochina remains the poor cousin to the more prosperous Southeast Asian countries, a source of cheap labour and raw materials as well as a market for goods produced by richer neighbours.

Cambodia has adopted Western-style democracy after years of civil war and economic stagnation. The Cambodian constitution guarantees a free press. But because the political situation is often on the verge of anarchy, journalists have been killed and threatened by officials and other individuals not used to a critical press. Ownership of newspapers by rival political factions exacerbates the situation, as journalists become cannon fodder for opposing politicians and papers are reduced to becoming venues for trading insults. The level of journalistic skills also needs drastic improvement. The Cambodian educated classes were almost entirely wiped out during the Khmer Rouge's bloody reign in the mid- and late 1970s, and a new generation of journalists has to be trained. Despite these limitations, the Cambodian press has acted as a check on government and served as a forum for diverse voices.

Socialist Laos, meanwhile, has been undergoing free-market reforms, but its press is still cast in the 1950s mould—unimaginative and full of official pronouncements. Vietnam is also opening up its economy, and briefly, in the 1980s, allowed some opening in the media as well. Since the 1990s, however, the Communist Party has been reluctant to implement political reforms. There has been significant economic growth, but the benefits have been unevenly spread.

The press remains under State and Party control, a set-up that is unlikely to change even as Vietnam experiences an economic slowdown as a result of the regional turmoil (70 per cent of the country's exports go to Southeast Asian countries, which have now turned into less enthusiastic customers). The Vietnamese government does allow occasional exposés, along with new and more sophisticated publications. Still, for the most part, the media are discouraged from reporting on such issues as corruption, the onslaught of the market, the suppression of civil rights and environmental destruction.

In most of Indochina, the press has not been able to report fully on the impact of the market on these once closed societies. The media have limited access to information on foreign companies exploiting local resources, and on global, regional and national economic policies and trends that are affecting the lives of the peoples of Indochina.

Burma is a category in itself and deserves recognition as home of the most oppressive press system in Southeast Asia. The Burmese military regime, which assumed power in a 1962 coup d'état, introduced market reforms in the second half of the 1980s. But these caused economic dislocations that fuelled the 1988 democracy movement when scores of opposition publications flourished. The protests forced the government to hold elections in 1990. Pro-democracy forces won but the junta refused to recognise the results. Instead it arrested opponents, clamped down on the press and allowed only the most subservient media to operate.

Today even the ownership of fax machines, computers and modems is forbidden. Many foreign publications are banned and mail is routinely intercepted. But the spirit of dissent is kept alive by Burmese exiles who report for the foreign media and by foreign broadcasts clandestinely beamed to Burma from overseas. Burmese support groups also operate lively sites on the Internet and a barrage of critical foreign reporting has made the Burmese junta an international pariah.

The information paradox

The paradox is that whether rich or poor, whether they are under democratic or authoritarian regimes, Southeast Asians have more access to information now than they had in the past. The region is teeming with satellite and cable television, newspapers and magazines, and a plethora of Web sites. All countries in the region, with the exception of Burma, have access to the Internet and the World Wide Web. The information revolution is real in Southeast Asia, although its impact is felt more in some countries than in others.

Technology has helped free up the media in countries where authorities have kept a tight lid on dissent. In Indonesia, journalists and dissidents used the Internet to bring uncensored news to students and a middle class increasingly fed up with corruption and abuse of power. Ironically, the Suharto government facilitated the process by setting up Internet service providers (ISPs) in provincial capitals and allowing the proliferation of privately run ISPs and Internet cafés. All these have been put to good use by pro-democracy activists and students not only for disseminating alternative news but also for coordinating protest actions.

All across the region, human rights and environment activists, national liberation movements and indigenous peoples have found a common ground in the Internet. Its decentralised nature, freedom from official control, and relatively low cost of delivery have made it an ideal medium for dissent. In Malaysia, where the mass media are in the hands of Mahathir's cronies and where restrictive laws limit press freedom and make self-censorship second nature to journalists, stifled voices have found an outlet in the World Wide Web. This was especially the case in the aftermath of the power struggle in the highest echelons of the dominant UMNO party that resulted in the September 1998 arrest of dismissed Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Singapore is the last holdout. In Burma, where computer ownership is rare, authorities do not fuss about the Internet. But in Singapore, where the technology is widely available, government censors surf the Net daily in search of objectionable content. These sites are then blocked by local ISPs. Singaporean surveillance is hard to match. The ruling People's Action Party dominates the mass media through corporate control of Singapore Press Holdings, which has a monopoly of the country's press industry. The merest hint of media dissension is roundly suppressed with the help of laws as severe as those in the most unrepentant dictatorial regimes. Even though it aspires to be the regional information hub, Singapore has also banned critical foreign publications and has successfully used libel suits to curtail unflattering foreign reporting about the city-state.

Apart from the Internet, cable and satellite television provide an alternative to the bland and uncritical reporting of the local media in many countries in Southeast Asia. Cable TV is opening up new worlds to previously closed societies like Vietnam and Cambodia. Since the wave of economic deregulation in 1990, cable and satellite television has spread even to the remotest corners of Southeast Asia, with the exception of Burma. But there are restrictions on satellite ownership in several countries in the region. Cable TV content is filtered in Singapore, which allows only select stations to broad-

cast. In Malaysia, censors have the option to pre-screen foreign programmes meant for cable to ensure they meet the state's standards.

In the coming years, most of Southeast Asia will be increasingly open to the latest advances in information technology, and governments will find it more and more difficult to filter information and news. The inherent anarchy of the Internet means that it is by definition impossible to censor, despite the obsessive vigilance of Singaporean snoops. Meanwhile, the shrinking size of satellite dish antennas will soon make government regulations banning them irrelevant.

The downside of the information revolution is that it is mostly bringing information that titillates or amuses citizens rather than empowers them to make intelligent decisions about their lives. More and more, people have the illusion that they are informed simply because of the multiplicity and sophistication of the media available to them. But the reality is that they will not be able to digest most of the information they are served. The danger is also that the information received contain more junk than substance.

Recent trends in global communications indicate the emergence of a world communications order dominated by a few big Western media conglomerates which own newspaper chains, satellite and cable television facilities and also increasingly dominate the content of the World Wide Web. Information is becoming, more than ever, a profitable business. The media moguls have truly gone global: Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation, for example, owns 300 newspapers in the North and South, the largest satellite system in Europe, and the Star television satellite network in Asia.

National and local newspapers, television networks and small groups currently maintaining sites on the Internet will find it hard to defend themselves against the invasion of transnational media empires. As globalisation brings about the loosening of state controls on the entry of the foreign media, local presses will have difficulty competing with bigger, richer and more sophisticated media entities.

As the media moguls increasingly dominate news and information gathering, there will be more stress on news that serves global, rather than small, national or local audiences. Issues will be simplified and there will be more stress on information that is entertaining and easy to digest. News will have to 'sell' if it is to be aired at all, because the media conglomerates are fundamentally profit-making machines answerable primarily to their stockholders rather than a clearly defined public.

Information technology is not the panacea that will set things right. The technology remains very much in the control of the West. And the mass of data that is transmitted gives the illusion that knowledge is passed on. But is it really? Increasingly, the content of the World Wide Web is becoming commercialised, and the Internet is being used to sell products ranging from pizzas to mail-order brides. Dazzled by the quantity of information the Internet and cable television provide, few have questioned the quality of the information that is passed on. Does it have any use? Is it relevant?

Improving the flow of information

The challenges that face the Southeast Asian media today are more complex than ever. On one hand, there are still the problems of state censorship and suppression. But the relaxation of state controls on the media and the liberalisation of the entry of foreign media content bring their own problems.

The challenge for the Southeast Asian media is how to ensure that they provide accurate and timely information that will allow citizens to make intelligent decisions about their lives and to be active participants in their societies. The media in the region must not only be competent and free; they must also be able to compete in a crowded market.

The crisis provides opportunities for improvement. The constituency for a free press and liberalised information flows is expanding. Southeast Asian media audiences are demanding more than the usual fare that they have been served. There is at the same time a broad global constituency for greater information access. More than at any other period, there are many more diverse voices clamouring for the free flow of information.

In a series of lively discussions, Southeast Asian journalists attending the Subic conference discussed how to overcome the obstacles to freedom of information and improve the quality of information flows. The suggestions included:

Removing the barriers to the free flow of information

Restrictive laws, licensing requirements, threats against journalists, the constraints imposed by media owners, and harassment lawsuits prevent the media from reporting freely. Burma is the most scandalous example of this. The media, particularly in Southeast Asia's democratic regimes, should expose infringements on press freedom and develop mechanisms to assist and protect threatened journalists. They should also lobby for laws that guarantee press freedom and freedom of information.

The importance of having a regional body to monitor violations of journalistic rights was stressed. While Western press and human rights groups have played an important role in bringing to public attention problems of press freedom in Southeast Asia, pressure from regional journalists is often more effective on leaders who are intolerant of criticism from the West. A regional organisation of journalists has existed for some time, but under the sponsorship of Southeast Asian governments. Not surprisingly, it is a moribund group not likely to rock the boat when it comes to press freedom.

In November 1998, journalists from Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines got together to form the Southeast Asian Press Alliance (SEAPA) that will serve as a watchdog group to promote and protect press freedom. SEAPA will facilitate an exchange of information among press groups, keep track of violations of press freedom and conduct training seminars (see Appendix).

While journalists in authoritarian regimes need the most support, those in democracies need to keep up their vigilance as well. National media organisations should ideally be at the frontline, defending freedoms. In the Philippines, which enjoys one of the freest press systems in Asia, many provincial journalists have been killed because of their work. Although press groups have publicised the murders, none of them have been solved and provincial authorities often take a cavalier attitude to the killings.

In Indonesia, the new freedoms are fragile and the political situation unstable. Journalists are beaten and threatened, and new laws to curtail media freedoms are being proposed. Indonesian journalists need the support of their Southeast Asian colleagues to ensure that hard-won liberties are maintained and media freedom is institutionalised in progressive legislation. The role of independent journalists groups in expanding the limits of freedom during and after the Suharto regime provides lessons for other Southeast Asian countries. The Indonesian experience shows how a group of determined journalists can effectively challenge iron-fisted attempts by a powerful state to clamp down on the media.

Developing alternative tools of information

The potential of the Internet as a venue for suppressed information has not yet been fully maximised. The Internet's success in Indonesia and Malaysia can be replicated in countries where journalists labour under oppressive press systems. Even as vigilant censors are finding ways to suppress Internet content, determined journalists and activists are discovering creative ways to skirt censorship. While the battle rages, the World Wide Web remains a

cheap and accessible medium for the kind of guerrilla journalism that can outwit government censors.

Training journalists

Throughout the region, journalists need more training to improve reporting on complex economic and political issues. The media explosion that took place because of democratisation and economic prosperity was not always accompanied by professional growth. In many countries, there are not enough good journalists to keep up with the media expansion. In addition, editors are usually immersed in day-to-day work of coming out with a paper or airing a newscast to be able to train reporters properly. In most of Southeast Asia, young, harassed journalists are made to report on key issues and crucial events with scant preparation.

As Southeast Asian countries tangle with complex problems, journalists who can write with depth and insight are sorely needed. Training programmes, particularly in fields such as economics, can help. But these should address not only the improvement of skills but of ethical standards as well. Journalists acknowledged the problems of bribes and other inducements made to reporters and editors. These problems are best addressed by bringing them out into the open and helping journalists reach a consensus on ethical standards.

Journalists also realised the need to tap training expertise from within the region. In Indochina, training in basic skills such as news writing, doing interviews and editing is lacking. In Indonesia, the need to wean activists steeped in political opposition and train them for more sober and analytical reportage was pointed out. In Thailand and the Philippines, training in more specialised fields of reporting, such as investigative journalism, needs to be more aggressively promoted.

Encouraging investigative reporting

The techniques of investigative reporting—in-depth, long-term research, the use of public and private records and extensive interviewing—uncover new information vital to the public interest. Investigative journalism has also succeeded in removing abusive officials, catalysing policy reforms and prompting official investigations of wrongdoing. Moreover, it requires honing research and reporting skills, thereby helping address some of the problems of professionalism that cramp the media's capacity to report on complex issues.

In addition, investigative reporting addresses the problem of sensationalism

as it requires in-depth research and sober analysis. It also helps sell newspapers and gives publications a competitive edge. In the end, investigative reporting helps widen the scope of journalistic freedom. By constantly digging for information, by forcing the government and the private sector to release documents, by subjecting officials and other powerful individuals to rigorous questioning, investigative journalists expand the boundaries of what is possible to print or air. These, in turn, buttress the media's ability to play a watchdog role. The better the media are, the more they are able to hold individuals and institutions accountable.

Investigative reporting, however, requires a modicum of freedom and thrives best in democratic regimes. Obviously, it is not possible inside Burma. It may be possible to a limited extent in restricted press systems like those of Malaysia, as long as investigations are initially kept within the bounds of what are considered 'safe' or not overtly political issues such as the environment, consumer rights, women's rights, and health.

In the end, all these efforts—training, organising, lobbying, monitoring and in-depth reporting—contribute to the development of a truly professional corps of Southeast Asian journalists. To be sure, structural obstacles, ranging from strong-arm states to anarchic media markets, will continue to hobble the media's capacity to develop their full potential as an information tool. These problems are formidable and cannot be overcome overnight. But the crisis provides an opening to jump-start reforms. This opportunity should not be missed.

Participants

Aung Moe Maung, Shwe Win Naing (*Burma*); Nariddh Moeun Chhean, Sovann Ou (*Cambodia*); Philip Bowring (*Hong Kong*); Tedjabayu Basuki, Lukas Luwarso, Ati Nurbaiti, Warief Djajanto, Salomo Simanungkalit (*Indonesia*); Somchanh Thanavong (*Laos*); Lay Kim Wang, Rustam bin Abdullah Sani, Jacqueline Ann Surin, Sivaselvam s/o Sambasivam (*Malaysia*); Kunda Dixit (*Nepal*); Eugenia D. Apostol, Walden Bello, Sheila S. Coronel, Melinda Quintos de Jesus, Michael D. Marasigan, Luz Rimban, Horacio Severino, Lorna Kalaw-Tirol, Luchi Cruz-Valdez (*The Philippines*); Henry Tan Hin Teck, Tina Yap Ang Geok, Norman bin Suratman (*Singapore*); Peter James Eng, Thanong Khanthong, Chavarong Limpattamapanee, Rungmanee Mekhasobhon (*Thailand*); Nguyen Thai Thanh, Ho Nguyen Thao (*Vietnam*); Olle Nordberg, Niclas Hällström (Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation, *Sweden*); Yvonne T. Chua, Esther Acosta, Alecks P. Pabico, Eden B. Parot (Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, *The Philippines*).

Appendix

Building A Southeast Asian Alliance for Press Freedom

Statement of Intent

Recognizing the need for independent journalists concerned with preserving, protecting and expanding press freedom in Southeast Asia to band together for mutual benefit, it is the intention of the undersigned individuals, acting on behalf of our organizations, to build an alliance of press freedom advocates committed to the promotion and protection of press freedom in Southeast Asia.

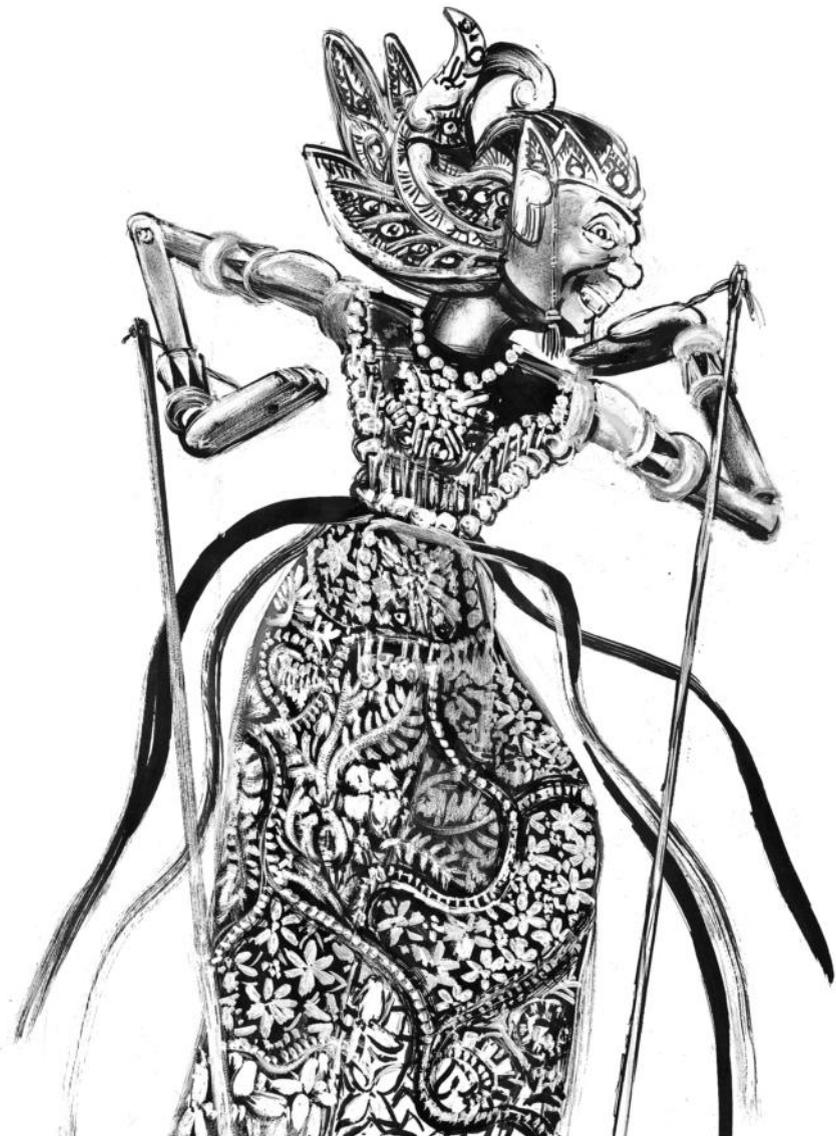
This alliance, to be called the Southeast Asian Press Alliance, shall be governed by a steering committee made up of 6 members, representing each of the founding organizations which sent delegates to Bangkok 7–8 November 1998 for a seminar on ‘Promoting and Monitoring Press Freedom in Southeast Asia’. It is understood that in the future this alliance and its Steering Committee may grow as other independent press freedom organizations seek to join.

Among the activities and projects envisioned by the alliance are:

1. The creation of a working secretariat with a professional staff to be established initially in Bangkok with continual oversight by the Steering Committee.
2. The secretariat will conduct thorough research and documentation of individual cases of attacks on journalists and threats to press freedom in the nine member countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), plus Cambodia.
3. Such research will be shared within the alliance and with the worldwide network of free expression advocates gathered under the umbrella of the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX).
4. In response to abuses of press freedom, the alliance may undertake a variety of actions such as issuing formal letters of concern and protest, making direct representations to governments on behalf of journalists, and conducting in-depth research missions in the field.
5. The alliance may also encourage governments in Southeast Asia to reform repressive media laws, relax restrictions on the exercise of free expression through the media and advocate other positions consistent with our mutual interest in the development of a free and responsible Southeast Asian media culture.

Signed, this 8th Day of November, 1998, in Bangkok, Thailand:

Alliance of Independent Journalists, Indonesia – *Lukas Luwarso*
Institute for Studies in the Free Flow of Information, Indonesia – *Ulil Abshar-Abdalla*
Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, Philippines – *Melinda Q. de Jesus*
Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism – *Sheila S. Coronel*
Reporters Association of Thailand – *Chavarong Limpattamapanee*



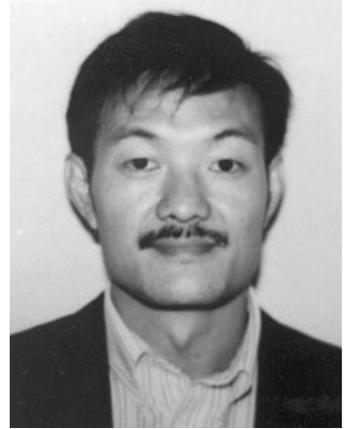
The Democracy Boom

By Peter Eng

The economic crisis that has bedevilled East Asia since mid-1997 has brought widespread misery to the region. Many media organisations have been affected, obliged to tighten their belts and, in some cases, to deal with government pressure on them to toe the line. But as Peter Eng argues in this article, there are still good prospects for the region's media. The crisis has exposed the flaws in the governments of the region; and the growing public clamour for transparency, combined with the diminished control of some leaders on their people, may yet lead to a freer press in some countries. This in turn, can only contribute to a more democratic Southeast Asia.

Indeed, the last decade has seen an upsurge in both the media and democracy in the region, the most prominent cases being those of Thailand and the Philippines, where the media played significant roles in the downfall of oppressive and corrupt governments and are now contributing to keep current administrations in check. At the same time, the restoration of democracy in these two nations has resulted in the strengthening of press freedom. With Thailand and the Philippines showing the way, it may only be a matter of time before the rest of the region—including those countries still under authoritarian regimes—follow suit. Indonesia, in fact, is already halfway there, although Eng cautions that vigilance is needed for its media to fully regain their freedom and for democracy to bloom.

Peter Eng was a former Associated Press correspondent in Bangkok. He is still based in the city and writes mainly on media issues in Southeast Asia.



These are trying times for many journalists in Southeast Asia. Amid national economic crises, newsprint and other costs have soared while advertising revenues have sunk, forcing many news outlets to lay off reporters or close. And authoritarian governments—some of them fighting off pressures from the economic woes—continue to squeeze journalists and sometimes jail them, or worse.

In February 1999, the Malaysian government announced plans to create a team of lawyers to take action against journalists who slander the leadership. In explaining the decision, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who replaced the ousted Anwar Ibrahim as deputy prime minister, showed that the old ways of thinking are very much alive in the region. 'There have been too many instances where individuals take advantage of freedom of speech to make all

sorts of accusations and allegations against the party leaders and the government', he said. 'This unhealthy practice cannot be allowed to go on.'

But there is a more positive side to the story.

Both economic booms and busts have contributed to press freedom in the region. The boom of the 1980s and early 1990s, for instance, fuelled demands by businesses and citizens for more information, and the start-up of many new privately-owned media, especially business media. This trend should start anew when the economies recover. Already, in early 1999, a new business magazine, *Asian Entrepreneur*, was started up in Singapore amid the country's first recession in 13 years.

The boom also expanded the region's middle classes and gave them greater clout in political and social issues. These middle classes are natural allies of the free press.

Meanwhile, by exposing their ineptitude, corruption and cronyism, the economic turmoil since 1997 has undermined governments and their means of control, including their grip on the media. And everyone agrees that economic revival is not possible without greater transparency and freer flow of information.

As importantly, political systems significantly democratised in the Philippines in 1986, Cambodia in 1991–93, Thailand in 1992, and Indonesia in 1998. (Social strictures also have eased to lesser degrees in other countries, including Vietnam.) In Cambodia, one result was that a free press appeared for the first time in two decades. In Thailand, the first broadcast media not controlled by the government and the military started up.

The fall of President Suharto in May 1998 brought Indonesia into the free-press club, and it is now ordinary member: Indonesia has 200 million people, 40 per cent of Southeast Asia's population.

Journalists in the freer countries are becoming active in region-wide media issues. In November 1998, journalists from Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia formed the region's first media freedom watchdog group, the Southeast Asian Press Alliance. And the media are starting to have regional influence. Thai newspapers have become invaluable sources of news and opinion for neighbouring countries where governments restrict journalists, especially Burma and Vietnam. Exiled Burmese activists stay informed on developments inside Burma through the English-language Thai newspapers.

These papers strongly support Burmese dissident leader Aung San Suu Kyi, who has been called a prostitute and a ‘maggot’ by the state-controlled press in her own country.

New transnational media are expanding in the region: print publications, radio stations, cable and satellite TV, and the Internet.

These trends have transformed much of Southeast Asia from a region where the people silently kowtowed to the authorities to one where all groups, government and private, agree that public opinion matters. It is an environment in which journalists, who echo and shape public opinion, increasingly wield real power.

The privately-owned press has boosted democracy in several ways. As institutions outside of governments, they have provided emerging groups with new vehicles for social, economic and political power. That has been true of the newly rich Thais who started business publications in the 1980s and early 1990s and of the new political parties that set up harangue-the-government newspapers in Cambodia after the 1991 peace accord there. Because newspapers mean prestige and clout, big business houses in the Philippines hold on to the newspapers no matter how much money they lose.

The freedom to gather and produce news—assemble an information-gathering team, ask questions, demand answers, ferret out the truth, etc.—is in itself an integral and important part of total freedom in society. But more so than most other institutions in society, the media also can spark other freedoms.

Brave journalists who defied threats and censorship in order to cover protest movements and expose abuses by the authorities played major roles in the watershed pro-democracy uprisings in the Philippines in 1986, Thailand in 1992, and Indonesia in 1998. Journalists are now perhaps the leading guardians of democracy in the Philippines and Thailand. In 1997, Thai newspapers helped bring down an inept government and ensure the passage of a new, more democratic constitution. Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, who was ousted as Prime Minister, called the English-language newspaper *The Nation* ‘my biggest enemy’. The country’s first private broadcast outlet, Independent TV, regularly exposes corruption and abuse by the police and other bureaucrats. It is helping to hold the bureaucracy accountable and protect the people’s rights.

In Thailand and the Philippines, the media have allied with the middle

classes, which likewise demand representative, accountable government and the protection of human, civil and economic rights. The 1992 uprising was Thailand's first revolution led by the middle class. From it emerged a new alliance between the media and the middle class in which each partner has enhanced the power of the other.

The region's models: Thailand and the Philippines

Whatever their faults, the Thai and Philippine media have become models for the region. In both countries, press freedom has become an organic part of society and will last.

It is no longer possible to imagine how the governments there would function without the adversarial press. Journalists have cleared the smoke that obscured the wheeling and dealing of politicians, and forced them to be constantly aware of public scrutiny and public opinion. Journalists now set much of the political agenda, making sure, for example, that the politicians give top priority to economic reforms. Their stories often are the reason why action is taken, policies changed, reforms made. Exposés by papers such as the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* often result in top officials resigning or being sacked. Mostly due to attacks by the media, three Thai governments have collapsed since 1992.

Thailand's experience shows the symbiotic relationship between the media and democratic development. The new democratic constitution was passed despite opposition from the government and the parliament largely because of pressure from the media. In turn, this constitution will enhance media freedom by breaking the state monopoly over broadcast outlets and barring the government from closing media outlets.

In Thailand and the Philippines, citizens think of press freedom as inseparable from democracy, and they will rise to defend it. They rely on the media not only for news as such, but for many other needs and desires in life: to publicise their campaign against construction of a dam, get city officials to clear the garbage piling up on their streets, punish the store that sold them a faulty refrigerator, give them reliable data about their stocks.

'Today the media is essential to Philippine democracy', says Ermin Garcia, erstwhile head of the Philippine Press Institute and now publisher of the *Manila Times*. 'Any talk of censorship or restraint leads to a debate of impending martial law. The media is where the alarm is sounded. You touch the media, any attempt to muzzle or restrain it, then people say democracy is going to die. We saw what martial law did to us. Nobody could speak or write.'

Asked what distinguishes the Philippine media, Garcia replies: 'We're noisy. People don't let up. The president has complained he has not been given the traditional honeymoon. From the first day, we have been very critical of his policies.'

Many top media are staffed by journalists from the middle classes. The media have expanded coverage of 'middle-class issues' such as the environment, social welfare, and women's rights. And they are spreading liberal values in society. During the past two years, by showing how the economy was ruined by inept and corrupt officials who got into power by buying votes or favours, the media have educated citizens about how economy and politics are linked, how the work in government offices affects the quality of their daily lives. In Thailand, the media often act as gadflies, dragooning the consumerism-obsessed middle class into action whenever civil rights are being threatened.

Largely because of the media, new concepts in Southeast Asia—accountability, transparency, rule of law—have quickly become popular demands or at least the rallying cries of demonstrators in the streets. Wrote *Bangkok Post* editor Pichai Chuensuksawadi in an October 1998 editorial: 'The press and other media have become more ardent in their criticism of the country's political leadership, which is, I firmly believe, in tune with the aspirations of the public, who were sick and tired of the serious shortcomings of our political and economic system and its deep-rooted practices of patronage and cronyism.'

'I have been asked why in recent years the Thai press has been quick to call for the resignations of prime ministers', he added. 'The reason is simple: We believe that the time has come for governments and their leaders to be made accountable for their election promises and pledges, that they be made *accountable* for their performance while in power. It is simply not good enough to say: *We have earned the right to govern because we were elected and represent the people*' (italics added).

Every day, journalists chip away at conservative attitudes. At a recent news conference in Bangkok, an up-and-coming young journalist asked a senior official what the government would do about the officials who had caused Thailand's economic crisis. The official was angered by the question. 'Haven't these officials already been hurt enough by the criticism by the media', he said. The journalist was taken aback momentarily, but regained his composure and replied, 'We're not talking about hurting anybody. We're talking about making people accountable for what they did.'

As one sign of the media's maturation in Thailand and the Philippines, editors have shifted their main focus from how to guard press freedom to how to increase professionalism of journalists and stop practices such as bribetaking and sensationalism of stories. Says Thanong Khantong, an investigative business reporter at *The Nation*: 'The government cannot hide information any more. We've moved beyond that. The question is how journalists can interpret that information more intelligently.'

In 1997, journalists from all the major dailies formed the Press Council of Thailand to upgrade standards and ethics. In 1998, the council issued a code of conduct for newspapers. In February 1999, responding to a request from 68 reporters, the council investigated bribery cases involving reporters, including those on the Prime Minister's office beat who allegedly took money from a politician. (Significantly, the allegations were first made not by outsiders, but by fellow journalists, in stories by the news magazine *Siam Rath*, or the weekly magazine of the *Thai Nation*.) The scandal forced three journalists of the *Bangkok Post* to resign. Commenting on the allegations, Kavi Chongkittavorn, the executive editor of *The Nation*, wrote in a February 1999 commentary, 'Thai reporters are still at best amateurish, despite all the hype over their role as a watchdog. ... Serious training for future journalists must be the top priority in all editorial departments.'

Journalists know that bad practices can erode the media's freedom by ruining their reputation and by provoking retaliation, legal and otherwise, from aggrieved parties. This danger is even greater in countries in delicate political transition such as Indonesia and Cambodia.

Struggling before freedom comes

Cambodia would have benefited if it had had some experience with journalistic independence and dissent before it was abruptly handed press freedom. That experience would have made the transition to a democratic press much easier.

In neighbouring Thailand, the state has controlled all the broadcast media since their inception, but the print media always have been relatively free. In May 1992, the Thai television stations broadcast either lies or nothing at all when troops were shooting pro-democracy demonstrators in the streets. But the newspapers depicted all the bloodshed, fuelling public outrage that forced the military-backed government to capitulate within days.

In the Philippines, the media opposed President Ferdinand Marcos right after the 1983 assassination of opposition leader Benigno Aquino Jr. They did

not wait for the government to give them the go-ahead to write what they wished. Even the government-controlled press turned against the government. By the time of the 'People Power' revolution in 1986, the Philippine press had already established itself as a rowdy, opinionated power to be reckoned with.

A similar revolution took place in Indonesia 12 years later, but is still unfinished. Nevertheless, journalists there also have made remarkable progress in a short time—but only because there, too, they persevered against the odds.

After the Indonesian government closed three top news magazines in 1994, one of them, *Tempo*, immediately challenged the order in court. Two courts handed down unprecedented rulings against the government before the Supreme Court upheld the ban. Indonesian journalists did not give up. They formed the Alliance of Independent Journalists, defying the requirement that all journalists belong to a government-sponsored group. The alliance published an underground magazine, *Independen* (Independent), until the authorities closed it and arrested members of the alliance. The alliance restarted the magazine as *Suara Independen* (Independent Voice). The former editor of *Tempo*, Goenawan Mohamad, became a leading voice for free expression. Former *Tempo* writers started a Web site, *Tempo Interaktif*, which set standards for on-line reporting. Dozens of ex-*Tempo* writers took their independent brand of journalism with them to work at mainstream newspapers like the *Jakarta Post* and magazines like *D&R* and *Forum*.

In military-ruled Burma, one of the world's leading enemies of the free press, officials recently ordered newspapers to print articles criticising Suu Kyi. In Communist-ruled Vietnam, a newspaper editor was jailed for a year for reporting on government corruption. But these kinds of blatant interference are relatively rare in the region. The greatest threat to media freedom is not censorship by governments, but self-censorship by journalists.

During the Suharto era, all publications in Indonesia were required to have publishing licences from the government. Afraid to lose that licence, journalists of the mainstream media refrained from criticising the government. Yet while all journalists practised self-censorship, their approaches were very different, says Endy Bayuni, managing editor of the *Jakarta Post*.

'At one end were those who played it safe and wrote to please the powers that be', he recalled in an August 1998 article in the *Asian Wall Street Journal*. 'At the other end were the few who pushed the line that divided what was acceptable from what was not. The line was invisible and changed from

time to time. Editors had to guess its whereabouts by assessing the government's mood. These editors continually tested the line of freedom.'

As these editors tested the line in the mainstream media, hundreds of unlicensed 'alternative media' published by students, non-government organisations (NGOs) and other groups flourished in Indonesia. These publications contributed significantly to the rise and popularity of opposition leader Megawati Sukarnoputri. They reported the abuse, corruption and cronyism of the state; anger at this and economic woes sent tens of thousands of people to the streets and ousted Suharto after 32 years in power. As the tide grew, critical articles even appeared in the largest mainstream daily, *Kompas*. Since Suharto's fall, many new publications have appeared despite the financial crisis, including the restarted *Tempo*.

... and not struggling

In this context, the gloomiest situation has been that of Malaysia. When Anwar was Deputy Prime Minister, he advocated greater freedom for journalists. 'I reject the notion that a free press is alien to Asian society', he said, distancing himself from the 'Asian values' argument of his boss, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad.

When Anwar was sacked in September 1998 and then put on trial on charges of sodomy and corruption, Malaysian journalists were handed a ripe opportunity to support a liberal and to challenge the authoritarian system that has been in place since 1981. And journalists could have supported the thousands of people who took to the streets of Kuala Lumpur and other cities in support of Anwar. The opportunities were not unlike those presented to journalists in the Philippines in 1986, Thailand in 1992 and Indonesia in 1998.

Unlike their counterparts in those countries, however, most Malaysian journalists have bent over backward to toe the government line. When Anwar was in office, the newspapers—all owned or controlled by government parties or associated groups—gave him favourable coverage. After his ouster, these normally staid newspapers paraded lurid stories of his alleged sexual trysts and castigated him as a rabble-rouser. After US Vice President Al Gore recently declared support for Malaysian pro-democracy demonstrators, the newspapers heaped scorn and insults on him. The middle-class intellectuals who lead the pro-Anwar movement have criticised the mainstream media as liars and government lackeys, and have turned to the Internet, where dozens of pro-Anwar and 'independent journalism' sites have bloomed.

In the months before Anwar's dismissal, three senior editors sympathetic to him were sacked. That appeared enough to keep journalists compliant. Some blame media's timidity to the 'culture of careerism'—journalists just do not want to jeopardise their job security.

One Malaysian journalism professor observes that in his 10 years of teaching, his students have become more and more unquestioning and docile. This contentment, he says, was reinforced by the successive years of economic growth that Malaysia had enjoyed until recently.

Says another journalism teacher: 'Younger journalists grew up in a period when media censorship was already entrenched, especially in the mid-80s when a few papers were closed temporarily. The notion of journalists being public surrogates investigating public affairs is somewhat alien to them. Look at the papers—they're full of protocol news and social trivia. There's a deep cultural entrenchment in groupism and stiff hierarchy in social interaction. Malaysian communication behaviour and thought patterns—right from within the family environment to the schools, the community and the government—were never built on a tradition of free expression or open discourse.'

The only guarantee: Civil Society

To be sure, those who have achieved press freedom for themselves find out soon enough that they have made only the first step. As Indonesian journalists now realise, media also require security. It is true that new President B.J. Habibie has eased the restrictions of the Suharto era, and news outlets no longer worry about losing licenses. But reporters probing human rights, corruption, religion, race relations and other issues must consider the possibility of strong reactions from the military, the government, and right-wing Muslims and other groups, particularly as lawlessness has increased. The generals have already accused journalists of meddling in politics and opposing the military. In recent months, many journalists have been beaten by soldiers while covering anti-government student protests. And these student and other groups that call themselves 'pro-democracy' have threatened journalists in order to get them to support their cause.

Indonesian journalists are trying to get their freedom institutionalised, starting with the revocation of the Suharto-era laws. But ultimately, the only guarantee that press freedom will last is the sanctioning of society. After a certain level, it is very difficult for the press to develop if society does not develop alongside it.

‘No amount of constitutional or legal guarantees nor the presence of a strong journalists union will guarantee press freedom, if this concept has not taken root among the people,’ Lukas Luwarso, chairman of the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) in Indonesia, said in a speech at a November 1998 seminar for Southeast Asian journalists in Bangkok.

‘Successive regimes in Indonesia,’ he said, ‘have shown scant regard for constitutional and other legal guarantees, applying rule by law instead of rule of law. In the post-Suharto era, pressure on the media has come not only from the government, but also from those who claim to seek democracy. A society both respecting freedom of expression and able to stand up to the state is clearly a key for effective and guaranteed press freedom. In short, civil society must be developed.’

Civil society is even less developed in Cambodia, a situation reflected in the constant insecurity of the media there. Before UN peacekeepers arrived in 1991, Cambodia had had no press freedom since the 1970s. Because of constant civil conflict, authoritarian rule, poverty and isolation, it had neither trained journalists nor developed any advertising base. The private newspapers that appeared after 1991 could survive only on funding by the political parties and other bigwigs, who have since routinely used the papers to sling libellous and obscene insults at their adversaries.

Journalists who accused the party of Prime Minister Hun Sen of corruption or abuse paid the price. Since 1991, many journalists have been threatened, some jailed, some attacked and half a dozen killed in circumstances suggesting involvement of the authorities. In June 1998, the editor of the newspaper *Koh Santepheap* (Island of Peace) was shot and wounded after he published articles implicating a government official in narcotics trafficking.

In Cambodia, critical journalists do not have the support of either state institutions or the general public—key attributes of the press in developed democracies. No one has been arrested for any of the attacks on journalists, because the government, the police and the courts are weak and corrupt, and because people do not clamour for arrests.

Cambodia’s experience shows that just as a democratic election does not guarantee democratic governance, freedom of the press does not guarantee a democratic press. Other requirements include training of journalists, financial independence of newspapers, and an environment in which rule of law is respected.

But this does not mean press freedom is being wasted in Cambodia. The privately-owned newspapers have ended the monopoly of information by the formerly Communist government. A handful of brave journalists have exposed abuses by officials and soldiers not just in Phnom Penh but also in the countryside, where villagers long had suffered silently without any recourse. They have taught people what their rights are, and motivated them to defend these rights. The newspapers have provided new groups with forums for their grievances and aspirations. These include the opposition political parties, the human rights, social welfare and other non-governmental organisations, the labour unions, students and other groups of the country's emerging civil society. Despite their many flaws, the Cambodian newspapers are helping spread the social habits and values that are the building blocks of democracy.

A new age of transnational media and transnational support

If, as the Malaysian journalism teachers believe, local cultures do indeed hinder press freedom, they are being frayed by Western values that globalisation and information technology are carrying across borders.

The Internet and other transnational media are boosting press freedom and democratic change in Southeast Asia. Southeast Asians are relying on the transnational media for news about their own country particularly during political crises, when their governments corral the local mainstream media. This has been true recently in Malaysia and Indonesia. At the same time, the Internet news lists and discussion groups reach well beyond the small number of people who can afford computers and Internet accounts. Sites are downloaded, printed out, photocopied and distributed in offices, schools, villages and mosques.

Dissident groups use the Internet to make announcements and relay messages in order to organise rallies and other protest activities. Students in Indonesia have done this very effectively before and since the fall of Suharto.

The transnational media are bringing new ideas and moral support from abroad into the region's most closed countries. Radio Free Asia, the British Broadcasting Corporation, the Voice of America and the Democratic Voice of Burma are doing this in the case of Burma. When Vietnam's Doan Viet Hoat, jailed almost continuously since 1976 for his pro-democracy publications, was freed in September 1998, he said upon arrival in the United States that, 'in the past ten years, intellectual and cultural works done by the Vietnamese communities abroad have been infiltrated into Vietnam and have created a great influence on the people, even on many Communist cadres'.

Many of these writings are distributed via the Internet by Vietnamese exiles in the United States, Europe and Australia. The Internet has also succeeded in making once-obscure issues, such as Burma and East Timor, known worldwide and made a part of the international agenda.

Such is the power of information technology that governments must change tactics and learn how to use it, not fight it, says Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew. 'Singapore has managed this relentless flood of information not by blocking the flow but by stating its points of view in competition', he told participants at a conference on Asia-Pacific media that was held in October 1998 in Los Angeles. 'We defend our position in open argument and let our case stand on its own merits. Countries which try instead to block the flow will lose.'

Lee believes that despite the technological changes, the Asian media, which he says must unify societies, will remain different from the media in the United States. Time will tell if he is right.

Certainly, though, support from foreign governments and groups is not only boosting press freedom in Southeast Asia but changing the way journalists perceive their roles and responsibilities.

For several years before Suharto's fall, INDONESIA-L, an Internet news list moderated by a US scholar based in his home country, provided Indonesians with a forum for frank debate and criticism that could not be found elsewhere. Indonesians of all backgrounds anonymously posted their opinions on the list. This debate and criticism contributed significantly to Suharto's fall. The success of INDONESIA-L has encouraged Indonesians living in Indonesia to set up their own Internet lists devoted to every important issue concerning their country. Thus, the media power that had been based abroad has devolved to many more people, and to the Indonesians themselves.

Two newspapers financed and mostly staffed by Americans, the *Phnom Penh Post* and the *Cambodia Daily*, are the only independent media in Cambodia today. They are providing models for the local newspapers on how to follow the principles of neutrality and objectivity rather than the demands of the newspaper's funders, the political parties, and the government.

The Democratic Voice of Burma radio, which broadcasts into one of the world's most closed societies, is financed by Norway. It is staffed by students who fled to the Thai border after the Burmese military massacred protesters in 1988.

Foreign press freedom monitoring groups make a difference. When Indonesian journalist Ahmad Taufik, who had been jailed for publishing an unlicensed magazine, was freed in 1997, he thanked foreign groups that had lobbied for his release, including the International Federation of Journalists, Reporters Sans Frontières, the Committee to Protect Journalists and Human Rights Watch. Taufik said that it was important for him to know, in jail, that he had friends in the outside world. This knowledge, he said, made him confident he was on the right side.

The region's new monitoring group, the Southeast Asian Press Alliance, was formed under the sponsorship of two US-based organisations, the Committee to Protect Journalists and the World Press Freedom Committee.

Western journalists and non-profit groups are training Southeast Asian journalists, even from countries like Burma and Vietnam. They are teaching them not just the 'inverted pyramid' style of writing, but also new ways of observing, questioning and thinking, along with professional ethics.

The future: reasons for optimism

In Southeast Asia, the argument of authoritarian governments that the journalist's role is simply to support the government programmes of 'national development' and 'national unity' remains strong. As Indonesia struggles out of autocracy, the government and the military say that journalists cannot be allowed too much freedom or they will foment social instability. In the context of Indonesia—multi-ethnic, multi-religious, vast, violence-prone and ever more anarchic—this argument is not easy to refute.

But there are reasons for optimism. In recent years, the Southeast Asian media have faced down autocrats. They are not only weathering the regional financial crisis but probably will emerge from it leaner and more professional. In Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia, and in some ways Cambodia, the media have advanced faster than other institutions of democracy such as the judiciary, and are forcing these institutions—and society in general—to keep stride. And Southeast Asia's journalists no longer struggle alone. Where they don't enjoy domestic support, they still have international support. Recent experience proves that their goals can be achieved, and very quickly, especially compared with the stagnancy and regression of previous decades.

The media are enlarging the social and political space even in authoritarian countries that do not face any real threats to their rule, but do face new domestic and international pressures. Since Vietnam began market reforms in

1986, for example, the state media have reported social problems, dissent, and other types of stories that they did not touch before. In some cases, the media were forced to comment on these issues because they were already widely known among people inside Vietnam through reports originally posted on the Internet by Vietnamese living abroad. Recently, the Communist Party's newspaper *Nhan Dan* (The People) reported violent uprisings by Vietnamese peasants against local authorities whom they accused of seizing their land. Whether or not it had its start on the Internet, the fact that this news made it at all into the pages of a state-run publication should be seen as a positive, if small, sign.





Global Media and Empire

By Kunda Dixit

Globalisation has always been a suspect term in the Third World, where it is often assumed to be synonymous with Northern domination. In this article, Kunda Dixit while taking a less categorical view, nevertheless points to the dangers of globalisation. In particular, he takes the example of media transnationals, many of which are mere parts of even bigger business empires spanning the globe.

Clearly, 'borderless' media organisations with almost limitless reach offer certain advantages. The global media have opened up new worlds and new perspectives for Southeast Asian citizens. In repressive regimes, the Internet and cable TV have allowed access to information that is not locally available. But as Dixit observes, the concentration of media ownership in fewer and fewer hands has resulted essentially in news as business and not news as service. The emphasis is no longer on information that is needed, but on news that will sell. At best, it is news that is compromised.

Southeast Asia is only one among the many regions worldwide that are at the receiving end of these media transnationals, especially those with broadcasting components. Worsening the situation is the tendency of many local media to copy the ways of the global 'big boys', in a desperate attempt to keep up with their giant rivals. Thus, writes Dixit, 'the media in many countries have ceased to be a marketplace of ideas, they do not reflect diversity and plurality, and ultimately undermine democracy'.

Kunda Dixit heads Panos South Asia which is based in Kathmandu. He was formerly Asia director of the Rome-based news agency, Inter Press Service. He is the author of Dateline Earth: Journalism as if the Planet Mattered.



Some time in early October 1998, I was listening to the live telecast of Bill Clinton finishing his speech at the Annual Meeting of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) in Washington, DC. As far as I can remember, it was the first time I had heard a US president expressing doubts in public about the process of economic globalisation. Yet, as recently as a few months before, the same president had been euphoric about the universally beneficial balm of US-style market capitalism and the global free market that it drives.

Clinton himself was at that time suffering the power of the globalised media

when the Internet edition of the Starr Report that detailed specifics of oral hygiene got more hits than even live pictures, on the NASA home page, taken by the Pathfinder probe on the surface of Mars. The international global media then carried the steamy scandal involving The Most Powerful Man on Earth to the farthest corners of the planet. Like never before, satellite television news converged with soap opera. In fact, it often became difficult to tell the difference between the infidelity, backstabbing and deceit in the US prime-time sudseries 'Melrose Place' and infidelity, backstabbing and deceit in real-life Washington, DC.

In all this hype of globalisation, it is easy to forget that the foundations of a worldwide free market were actually laid by the colonial powers in the age of European expansion into what is now called the South. China has been resisting globalisation ever since the Opium War, in which Britain arm-twisted the Middle Kingdom for the right to sell Indian opium in the mainland. Is this any different from US pressure today on Beijing to open up its markets, tighten up on intellectual property, loosen up on human rights, if it wants to become a member of the World Trade Organization (WTO)? Or from the bullying the US delegation uses on members of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) that has led the consensus-conscious Southeast Asian states to engage in backroom bickering? In one sense, it can be said that globalisation is imperialism in disguise, and it has the same motive: control over resources and the right of might.

When the East Asian economic crisis began smoldering in 1997, few in the West blamed globalisation. In fact globalisation was put forward as the solution, and the IMF carried on prescribing the same pill whether the patient had an earache or dengue fever. It was only in 1998 when the contagion spread to Russia, hurt exposed European banks, then infected Brazil and finally threatened the US economy that cracks suddenly appeared from within the ideological monolith of globalisation.

For some time now, globalisation has been the dominant discourse and promoted as the mantra of the Third Millennium. The West, the Washington Consensus and even progressive leaders in newly democratic countries in the South swore 100 per cent allegiance to the theology of the global free market. There was no place for doubters here; you were either for it or against it. Those who called for globalisation with a human face were hounded as heretics, called names like 'social fundamentalists', and were not taken seriously. Others like Malaysian Premier Mahathir Mohamad took full benefit from economic globalisation, but blamed it when their totalitarian ways were exposed.

The worldwide integration of free markets, trade, financial flows and information has coincided with unprecedented advances in information technology that has now caught even the remotest corners of the earth in a web of globalisation. On November 1, 1998, the first hand-held satellite phones were to go into operation. These would make point-to-point satellite telephony and global paging systems a reality, bypassing national telecommunications networks. Yet, even as we are inundated by this talk of gigabytes of information whizzing around the world in nanoseconds, we are also distracted from the quality of this crisscrossing information: is it relevant, is it necessary, does it make the world a better place?

Globalisation is not just taking place in economics and the media. Ecological problems such as global warming, ozone depletion, biodiversity loss, the spread of poverty, sex tourism, racism, migration and even pandemics such as HIV/AIDS are all fragments of the globalisation phenomenon. And although globalisation affects everyone, its benefits seem to go mainly to its most vociferous proponents: the dominant powers that simply want to retain their economic and political supremacy. Today, the biggest 500 businesses in the world—which together employ less than 1 per cent of the global workforce—control a quarter of all economic output. And according to the United Nations Development Programme's annual Human Development Report, this disparity is widening. Big transnationals are merging into ever-bigger monopolies with assets that exceed the Gross Domestic Product of many medium-income countries. The entire economic output of Burma, for instance, is the same as Kodak's.

Concentrated control

But it is when you mix free market with international media that you get the 'Great Globaliser'—the vanguard of a consumerist ethos that drives global markets. The world's top five communications conglomerates control more than 40 per cent of the business in the international media. The pattern is for non-media multinationals to buy one big entertainment supplier, one big news network, and an assortment of smaller radio stations, a newspaper chain, a publishing house and a music channel. So, defence contractor General Electric owns NBC, which in turn has combined with Microsoft for an online news channel and together they own a movie archive. Westinghouse, the maker of nuclear power plants, now owns CBS and other home entertainment outlets. Disney, the world's largest media empire, now has ABC. And even before CNN merged with Time/Warner, the group already had HBO and a cartoon channel.

If you want coverage of the international arms trade that exposes the hypo-

crisis of countries that urge disarmament at UN conferences while being one of the biggest exporters of conventional arms, you will not get it in this media. Do not tune in here for in-depth reports on the activities of tobacco multinationals in the Third World. In October 1998, ABC spiked an investigative story on alleged staff irregularities in Disneyland.

The more dangerous trend is that fewer and fewer people today control the information we get, and they are setting the agenda for the rest of the world: how we should behave, what we should buy, which credit card we use, what movies we cannot afford to miss, what we should feel outraged over. They are telling us Saddam Hussein is a crook, free trade is great, and it is OK for 20 per cent of the world's population to consume 85 per cent of its resources.

Media concentration is not just happening in the United States. There are homegrown sultans of satellite in Indonesia, Korea, Japan and India. And not all of them have been content to stay within the borders of their respective countries. Before the crisis, Thai media tycoons were looking overseas and talking about ever widening satellite footprints. The powerful M Group of corporate magnate Sonthi Limthongkul had also linked up with the Lao government in the LaoStar satellite project.

Wherever they are based, however, media moguls have copied global trends towards corporate media tie-ups and their surefire formula for success. News Corporation's Rupert Murdoch discovered long ago that you can make more money with entertainment than you ever can with news and current affairs. He also discovered that in Asia, although English brings prestige, the real jackpot is local language broadcasting. This is why the main money-spinners on his STAR TV Network are its Mandarin and Hindi broadcasts. Murdoch even dumped the offending BBC English news channel from his northern feed to appease officialdom and protect his coveted hold on the mainland Chinese market.

Broadcasting, especially, has turned into a supranational industry with the concentration of media ownership worldwide into fewer and fewer hands. The result of this trend is the global media's monoculture message, which is doing to cultural variety what economic globalisation and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources have done to the world's biodiversity. This commercialisation has transformed the content of television programming available to Asians. Today, what young people in Asia think, the way they dress, what they eat, how they talk, what they want to be when they grow up is, by their own admission, largely shaped by what they watch on cable or dish.

And it is not all bad. Thanks to cable television, there is a new ethnic chic sweeping the middle class. Music television has not been dominated by US pop as was originally feared; in fact, it has made local music more popular than anyone had imagined. Television has widened the horizons of today's youth far beyond that of previous generations. Television may portray an unattainable lifestyle, but at least it shows people what is possible. In repressed societies, television has the power to bypass official controls, and (as in Indonesia recently) tell people what is actually happening in their own country. It also makes the people in such societies feel less disconnected from the outside world; when Murdoch unceremoniously dropped BBC World from his network, among those who felt serious Beeb withdrawal pangs were avid watchers in Cambodia and Vietnam.

The media free market

Yet, because broadcasting is big business and the stakes are high, the motto of its owners is: Give the public what we think the public wants, not what it really needs. The trend is therefore towards escapist entertainment, wall-to-wall music on FM, several competing cable channels with 24-hour movies, and when there is news, it is more like 'newszak'. Where there is local language programming, there is the same mindless mix of game shows and soaps—I suppose it doesn't really matter if your junk food is Western or Oriental, it is still junk food. The few quality channels and programmes are almost drowned out amid this background radiation of industrial entertainment.

In countries where the media are still under strict official control, they have a big credibility problem. In current affairs, there seems to be little difference between the one-sided propaganda of government stations and the sterile non-controversial, say-nothingness on commercial ones. This is the tested formula of conveyor belt of news: churning out relentless factuality and political talking heads—easy to produce and cheap to fill airtime with, especially if it can be repeated on the hour every hour. And as government subsidies to state broadcasters dry up in many Asian developing countries, government radio and television have been forced to compete with commercial channels and mimic their content. It is getting more and more difficult to distinguish between the two.

Just as the print media are fighting a losing battle against broadcasting, television and FM have abdicated their public service role. The result is that the media in many countries have ceased to be a marketplace of ideas, they do not reflect diversity and plurality, and ultimately undermine democracy. This media free market treats the audience as 'consumers rather than citi-

zens'. There must be a way out of this Catch 22 of media economics that forces us to assume that quality programming necessarily requires more money. Or that the trashier the content, the higher the ratings. Or that the print media must imitate the high-graphics *USA Today* formula, go glossy and tabloid to survive.

As the globalised media becomes more and more commercial, there is a growing backlash against market control. Four or five entertainment conglomerates have become the main suppliers of cultural products that propagate the relentless novelty, perpetual growth and instant gratification that have perhaps contributed in some measure to the global economic crisis.

A lot of the opposition to corporate commercialism in the media comes from conservative and fundamentalist forces in our countries. The Taleban, the white supremacist groups in the United States or conservative guardians of society's morals in Singapore are on the same side in this struggle against what they all see as global television's secular valuelessness, unbridled consumerism or moral ambiguity. The other resistance comes from the growing moves in many Asian countries and across the world to revive the media's role of encouraging debates in the public sphere, to make readers, listeners and viewers participants rather than remain just passive consumers. These efforts are not yet very well organised, there are isolated groups fighting lonely battles in what has been called a war against 'the State and the United States'.

When economic globalisation and its media arm leave more and more people out of loop, it increases the gap not only between North and South, but also within countries. The domestic elite that has been able to take advantage of free trade and communications is doing well; others are falling behind. And what global television brings to their living rooms is a lifestyle they can only dream about, products they do not really need and cannot afford, but are told are essential for status. The sale of 'Fair and Lovely' skin whiteners in South Asia, for instance, has shot up since the company that manufactures it started advertising on cable. When globalisation marginalises more people, frustration can turn to revolt. It is already happening—much of what we call 'fundamentalism' and militancy have little to do with religion, they are the beginning of a backlash against globalisation. They are uprisings against an uncaring elite and a soulless global culture.

Dealing with the Big Boys

But, let us face it: We are outnumbered and outgunned by the combined forces of Big Money and Big Government. Public radio and television in

Asia have to think strategically and opt for guerrilla tactics rather than engage in a bruising conventional war. Contradictory as it may seem, the state and the market should not be seen as enemies. Alternative media are in the business of making themselves redundant by bringing the state and commercial broadcasters into the public sphere. The idea is to show that quality can find sponsors, and set new standards. As one US media veteran once put it: 'The real miracle of television is when it's used to make us think.'

Then again, cultural imperialism is also a convenient catchphrase used by pundits in inward-looking countries to raise their fists at the sky to denounce satellite broadcasts while they keep state-controlled broadcasters in their firm grip, or allow it to go completely commercial. The centre-periphery gap in the global media is replicated by state media monopolies and commercial media within Southeast Asian countries and in the region. We denounce foreign attempts to buy into domestic media. But the quality of our own programming is sloppy, irrelevant or one-sided.

To be sure, satellite television has also given space for much more local content. And at the dawn of the digital television age, which will bring 350 channels into each home, we will be sure to see a further fragmentation of the market with a lavish choice of channels. On the one hand, there will be much more space for diversity to be aired, for pluralism to find a voice. But on the other hand these signals will be buried under a global haystack of trivia.

Television's coming convergence with computers and telecommunications is already revolutionising the nature, speed and accessibility of information. It will further aggravate the present information overload so that while we may think we live in the world of information, more and more of it on the Internet will be of little use in working out answers to global problems or defining lifestyles suited to a planet with finite resources. The fact that computer ads have started resembling automobile commercials provides further proof that information technology is targeted for the privileged few. There is the same obsession with design, speed and the call for a spirit of adventure. The planned obsolescence of cars has its parallel in the never-ending cycle of annual software and hardware upgrades, which in the end perpetuate the gap between the knows and the know-nots. Added up, the corporate values that drive information technology are the same ones that messed up the earth.

But despite all this, the consensus about information technology is that 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em'. It is better to ride the tiger than be eaten up by

it. Across the world, activists, dissidents, freedom fighters and national liberation movements have taken to the inherent anarchy of the Internet, its decentralised nature and its relative freedom from official control. The Zapatista guerrilla leader, Subcommandante Marcos gives interviews via the Internet from his jungle hideout in southern Mexico. Neo-Maoists from the Philippines to Nepal and Peru today wage low-intensity war from the thickets of cyberspace. What the fax machine was to China during the Tiananmen uprising, the Internet is today in Indonesia, Malaysia, Tibet, East Timor and to a lesser extent Burma.

One of the casualties of the East Asian economic crisis was 'Asian values'. While Asian values had gained respectability as the region grew and prospered, they suddenly took a bad knock. We may say this is one of the more positive outcomes of the Asian crisis. Asian values never really reflected the diversity of culture and values within Asia, the region's differing political cultures, different ownership and roles of the media, varying degrees of state control and wide disparity in the maturity of the press. And we have to take heart from the fact that it is the countries with the freest press—Thailand and the Philippines—that have come through the crisis most intact. The brittle dictatorships that have survived, from the capitalist authoritarianism of Malaysia and Singapore to Stalinist Burma, have not yet learned the lesson.

The challenge for Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia today is a museum of different media models for ownership and control, and can be divided into three broad categories:

Direct state control

In Burma, Vietnam and Laos, the media are monopolised by the state and serve as the propaganda arm of the ruling party, reflecting its concerns. The media are used as a crude public address system to disseminate party doctrine, to run down dissidents or detained leaders, lash out at human rights groups, exhort workers and peasants to greater heights of achievement. There is no need for censorship here, since everyone knows what is untouchable. Outside Southeast Asia, another example of this is China.

Licensing control of private media

This is the Singapore model, and is practised also in Malaysia and till recently in Indonesia. Although television and radio are largely state-owned, the print media are in the hands of the private sector. However, strict licensing laws, and the uncertainty of annual renewal makes more media companies careful not to ruffle official feathers for fear of losing their profitable media businesses. Singapore's SPH, which publishes the *Straits Times*, is

one of the most profitable news organisations in the region. Satellite dishes are banned, and the government has privatised one of its domestic channels to give people an alternative. Even so, competing power centres have used the print media for exposés that have usually been quashed.

Free-for-all press

The freedom enjoyed by countries like Thailand and the Philippines has sometimes been called 'the freedom of the wild ass'. Lee Kwan Yew liked to run it down, saying it was keeping these countries backward. Tabloid journalism thrives not just in print but on television and FM, which show signs of extreme commercialisation. But there are also indications that profitable media ventures are averse to rocking the boat, and if they do critical exposés, it is usually of a rival business house. The Thai press has maverick media tycoons whose eyes were set on going regional, but these dreams have been shattered by the economic crisis.

The trend throughout the region has been that of the domestic media and state broadcasters forced to be more commercial to compete with satellite. The media, even in the freest countries, are therefore squandering their potential to be an agent of positive change, to preserve a diversity of views, to give a voice to the minorities, and to serve as a feedback mechanism for policymaking in a democracy. Television and radio have generally abdicated their responsibility to take on an educational role, while cable serves mostly as a home movie screen.

But Southeast Asia is perhaps one region of the world where the public awareness and educational aspects of the media are more urgently needed than anywhere else. The economic crisis has taught us a lesson that our models of growth were fashioned after the same wasteful extravagance and reckless abuse of nature that some in the North have now come to realise were not sustainable. The global media, entertainment and commercials which we copy still portray this as the lifestyle to aspire for.

But while awareness about these issues has now spread in the West, we in Asia have been brainwashed by the media into aping the worst and most wasteful decadence. And as Asia's huge population gets richer and consumes more, it is becoming the locomotive for global growth. In their quest to keep economies growing faster than their populations so that there are enough jobs, food and income, many Asian countries are making the mistake of promoting unsustainable growth.

Media trainers, journalists and governments in the Southeast Asian region

must see the media's role as being something beyond profits, and they need to give public broadcasting a new beginning. Already, the industrialisation of culture and the incursion of global mainstream values make street corners in Jakarta, Manila or Bangkok indistinguishable from each other. The media must be a part of the solution in correcting this; otherwise they will be a part of the problem.

The Burmese Way to Muzzle Dissent

Based on a paper by Khin Maung Win

Until the late 1980s, Burma did not figure greatly in the consciousness of the international public. The former British colony had shut itself off from the rest of the world as far back as 1962, when General Ne Win seized the reins of power and, with the backing of the military, proceeded to take the country on what he called the 'Burmese Way of Socialism'. This euphemism turned out to be an excuse to repress and abuse the people of Burma. Today, as the country tries to integrate itself once more into the international community, such abuses continue under a military junta that shrinks from almost nothing in its determination to retain absolute control.

This article by Khin Maung Win describes how one of the most effective weapons used by the junta to keep its opponents—and the Burmese people—in check is its strict control of the media. The press and broadcast media have been reduced to mouthpieces of the military government. Not content with that, the junta that now calls itself the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC) has passed various laws designed to thwart the spread of information, and has even outlawed the ownership, without permission, of fax machines, copiers and computers. However, the junta has found that even the threat of long-term jail sentences and torture will not stop believers in democracy from trying to free the flow of information.

Khin Maung Win is a Burmese exile living in Bangkok. He is currently feature programme editor of the Democratic Voice of Burma, a radio station that beams clandestine broadcasts to Burma.



In 1962, General Ne Win seized power in Burma and installed a totalitarian regime. One of his first acts as the country's ruler was to hold a press conference, presumably to try to rationalise what he and his military cohorts had just done. But the queries of the veteran journalists who came to the conference so vexed him that Ne Win cursed, stood up and kicked his chair. He then furiously marched out of the room.

That marked the end of press freedom in Burma. Then again, most of the freedoms the Burmese had enjoyed in the post-independence era were as good as gone once the military took control of the government.

Ne Win stepped down in 1988, and was succeeded by other generals. That year also saw civil unrest take place, which gave an excuse for the military to stage a pseudo coup that only ensured its continued hold on government. Calling itself the State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC), the military promised that it would allow the organisation of opposition parties, which could then run in the 1990 parliamentary elections.

The elections did take place, but the results were not to the military rulers' liking: The opposition National League for Democracy (NLD) party won a narrow victory. The SLORC refused to recognise the election results; instead it launched a major crackdown on the opposition, jailing NLD leaders and supporters.

Today, the junta is known as the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC). But whether it is called the Burma Socialist Program Party or SLORC or SPDC, Burma's military has always made sure it has the country's media in its tight grip. There have been two main results of this situation. One, it has helped tremendously in the containment and intimidation of the opposition democratic movement, thereby making the junta more entrenched as the absolute power in Burma. Two, total media control has enabled the military rulers to hide the enormity of the human rights violations perpetrated against their own people—crimes regarded by many as among the worst in the world.

Untold numbers of opposition politicians and student activists in the forefront of the struggle against the military junta have been jailed and tortured to death. Extrajudicial killings have become a common and acceptable practice for authorities to eliminate the opposition democratic movement. Women are subjected daily to sexual harassment by the military. Millions of people are suffering from forced relocation and forced labour.

These atrocities are all taking place in Burma in the absence of independent and free media. Even though international media and human rights organisations have attempted to monitor what has been taking place there since 1988, they have been unable to present a picture that is complete and accurate. If only to prevent the worsening of human rights abuses in Burma, the task of improving the flow of information from within the country to the international community is not only essential, it is also urgent.

Press freedom in Burma in the past

That some Burmese journalists and writers continue to try circumventing the country's oppressive laws—at great personal risk—is a testament to

their bravery as well as to the country's more illustrious, pre-junta past. Even King Mindon, who ruled Burma in the 19th century, had the wisdom to recognise the value of freedom of expression. It was during his reign that Burma had its first newspaper, and Mindon made it a point to proclaim his kingdom as a place that respected press freedom.

Burma became a province of British India in 1886 and remained under colonial rule for most of the next 62 years (the British gave Burma its own constitution in 1937, but granted independence only in 1948). Yet, all throughout that period and during the post-independence administration of Prime Minister U Nu, press freedom continued to be a much revered right in Burma.

This stopped under a regime that declared freedom of expression possible only if it was 'within the accepted limits of the Burmese Way of Socialism'. Shortly after the 1962 coup, all privately run publications including newspapers, journals and magazines were closed down by the country's military rulers. That action completed the process of censorship. What were left of the media became mere mouthpieces of the military government. For good measure, though, a Press Scrutiny Board (PSB) was set up to monitor and censor publications, including journals. The authorities also jailed many journalists, writers and artists whose works were perceived as disrespectful or critical of the government and those in power.

But the return of Daw Aung San Suu Kyi to Burma in the late 1980s marked a turning point in the country's modern history. It was to care for her ailing mother that the daughter of the late U Aung San, leader of Burma's independence movement, came back to her homeland. Suu Kyi, however, turned out to be what the opposition had been waiting for: someone charismatic enough to head the fight for democracy, a credible and well-loved figure around whom they could rally.

By the summer of 1988, Burma was witnessing peaceful demonstrations calling for reforms. And after so many decades of making do with state-owned media, the Burmese were once again reading private newspapers and all sorts of publications that were suddenly in circulation. But that reacquaintance with freedom of expression proved too brief. In September of that year, the military staged its bloody pseudo-coup. Several months later, Suu Kyi herself was placed under house arrest. By then, other oppositionists had already been rounded up and imprisoned.

Many journalists and writers also landed in jail, including U Win Tin, former editor of two daily newspapers and vice-chair of Burma's Writers Associa-

tion, and prominent writer Maung Thaw Ka. U Win Tin, who had been sentenced to three years of hard labour in 1989, is still in prison. Reportedly in ill health, his sentence was extended to 11 years after he was convicted of smuggling out letters describing the dismal conditions at the Insein Prison. Maung Thaw Ka, meanwhile, has died in detention.

These days, the Burmese media are used exclusively to explain state policies and inform the people of only those facts the military deems beneficial for the public to know. Reduced to being mere cogs in the government propaganda machine, the media are used extensively to denigrate the opposition movement (see Appendix A). At the same time, restraint of freedom of expression and the restriction of the flow of information within Burma continue to deteriorate as the junta attempts to shut down all possible information sources.

A long list of don'ts

For the junta, dissent must be quashed by all means possible, including ways that border on the ridiculous. The State monitors telephone conversations as well as written correspondence of selected individuals. Anyone caught with an unauthorised publication ends up behind bars. Among these banned writings are the regional news magazine *Far Eastern Economic Review* and books on Marxism and communism—which is ironic for rulers who at one point labelled themselves ‘socialist’. In 1998, some NLD members were also arrested for distributing leaflets that contained an appeal by Suu Kyi.

At the same time, the PSB has been busy blackening out offending paragraphs, titles, captions and pictures in the few magazines and newspapers that are still in circulation (the rare foreign publications allowed in also pass through state censors). Sometimes, the PSB resorts to simply ripping out pages that contain stories it does not want the public to read. In one particularly ‘memorable’ piece of PSB handiwork in 1995, an issue of the popular magazine *Thintbawa* was released with more than a third of its 160 pages missing, its cover a black mess. According to some sources, what the censors did not want the public to read was actually a reprint of an award-winning piece on the first student boycott during the colonial era. Any mention of boycotts—past, present and future—apparently makes the junta nervous.

Then there are the draconian laws, which are interpreted by courts that without exception obey the directives of the military government. The 1962 Printers and Publishers Registration Act plays a major role in the prevention of the flow of information and of the silencing of people seeking to exercise

freedom of expression. The Central Registration Board was formed under this Act, which says all publications (including 'religious manuscripts') must be submitted for scrutiny by the Board.

The Act has been used mainly for censorship of authors, editors, publishers and distributors and to blacklist writers perceived as critics of the government. Those found guilty of violating its provisions can be given a maximum seven-year jail term and/or a fine of up to 30,000 kyat (about USD 4,500 according to the official exchange rate).

The Official Secrets Act, meanwhile, constitutes the offence of handing over classified state documents of national interest to unauthorised persons. The law, however, fails to provide a detailed definition of what a 'state document' is, a convenient oversight for the authorities. NLD Vice Chairman U Kyi Maung was charged with violation of this law and sentenced to three years imprisonment. In 1998, NLD MP Daw San San Nweh, then already serving a 10-year prison sentence, was sentenced to serve 25 more years in jail. According to the court, she violated the Act when she gave a series of interviews to international media organisations, including the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC Burmese Service).

There is also the 1985 Video Act, which says those involved in making, copying or distributing even amateur videos of the NLD, rallies and even foreign news reports on Burma can be imprisoned for up to three years. Among those who are already in jail for violating the Video Act are U Kyaw Khin, an NLD MP from the Shan State who allegedly copied and distributed videos made by the foreign media, and U Win Htein, an aide of Suu Kyi who, the authorities said, compiled an anti-government video.

Indeed, while the rest of Burma seems to be suffering from a time warp, the country's legislation has kept up with the latest in communication technology. For years now, a Computer Law has been in effect, prohibiting any inhabitant of Burma from owning computers, modems, fax machines, or photocopiers without government approval. Foreigners staying in Burma are not exempt from this law. In April 1996, James Leander 'Leo' Nichols, an Honorary Consul to Burma of Denmark, Norway, Finland and Switzerland, was arrested for owning unauthorised fax machines and copiers. The 65-year-old businessman, who was a close friend of Suu Kyi, was sentenced to three years in prison, but he died in jail two months after his arrest.

Of course, a totalitarian government need not have all its rules in black and white. And one such unwritten law says no Burmese is free to meet foreign

journalists. Any citizen found to be providing information to an international news organisation may expect punishment from the authorities. In addition, the government apparently frowns on meetings between any citizen and officials of the United Nations, of which Burma has been a member since the country became independent. In 1998, activists found themselves in trouble with authorities after attempting to meet with the UN Commission on Human Rights Special Rapporteur on Burma, Judge Rajsoomer Lallah.

The junta also carefully picks the visitors it lets into the country. Journalists are usually among those who are not welcome. The few who are allowed in are almost always part of 'promotional tours' arranged by the junta's overseas-based PR firms, and are made to follow certain conditions. In April 1998, a group of journalists invited by the SPDC to assess the progress of the government's anti-drug drive were told that they were not to meet with Suu Kyi, who in 1991 was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

The clandestine media

The junta has been hard at work trying to present a positive picture of Burma to outsiders. It had begun this task in the late 1980s, when the junta decided it was time to reintroduce Burma to the rest of the world, which it had shut out during the reign of Ne Win. One of its first moves to refurbish its tarnished image was to change the country's name to Myanmar. It also employed the services of US lobbying firms so as to convince the international community that change was taking place.

Some transnational corporations could not resist the urge to take advantage of Burma's famous—and relatively untapped—treasure trove of natural resources. Soon, French, South Korean, Singaporean, Thai, US and even Chinese companies were doing business in Burma. Today, Burma is even part of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), which had kept the country out for decades because of concerns about the junta's human rights record.

Yet the junta has been unable to hide completely what is really happening in Burma. To be sure, an underground communications network had already been in place for years, through which information and data regarding the real state of affairs was passed on to interested citizens, as well as the Bangkok-based foreign media. This was partly why Thai newspapers were the first foreign media to inform the international community about Burma after the 1988 nationwide uprising. The Thai press still performs that task, and remains a reliable source of Burma news.

Burma support groups, human rights organisations and Burmese opposition groups have provided another avenue for the flow of information by producing their publications in both Burmese and English. And despite the stringent laws, a number of Burmese language magazines have appeared and act as a forum for freelance journalists and independent writers. More often than not, articles critical of state policies have been published, despite the risk of punishment, by these magazines.

In recent years, the Internet has become vital in the dissemination of information regarding Burma. That the junta now maintains its own Web page to counter what is being said online by the Burmese democracy movement and their supporters is proof that the latter's Internet strategy has been effective enough to unnerve the generals.

But while members of the international community are able to visit these Web sites, most Burmese do not have access to a computer—authorised or otherwise—much less the Internet. Fortunately for the Burmese public, there is still the radio to turn to. Although the junta uses the medium as one of its propaganda tools, it has been unable to ban all radio signals that may come from different parts of the world at any time. True, authorities have made a habit of trying to jam radio signals of foreign broadcasting stations. But they are not always successful, and more and more Burmese are turning to foreign radio stations broadcasting in the Burmese language to know what has been going on in their own country.

In truth, the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), the Voice of America (VOA) and the All India Radio (AIR) were among the crucial players during the 1988 nationwide uprising. Nowadays, the Norway-based Democratic Voice of Burma (DVB), which was set up in 1992, and Radio Free Asia (RFA-Burma Service), which began broadcasting in 1997, are gaining an increasing audience among the people of Burma. These radio stations provide a direct outlet for the democratic movement and for information otherwise withheld by the SPDC.

Strengthening the Voice of Freedom

But all these cannot make up for true freedom of expression and of the press in Burma. And so long as these two freedoms remain absent, Burma's military rulers will go on committing human rights violations with little fear of reprisal from the country's people as well as from the rest of the world. The junta needs only to look across the border to see the effects of a free press. There in neighbouring Thailand, the local media had contributed largely to the downfall of the autocratic regime of General Suchinda Kraprayoon in 1992.

To hope for the emergence of independent media in Burma, however, is wishful thinking at this point. For the military knows that the day it lets the media free is the day its hold on power will begin to weaken.

But that does not mean nothing can be done. Clearly, help can and should be given to the clandestine media that the Burmese—and the international community—have come to rely on. For example, the DVB might be able to make a bigger contribution to the fight for democracy in Burma, if it could have a relay station in Asia. Right now, the effectiveness of the Norway-based DVB is being hampered by weak signals.

Any kind of aid for the likes of the DVB, the many underground publications and Web sites maintained by the Burmese democratic movement is bound to make a difference in the fight to get the truth out about Burma. Considering the current situation inside Burma, the burden of assisting these media lies with the international community, especially in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). More than ever, now is the time to put to work the famous ASEAN creed of cooperation.

Appendix A

MYANMAR JUNTA STEPS UP ATTACKS AS OPPOSITION GROUP MARKS MILESTONE

Yangon, SEPT. 27 (AFP) – Myanmar’s military government stepped up its offensive against Aung San Suu Kyi’s main pro-democracy opposition party Sunday as it marked the 10th anniversary of its founding.

The state-controlled media carried commentaries and reports attacking the National League for Democracy (NLD) party as illegal and working with foreign backers to stir up ‘anarchy and unrest’ in Myanmar.

Witnesses and the media said a crowd of some 20,000 people in the central Myanmar city of Mandalay had packed a sports stadium Saturday, a day before the party’s anniversary, to protest against the opposition group.

The rally was organised by the ruling military and followed a similar event in Yangon last week, residents said.

A commentary in the state-mouthpiece *New Light of Myanmar* newspaper Sunday

said speakers at the Mandalay demonstration charged the NLD with destabilising the country. 'These people expressed their disgust at what is being done by the NLD and their external cohorts to lay obstacles in the path of progress that the current leadership has made together with the entire people.'

About 20,000 people, mostly civil servants, packed a sports stadium east of Yangon on Thursday in a rally to show their support for the junta and denounce the NLD.

The rallies have been among the junta's most visible efforts to encounter mounting pressure from the NLD demanding the convening of a parliament elected in 1990 and which the military has not allowed to sit.

The crowd in Yangon backed calls to protect 'peace and stability' in the military state, and denounced the pro-democracy opposition and other 'destructionists'.

The NLD anniversary is expected to be marked by party faithful in a low-key fashion. 'We have not been invited on this occasion, which is indicative of what scale of ceremony it's going to be', one diplomat told AFP on Saturday.

Diplomats said it was possible the occasion would be used to further the opposition's political agenda, including its demand for parliament to be convened. But NLD leaders have remained tightlipped on their plans.

The party has said more than 1,000 members have been detained since the demand for parliament was made in May. Opposition groups, including the Thailand-based exiled government, said it is the harshest crackdown on dissidents since the brutal suppression of student demonstrations by the military in 1988.

The *New Light of Myanmar* denounced opposition claims that the call for a parliament was backed by ethnic minorities which had formerly signed cease-fires with the junta.

Myanmar's embassy in Washington earlier said the groups had 'withdrawn all statements that might be misconstrued as supporting the NLD's illegal move'.

Exiled opposition groups have said the retractions were made under heavy pressure and threats by the junta. The NLD, founded shortly after the junta crushed a nascent student movement and imposed martial law, proved an instant threat in one form or another to the generals in power since 1962.

Leaders Aung San Suu Kyi, daughter of national independence hero Aung San, and ex-defence minister Tin Oo, who had been jailed for four years from 1976 for failing to report an assassination plot against former dictator Ne Win, quickly began attracting large crowds at rallies throughout Myanmar. The junta reacted by placing them under house arrest in July 1989, less than a year after Aung San Suu Kyi made her maiden political speech calling for democratic reform and respect for human rights.

Tin Oo was subsequently given three years with hard labour. Despite these setbacks, the NLD managed to win 392 of the 485 seats in the fray in 1990.

Aung San Suu Kyi, the party's general secretary, was released from house arrest in 1995, but her movements are still strictly controlled. The NLD's latest move was the setting up of a parliamentary committee on September 16, which it claims has the support of more than half the MP's elected in 1990 to act as a de-facto parliament.

Appendix B

Media Release
October 6, 1998

BURMESE TROOPS RAPE WOMAN AND HER MOTHER IN FRONT OF HUSBAND

Burmese soldiers raped a woman and her mother in Karen State in eastern Burma in front of the woman's husband, according to a villager from Engyi village in Kawka-reik Township.

The crime took place in the morning of August 17, when four soldiers from Light Infantry Regiment 546 arrived at the house of Ma Myint Khaing in Engyi village in Kawka-reik. The soldiers arrested and bound Ma Myint Khaing's husband for no apparent reason.

The four soldiers then raped 23-year-old Ma Myint Khaing and her 51-year-old mother Daw Aye Sein in the presence of Ma Myint Khaing's husband. The victim dare not report the crime for fear of retribution from the army.

The four soldiers are Corporal Zaw Latt, Private Maung Soe, Win Naing and Than Hteik.

Ma Myint Khaing had given birth to a baby only two days before the crime. As a result of the ordeal she went through, Ma Myint Khaing became mentally ill. Latest reports indicate she is still receiving medical attention in Kyondo.

All Burma Students' Democratic Front (ABSDF) Foreign Secretary Aung Naing Oo said that Burmese troops consider rape to be a 'special privilege' of military service.

'In addition to killing innocent villagers and pillaging villages, Burmese soldiers and officers alike gang-rape helpless women, often in the presence of their husbands or relatives. We have never known a case in which the violators are charged and brought to justice.'

On the same day of the rape of Ma Myint Khaing, Major Tin Aye and four other soldiers from the same regiment also raped Naw Saywa and one other woman at Nophado village. Naw Saywa's husband was killed by being stabbed with a bayonet fourteen times for resisting arrest.

Regiment 546, which is based in Kyondoe and is under the command of Burma's Southeastern Military Region, is notorious for various forms of human rights abuses in the area including rape, killing, looting and confiscation of private property.

Earthrights International, in its 1998 report 'School for Rape', described rape by the Burmese Army as an institutionalised practice. 'In Burma, rape serves as gratification for the Burmese soldiers' desire for revenge against the ethnic insurgent fighters.'

ALL BURMA STUDENTS' DEMOCRATIC FRONT



Malaysia: Ownership as Control

By Wang Lay Kim

There was never a doubt in the mind of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia that the mass media had a vital role to play in the realisation of the country's ambitious development plans. The media was expected to project a positive image of the country and thus lure in investors to stimulate the economy. That the Malaysian media seemed to see little wrong in this and took care to toe the official line was tolerated for many decades by the public. After all, by the 1990s, Malaysia had become one of Southeast Asia's tiger economies, with consistently high annual growth rates.

But when the currencies in the region began to crash in July 1997, Malaysia was one of those to hit the dust hard. The local media stuck to the script provided by authorities, but more and more Malaysians began to tire of their persistently optimistic prognosis. Unfortunately, the local media were in no position to do otherwise, even when the economic turmoil spawned a serious political crisis that eventually led to the downfall of the popular Deputy Premier and Finance Minister Anwar Ibrahim.

In her contribution, Wang Lay Kim, a mass communications lecturer at the Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, explains in detail how the mainstream press in Malaysia ended up being monopolised by the member parties in the country's ruling coalition. As for the broadcast sector, Wang writes that the concentration of media ownership in the hands of businessmen with close ties with those in power became 'even more rampant' when the industry was privatised, thereby ensuring that the voices of Malaysia's leaders would always drown out everyone else's. Repressive laws, including the dreaded Internal Security Act, complete the muzzling of mainstream media—and the denial of access to accurate and timely information in Malaysia.

The balance inherent in democracy requires the creation of both these new conditions: freedom to do and freedom to answer, as an active process between many individuals. One clear way of ensuring a balance between freedom and responsibility is to make sure that as many people as possible are free to reply and criticise. Responsibility is then not only a thing we ask other people to maintain. It is what we ourselves exercise, by the right to reply, the right to criticise and compare, and the right to distribute alternatives. All these rights exist in our society, in a general way. Yet many of the institutions of communication are so large and powerful that they become, in their way, separate empires. Individuals and organisations are free to criticise them, but such criticisms can easily be isolated and set aside as unrepresentative or even irresponsible (in fact, for lack of information, it sometimes is irresponsible in the sense that it is wrong). The question is whether we can find ways of ensuring free and responsible comment and criticism, and of distributing the actual range of work.

Raymond Williams, *Communications* (1962)

It has been well acknowledged that freedom of information and expression is vital in nurturing a civil society. It is a further accepted fact that the mass media are an essential means of transmitting adequate amounts of accurate information to enable the citizens to engage in rational discussion and make informed choices.

Most developing nations, however, react in a paternalistic, perhaps even authoritarian, way towards the media. The ruling elite very often rationalises that control of the communication process is a necessary evil, done to protect the interest of the public. Following the philosophy of orthodox theoretical approaches to development, most Third World leaders argue that political and press freedom need to be restricted to enable the realisation of economic development.

But Southeast Asians now experiencing a prolonged economic crisis are becoming more aware that sustainable development really has to be effected in an environment of freedom of expression and freedom of the media. People across the region are demanding access to information and transparency from the ruling elite.

Malaysia has been no exception. When all set in its march to become a fully developed nation, Malaysia saw its economy falter in the wake of the currency and stock market turmoil that struck Southeast Asia in mid-1997. The troubles soon spilled over to politics, but in a country where state control of the media was nothing new, accurate information was hard to come by.

To be sure, much has been reported in the foreign and local media about these twin crises in Malaysia. But it is telling how the two media approach and analyse the situation—and how the government has reacted to their respective views. The foreign media's usual style has often angered the Prime Minister, Mahathir Mohamad. The Malaysian mainstream media, though, are very careful not to provoke the fury of the powers that be, and most of the coverage has, not surprisingly, taken the official perspective.

Malaysia, of course, is not alone in seeing the media as an important tool that provides accounts and images of a country's political and economic situation to local and international audiences. Indeed, for countries that have opened their economies to transnational capital flows and foreign investment, there seems to be a need to project a positive image to woo investors.

Under the Mahathir administration, Malaysia had certainly moved in that direction by embarking on an ambitious programme called Vision 2020.¹ This

aims to turn the country into a nation that is fully developed and integrated into the global economy by the year 2020. An example of one of the many schemes planned in the overall vision is the Multimedia Super Corridor,² where Malaysia is expected to invest RM 50 billion in an advanced digital network that will attract investors into the region.

And so, when the foreign press played up the not-so-positive goings on in Malaysia, Mahathir was upset. His taking to task of CNN and CNBC in late 1998 for their coverage of anti-government demonstrations in the capital was only one among several instances during which he lambasted international news organisations for what Malaysia saw as negative reporting.

In the early days of his administration, Mahathir had also often reminded the local press of its role in society, to be 'socially responsible' to the public in its reports. His philosophy is: 'For a society precariously balanced on a razor's edge, where one false, or even true word can lead to calamity, it is criminal irresponsibility to allow that one word to be uttered.'³ In other words, he is telling the press to apply self-censorship or face the consequences of being censored.

The media in denial

Until the devaluation of the Thai baht sent the region's economy reeling, it had looked as if Malaysia was indeed on its way to realising Vision 2020. The figures said so: the country's poverty level had reportedly dropped from 70 per cent in 1970 to eight per cent in 1995. Since 1988, Malaysia had been enjoying an annual economic growth rate of eight per cent. The nation that once exported mainly tin and rubber had been transformed into the world's 17th largest trading powerhouse.⁴ Today, however, Malaysia has been reintroduced to low growth, accompanied by inflation and unemployment.

The bursting of bubbles always results in jitters, accompanied by a desire to know more about what is happening. But in the initial stages of the crisis, the local media offered little information, much less any discussion as to the implications of the stock market crash and the currency (ringgit) devaluation. In fact, the press seemed to be in denial, content in echoing the government stance that the economy would recover within a year with cooperation from everyone. Reporters followed ministers around and dutifully showed how the officials were doing their bit by living simpler lifestyles.

But when the GDP growth dropped to 6.8 per cent and the ringgit depreciated over 30 per cent against the US dollar, people began to clamour for more transparency in the administration of state money. After all, public

funds like the Employees' Provident Fund were being used to bail out some companies and prop up the share market.

Perhaps it was inevitable that the economic downslide would not leave the country's politics untouched. By June 1998, at the annual assembly of the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO)—the dominant party in the country's ruling coalition, the Barisan Nasional (National Front)—the then head of the Youth wing, Ahmad Zahid, brought up the matter of corruption, cronyism and nepotism.

Mahathir himself had previously acknowledged that corruption existed, leading to the beefing up of anti-corruption laws and the removal from office of several UMNO politicians. But opposition leaders had suggested that the government was merely scratching the surface and had no serious intention of conducting any in-depth investigations into cases of corruption, for fear of revealing that it actually permeated the entire dominant ruling group.⁵

In any case, Mahathir's reply to Zahid's 'outburst' was to make public the lists of individuals and companies that obtained shares or projects from the government. Zahid, a close ally of then Deputy Premier Anwar Ibrahim, was also reprimanded for not using the proper party channels to raise the issue. In truth, what he had done was seen as a challenge to the hegemony of the dominant ruling group. In the Malaysian context, this meant tighter media control.

The country's modern history has witnessed numerous crises of hegemony, which include financial scandals, splits in the ruling political parties and clashes between the judiciary and the executive.⁶ Crises of hegemony have invariably led to more stringent control in general, through various means like the use of laws and more particularly in the media, through ownership.

Industry expansion, tighter state control

While the state controls the media both directly and indirectly through various forms—legal, economic and political—the media industry in the past few years has seen an increase in publications and broadcast channels as well as welcomed, paradoxically, the arrival of cable and satellite television (see Table 1 and Table 2).

Unfortunately, the industry's increased activity did not signify greater access and freedom of expression. Not even the coming of new communication technology, such as the Internet and satellite broadcasting, would provide more access to information and undermine state and market control of

Table 1 The increase of the various media

| | 1993 | 1994 | 1995* | 1996* |
|---------------------------|------|------|-------|-------|
| Television | | | | |
| No. of broadcast channels | 3 | 3 | 4 | 4** |
| No. of cable channels | - | - | 3 | 5 |
| No. of satellite channels | - | - | - | 15*** |
| Print media | | | | |
| No. of newspapers | 37 | 40 | 45 | 48 |
| No. of magazines | 160 | 170 | 180 | 190 |

Source: *Malaysian Business*, January 1, 1995.

* estimated figure

** the number of broadcast channels has increased to 5

*** to date there are 20 satellite channels

the media.⁷ In general, the complex relationships between the ownership of the media industry by Malaysian political parties have ensured that only a particular form of information, whether through print or broadcast, can be disseminated to the populace.

Zaharom points out that while the privatisation policy embarked on by the Mahathir administration has resulted in greater commercialisation of the industry, the move was not intended to liberalise the media.⁸ Rather, it was due to part of the New Economic Policy (NEP) promulgated to restructure Malaysia's economy and help the Bumiputera⁹ attain at least a 30 per cent stake in it.

One major result is that the country's media industry is now owned and dominated by the main component parties in the ruling coalition. Despite increased commercialisation of the media, control of the industry has in fact been tightened over the past decade with the introduction of new laws or amendments to existing laws, directives and guidelines, all of which curb the freedom of information.

Parties and publications

It was during the NEP years, which began in 1970, that the political parties started to become deeply involved in the media industry. In an effort to help the Bumiputeras acquire a considerable chunk of the economy, trust agencies such as Perbadanan Nasional Bhd (Pernas) and Permodalan Nasional Bhd (PNB) were set up to acquire corporate assets for the Bumiputera community.

Table 2 The Malaysian media scene

| | |
|------------------------|--|
| 1946 | Wireless radio-broadcasting |
| 1963 | Introduction of black & white television (RTM1) |
| 1969 | Introduction of black & white television (RTM2) |
| 1970 | International standard satellite earth station in Kuantan was introduced to provide for TV link to Sabah and Sarawak and for overseas TV transmission |
| 1973 | Arrival of modern printing technology for the newspaper industry, allowing more pages and colour reproduction |
| 1978– | |
| 1979 | First private television network: TV3 |
| 1984 | Colour television |
| 1989 | Launch of private radio station: Suara Johor (FM) |
| 1992 | Launch of radio station: FM1 - FM6 (RTM) |
| 1994 | Launch of the second private television network Metrovision for the city folk of Kuala Lumpur; Time Highway Radio was launched in September |
| 1996 | Radio Rediffusion RFM 98.8 FM in Klang Valley in May Best 104 (Suara Johor) extended its coverage from South to Central region in March CATS Radio (Sarawak) FM was launched Astro launch—the major launch of satellite television with 20 channels & 8 radio channels |
| 1997 | Four new stations launched in the Klang Valley Hits 92.9 FM in January Mix 94.5 FM, Light & Easy 105.7 FM and Classic Rock 103.3 FM, all in April Talk Radio 101.8 FM in December In July, Radio Malaysia went on 24-hour broadcasting |
| New Media 1998– | |
| NTV7 | Launched by April 1998 as terrestrial channel |
| Holiday Radio | Launched by April 1998 as national radio for travellers by NTV7 |
| TV Sports | Launched by mid-1998, controlled by the government with private sector involvement |
| Nusantara TV | Jointly operated by the Malaysian and Indonesian Government |
| Medanmas | IMT-GT TV: the first station under the sub-regional grouping of the Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle |
| TV 9 | A new free-to-air station; transmission is expected to begin in 1999. By a new joint-venture with American television network operator, National Broadcasting Corp. (NBC) |

Source: '98 Media Guide, Utusan Media Sales, Kuala Lumpur, 1998.

It was also around this time that allegations arose that Singaporeans were interfering with Malaysian politics through the control of Malaysia's main English daily. Under pressure from the youth wing to 'Malaysianise' the English daily, *The Straits Times*, Pernas acquired an 80 per cent stake in the Straits Times Press. A majority of the shares was later transferred to Fleet Holdings (Figure 1), an investment arm of United National Malay Organi-

zations (UMNO). The Straits Times Press was renamed New Straits Times Press (NSTP) when it was listed on the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange in 1973. Fleet Holdings in 1973 also held shares of Utusan Melayu Press.¹⁰ Gomez further says that:

Although these were major investments which brought in good returns, the original intent behind UMNO's acquisition of these publishing companies was to control the editorial content of both these newspapers....

In effect, the ownership of NSTP and Utusan Melayu gives UMNO control of the major newspapers in Malaysia.

Media Guide '98 reports that more than 7.8 million Malaysian adults read the daily newspapers, of which there are about 38. Industry figures, however, say these papers had a total circulation of only 3.9 million in 1997.

The Malay population accounts for 55 per cent of the readers, followed by the Chinese (36 per cent), and Indian and others (9 per cent). The four top national dailies are products of just two local media conglomerates, the New Straits Times Press (NSTP) and Utusan Melayu (Malaysia) Berhad.

NSTP publishes the national-language dailies such as *Berita Harian* and *Harian Metro* and the English dailies, *New Straits Times*, *Malay Mail*, *Business Times*, and the Chinese daily, *Shin Min Daily News*. Weeklies published by NSTP include *Berita Minggu*, *New Sunday Times* and *Sunday Mail*. Utusan Melayu (Malaysia) Berhad, for its part, publishes dailies such as *Utusan Malaysia* and *Utusan Melayu* and weeklies such as *Mingguan Malaysia* and *Utusan Zaman* (see Table 3).

Not only is there a virtual monopoly of the national-language dailies by these two local conglomerates, but Gomez has shown that they have very close links with political parties, particularly those in the ruling coalition.¹¹ He asserts:

That political parties own business concerns and are active players on the corporate scene, unique as the situation may be, is not common only to Malaysia. ... The uniqueness of the Malaysian example, however, if such a case need be made, lies in the nature and extent to which the leading political parties in the country's ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front) coalition are involved in business.

On April 30, 1990, through a reverse take-over of Fleet Group by publicly listed Renong Bhd, eight publicly listed companies including NSTP and TV3 (see Figure 1) effectively came under the control of Renong.

Table 3 Newspaper classification 1997*

| | National language | English | Chinese | Tamil | Total |
|---------------------|-------------------|---------|---------|-------|-------|
| Peninsular Malaysia | 8 | 9 | 7 | 4 | 28 |
| Sabah | - | 3 | 5 | - | 8 |
| Sarawak | 1 | 3 | 6 | - | 10 |
| Total | 9 | 15 | 18 | 4 | 46 |

Source: '98 Media Guide, Utusan Media Sales, Kuala Lumpur, 1998.

* Includes weeklies and bi-weeklies

The Anwar faction

Yet while ownership of the media remains primarily in the hands of UMNO, factionalism in the party has given rise to reshuffling of ownership through takeovers, reverse takeovers and mergers in UMNO-related assets (see Figure 2). One such major reshuffling took place on January 5, 1993, when Realmild Sdn. Bhd., a company with a total paid-up capital of just over RM100,000, bought up a 48.01 per cent stake in NSTP and 43.22 per cent stake in TV3 for a cash price of RM800 million.¹²

Interestingly enough, Realmild is owned by four NSTP executives who also happen to be close associates of Anwar: Abdul Kadir Jasin, who was Group Editor of NSTP at the time of the deal; Mohd Noor Mutalib, the Managing Director of NSTP and the Executive Vice Chairman of MRCB; Ahmad Nazri Abdullah, then Group Editor of Berita Harian; and Khalid Haji Ahmad, the Managing Director of TV3.

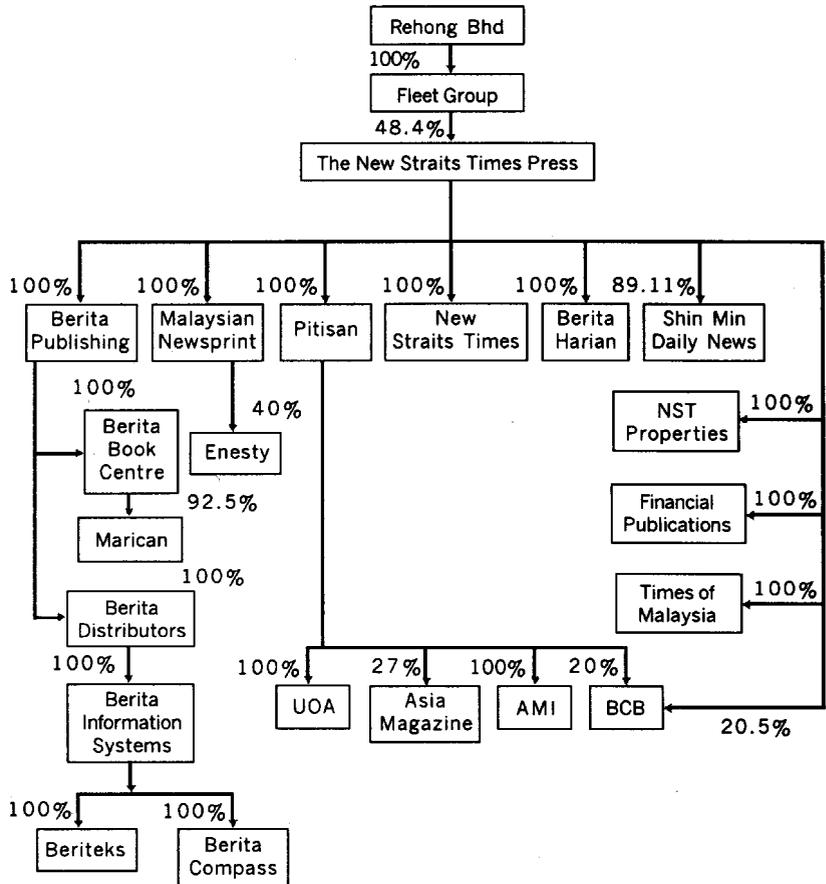
In a complex deal, a listed company, Malaysian Resources Corporation Berhad (MRCB) was included. The management buy-out and the reverse take over of MRCB effectively gave control of five listed companies, including NSTP and TV3, to the four NSTP executives (see Figure 3).

Gomez asserts that the management buyout was politically motivated by Anwar to gain control of the media and thereby use them to shore up support for the impending UMNO vice-presidential election.¹³ Indeed, the local press had given wide and positive coverage to the then deputy premier up until the time he was dismissed from office in September 1998.

The tide turns

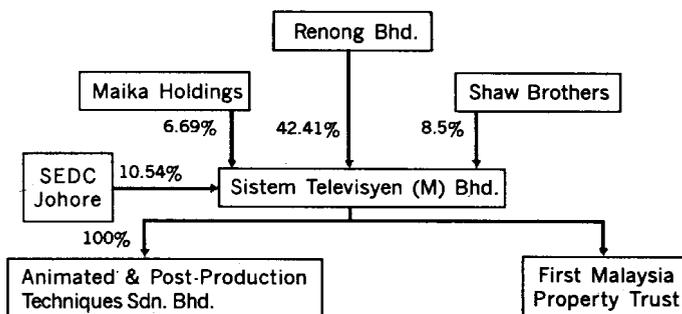
Significantly, a month before Anwar was fired, two of his close political allies, editors Johan Jaafar of *Utusan Malaysia* and Ahmad Nazri of *Berita*

Figure 1 NSTP corporate structure in 1990



Source: Gomez, E.T., *Politics In Business: UMNO's Corporate Investments*, Forum, Kuala Lumpur, 1990, p. 92.

Harian, resigned. Many read the resignations as a clampdown on the press as their respective newspaper groups had played up the issues of corruption, cronyism and nepotism, as well as on the problems at the newly-opened Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA). When Mahathir made known his displeasure over such reporting, the newspapers toned down their comments.

Figure 2 TV3 corporate structure in 1992

Source: Gomez, E.T., *Political Business: Corporate Involvement of Malaysian Political Parties*, James Cook University of North Queensland, Australia, 1994, p. 82.

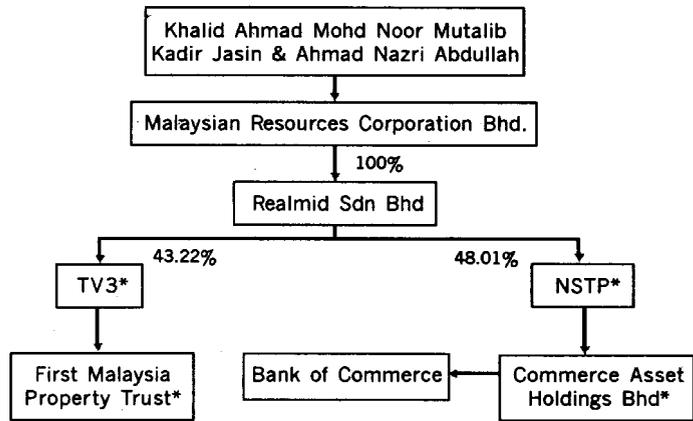
It is ironic that the two newspaper groups chose to be silent about the resignation of their respective chief editors, when the press would normally cover appointments and resignations of top executives in big companies. Then again, top posts in the media are political appointments. In retrospect, the one-time group editor, Noordin Sopiee, was removed from the *New Straits Times* when Tengku Razaleigh lost his challenge against Musa Hitam for the deputy president's position in UMNO.¹⁴

With the resignations of the two top editors, the Malay dailies once again adopted the official tone. Their editorials came out strongly in support of Mahathir's calls for the need to implement and revive all shelved major infrastructure projects, and his admonition to the people to cooperate with the government to overcome the economic situation plaguing the country.

The dismissal of the former Deputy Prime Minister was also given due coverage in the mainstream dailies. Not surprisingly, the press repeatedly highlighted that it was the Prime Minister's prerogative to fire Anwar, that Mahathir must have a good enough reason to do so, and that the ruling coalition was supportive of the decision.

But it is worth noting that Anwar, who used to get extensive positive coverage in the dailies prior to his dismissal, is now portrayed by the local media as a rabble-rouser, sexual pervert and trouble-maker. The local press not only consistently presents the official perspective of the dismissal, it repeatedly mentions the sordid details of Anwar's alleged sexual misconduct.

Figure 3 MRCB's corporate structure after the management buy-out of the New Straits Times and Press and TV3



Source: Gomez, E. T., *Political Business: Corporate Involvement of Malaysian Political Parties*, James Cook University of North Queensland, Australia, 1994, p. 136.

* Publicly-listed company

There are two grave implications here. One, the party-owned newspapers clearly get their cue from the powers that be. These strangleholds on the press inevitably prevent it from playing its effective role in disseminating information and being accountable to the Malaysian populace. Two, the lack of information and difficult access to accurate information can lead to a situation where people become easily confused, which may eventually lead to the public questioning the credibility of the press. This situation makes it difficult for citizens to exercise their right to information and their right to make informed choices.

But UMNO is not the only party in the ruling coalition to have substantial interests in the media industry. The other two main component parties, the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), also own parts of the mainstream media. MCA, through its official holding company, Huaren Holdings Sdn. Bhd., has a 58 per cent stake in Star Publications, which publishes the other mainstream English daily, *The Star*.

MIC, meanwhile, owns a substantial portion of the Tamil press, the control of which is mainly in the hands of MCA President Samy Vellu, who has used it to publicise campaigns and projects.

Government television

While the encroachment of political parties into the print media came in stages, the government has controlled television from its inception in Malaysia. There are two government-owned national TV channels: TV1, which commenced operations in December 1963, and TV2, which began broadcasting in October 1969. Both channels come under the purview of the Ministry of Information, which has provided them with these working parameters:

1. To explain in depth, and with the widest possible coverage, the policies and programmes of the government in order to ensure maximum understanding by the public;
2. To stimulate public interest and opinion, in order to achieve changes in line with the requirements of the government;
3. To assist in promoting civic consciousness and fostering the development of Malaysian arts and culture;
4. To provide suitable elements of popular education, general information and entertainment.

Observes Zaharom: '(Television) in Malaysia can more appropriately be seen as a government service, being as it is the mouthpiece of the government of the day.'¹⁵

Indeed, control of television is probably tighter than that of the press. This is because the viewership particularly among the Malays is quite high, possibly made up of those in the UMNO constituency. Almost 80 per cent of viewers for TV1 are Malays with a 45 per cent penetration in the rural areas (see Table 4).

New players in the broadcasting industry

Still, after more than 20 years of virtual government control in the broadcasting media, the first commercial television was introduced in 1984 under Mahathir's privatisation project. This was anticipated to provide the kind of programming not offered by the two state-run stations. But while TV3 does provide variety, particularly of entertainment programmes, discussion and debate of serious issues are virtually absent. Popular programmes that get too controversial have been yanked off the air, such as the live talk show 'Teleskop'.

The Information Minister has also issued directives to all television stations to stop airing programmes that project elements contrary to Malaysian values. In addition, the ministry has ordered a ban on all programmes that carry 'negative values'. Exactly what the phrase pertains to remains unclear.

Table 4 Viewership by ethnic breakdown for television channels

| Ethnic breakdown (percentage) | Station watched yesterday | | | |
|----------------------------------|---------------------------|-------|-------|-------------|
| | TV1 | TV2 | TV3 | Metrovision |
| Total viewers ('000) | 6,202 | 7,707 | 8,664 | 1,584 |
| Malay | 78.4% | 55.9% | 60.7% | 35.4% |
| Chinese | 13.1% | 33.4% | 29.3% | 46.9% |
| Indian | 7.8% | 10.1% | 9.4% | 17.2% |
| Others | 0.7% | 0.6% | 0.5% | 0.4% |

Source: '98 Media Guide, Utusan Media Sales, Kuala Lumpur, 1998.

But the TV stations have been warned that if they do not follow these directives, their licences may be revoked.¹⁶

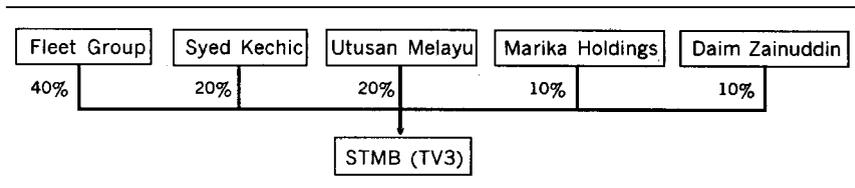
That TV3 will adhere to the official line has been ensured further at the allocative level. Its owners are again closely aligned with the ruling coalition, having been incorporated into the joint venture between Fleet Group, Syed Kechik Foundation, Utusan Melayu Press, the MIC investment arm, Maika Holdings and Daim Zainuddin (see Figure 4).

As shares got divested, and takeovers and reverse-takeovers became the order of the day, TV3 ended up essentially under the control of the four NSTP executives who bought out stakes in NSTP and TV3. Notwithstanding the takeovers, management buyouts, and reverse-takeovers, however, ownership of TV3 remains primarily in the hands of UMNO.

A consortium of four companies closely linked to UMNO also owns the fourth television station, Metrovision. City Television Sdn Bhd, which operates Metrovision, is 50 per cent owned by Melewar Corporation. Utusan Melayu (M) Bhd owns 30 per cent, while Medanmas Sdn Bhd and Diversified Systems Sdn Bhd each has a 10 per cent share.¹⁷

The latest commercial television station, launched in April 1998, also has strong links with the government. Its chairman Mohd Effendi Norwawi served as managing director in the Sarawak State Economic Development Corporation (SSEDC) and is a loyalist of the ruling coalition.¹⁸

Mega TV, the country's first cable television service, meanwhile, is owned by a consortium comprising TV3 (40 per cent), the Minister of Finance Inc

Figure 4 Corporate structure of TV3 in 1984

Source: adapted from Gomez, E.T., *Political Business: Corporate Involvement of Malaysian Political Parties*, James Cook University of North Queensland, Australia, 1994.

(30 per cent), Ibox TV Sdn Bhd (12.5 per cent), Eurocrest Sdn Bhd (12.5 per cent) and Sri Utara Sdn Bhd (5 per cent).¹⁹

Satellite television is also essentially under state control. For a long time, the Malaysian government had banned the use of parabolic dishes, with Information Minister Mohamad Rahmat arguing at one point that an ‘open sky’ policy would damage the country’s social and political order.²⁰ But the Prime Minister’s Vision 2020 aspirations, coupled with the need to use the Measat Satellite System as the sole provider of satellite services at the Multimedia Super Corridor Project, put pressure on the government to open up the sky.²¹

By stipulating on the use of 60 cm dishes, the Information Minister now says satellite television can be used to serve the business community—and at the same time prevent Malaysians from resorting to banned dishes. The specified dish size ensures that only Measat signals are able to pass through the decoder. The prohibitive price of satellite TV service also restricts the number of people who are able to afford it. Installation fee alone is more than RM1,000; the monthly subscription is RM80.

The government has a 15 per cent stake in Measat Broadcast, which operates the satellite TV provider ASTRO. All foreign programmes transmitted through Measat have to undergo a one-hour filtration period before being shown to the public. Foreign news agencies that refuse to be regulated may expect to be treated like the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC). The BBC’s world news programmes are not subscribed to, either on government-controlled channels or satellite television, because the BBC insisted that its programmes be aired without censorship.²²

The government can also jam broadcasts to foreign networks covering local

events. In late 1998, authorities thwarted the attempts of foreign media companies to use the International Broadcast Center to send footage of street demonstrations in Kuala Lumpur. Officials said the facilities were meant only for the coverage of the Commonwealth games and the Queen's visit. While the Information Minister said the free flow of information would continue, the foreign media would no longer be allowed full and uncontrolled access to government facilities.²³

Regulating the Web

Even the latest information technology has been unable to circumvent state control. In other parts of the world, the Internet has been hailed as the most viable alternative source to access information not accessible in the mainstream media. But access to it in Malaysia is via the Malaysian Institute of Microelectronic Systems (MIMOS), a government body that administers the Joint Advance Research Integrated Networking System (JARING).

Services on the Internet are determined by what is offered on JARING. At the same time, MIMOS's chairman and chief executive officer has stated that MIMOS will work with the authorities to discipline Net abusers.²⁴ And although he assured JARING subscribers that their privacy would be protected, this will only be so long as they abide by the rules. This raises serious questions on the invasion of privacy. In 1998, MIMOS assisted the police in tracking down four people suspected of circulating rumours of disturbances and riots in Kuala Lumpur on the Net.

So far, though, the Net has been the only place in which issues concerning Anwar's dismissal and subsequent arrest and trial are being raised. These topics have yet to be significantly and sufficiently reported in the local press. Then again, access to a pro-Anwar Web site can and has been blocked, although MIMOS has denied this. Although the number of Malaysians accessing information through the Net remains small, the situation is being monitored closely.

The legislative pitbull

If economic ownership and directives from the government fail to curb the flow of adequate and accurate information, there are enough laws that will do the trick.

Among these are the Official Secrets Act, and the most repressive of all, the Internal Security Act, which can be—and has been—used to curtail struggles for democracy and freedom of information. There is another set of laws more related to the media like the Printing Presses and Publications Act

and the Broadcasting Act. Both have been used to further curb press freedom. All these not only instil fear among journalists, they also prevent media practitioners from pursuing investigative journalism and from fulfilling their duty as the watchdog of society and government.

The Internal Security Act (ISA) was introduced in Malaysia by the British colonial government. It was used extensively against communist insurgents. In recent times, however, it has been used by the state against anyone perceived to be a threat to national interest and security. The ISA allows detainees to be held without being charged or having access to legal recourse for a period of two years renewable every two years at the discretion of the Home Minister.

In 1987, the ISA was used in a massive crackdown called Operasi Lallang on political dissidents, members of advocacy groups and religious bodies. Newspapers gave scant information about the operation even as editors themselves were being summoned for questioning by the police. It turned out that the editors were also told to keep news on the detainees to a minimum, a directive that they apparently heeded.²⁵

The ISA's most recent—reported—use were in the 1998 arrests of Anwar and his supporters. Invariably, what the newspapers highlighted was the official view of why the arrests took place and that the ruling coalition was in unanimous support of Mahathir's decision. Indeed, dismissal of a staff member is the prerogative of those in authority. But by focusing only on one aspect of the story, the newspapers failed to present balanced reports and were therefore unable to offer an accurate analysis of the situation.

A few local papers made matters worse by running editorials that condemned the foreign media's version of the story. These editorials unsurprisingly parroted the sentiments of the government.

The Official Secrets Act (OSA), meanwhile, has very vague provisions but nonetheless provides wide powers to the government of the day to act on anything labelled 'official secret'. With such an Act in place, journalists are prevented from carrying out in-depth investigations since any document labelled by the Executive as secret cannot be made known to the public.

Raja Aziz Addruse, former chairman of the Malayan Bar Council, describes the Act as the antithesis of the freedom of speech and of the citizen's right to comment on and discuss government misconduct and incompetence. 'In a democracy', he says, 'no government can claim to be a credible government

if it seeks to operate in secrecy. A government in a democracy must be prepared to account for its actions and to subject its acts and policies to public scrutiny and discussion.’²⁶

The Printing Presses and Publications Act of 1984, however, is the law that directly affects the print media the most in Malaysia. This Act provides vast powers for the Minister for Home Affairs to grant or to withdraw printing licences. It was amended in 1987, further curbing the freedom of the press. For example, Section 8 A(2) presumes the published material to be malicious if the writer cannot prove he or she has taken reasonable measures to verify the truth of the news. Section 8A(1) stipulates a jail sentence of up to three years, or a hefty fine of up to RM20,000, or both, upon conviction. Both Section 8(B) and Section 8(C) provide for the government to apply to the court to:

- suppress, up to six months, any publication where an offence has taken place;
- suspend it pending a court hearing or until the acquittal of the accused; and
- convict anyone who contravenes the court order with a fine of up to RM10, 000 or up to two years’ jail or both.

Under this law, applications for all printing and publishing licences are made yearly, and the Minister for Home Affairs has absolute power to suspend or revoke a licence or permit. The minister—who at present is also the Premier—is under no obligation to explain the decision, which may not be challenged in court. The Act also gives power to the state to control the import of foreign publications perceived as prejudicial to national interest, public order and bilateral relations.

In 1986, the *Asian Wall Street Journal* was suspended for three months for exposing the billion-dollar Bank Bumiputra Finance banking scandal, which was closely linked to the ruling coalition. Two Journal correspondents were expelled from Malaysia. There was absolutely no legal recourse available to them since the Minister for Home Affairs was given the absolute power to act.

The following year, two national dailies, *The Star* and *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, and a Malay biweekly, *Watan*, had their licences revoked. Six months passed before they were allowed to resume publication. One evident result is an even more servile and compliant *Star*.

Radio and television have their very own law to fret over: The Broadcasting Act of 1988. Karthigesu says the Act was brought into existence only after the introduction of TV3 to control the content of a broadcast.²⁷ As a commercial station, TV3's strategies were aimed mainly at maximising profit. Programmes therefore had to appeal to a wide spectrum of the audience. Entertainment programmes containing violence and sex were resplendent on this channel. As the viewership of TV3 increased, the government channels were pressured to imitate it in a bid to maintain their advertising clientele. It was in this context that the Act was passed.

The Broadcasting Act bestows enormous powers on the Minister for Information, who determines who gets the licence to broadcast and what can and cannot be aired. In addition, the minister also has the prerogative to change any conditions stipulated in the Act. The Act, thus, not only enables the state to weed out violence and sex on TV, but also allows it to tighten its grip on the media.

The path toward state control of the media

In fine, state control of media in Malaysia can be traced back to the restructuring of the economy of the country through the NEP, which produced a select group of politically well-connected Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera business people.

A large number of these new capitalists developed as a result of heavy assistance from the state or by acting as proxies for political patrons. Given favourable treatment such as loans from government-owned banks, as well as licences and contracts for large state projects, this new capitalist class was able to expand and extend its monopoly in the economy. One clear example is the Renong group, which has benefited tremendously through this patronage. Renong executive chairman Halim Saad himself has admitted that the company began as a bankrupt contractor that grew into a conglomerate with not a little help from the government.²⁸

The concentration of ownership of the media industry in the hands of those affiliated to the ruling party became even more rampant through the privatisation of the broadcasting media. Those in the position of allocative control of the media invariably had to bow to the wishes of powerful political patrons. At the same time, though, it is crucial to note that whenever economic control of the media is not able totally to muffle the voices of the disenfranchised, laws have been used to do the task.

The amount of privileges that could be distributed in a system based on po-

litical patronage was reduced when the country's economic fortunes tumbled along with those of the rest of the region, beginning in 1997. Prime Minister Mahathir, however, has not let go of his ambitious plans to carry on with huge expensive projects such as the MSC. These may overstretch Malaysia's resources to help out the new capitalist class, which had not been spared the effects of the crisis. The economic and political situation was further compounded by speculation that not everyone in power is in agreement with the Prime Minister. Nonetheless, Mahathir has been able to keep the country and party behind him, with the press reporting, *ad nauseum*, support for the administration.

The truth is that the Malaysian press has never been seen as a great advocate of democracy. In the past two decades, however, it began to highlight comments by certain factions in the UMNO on the need for accountability and transparency in the government. Ironically, this set in motion a series of events that has reasserted to the Malaysian public that the country's media are effectively controlled by the powers that be.

In the days following the dismissal of Anwar Ibrahim and his subsequent arrest under the ISA, the mainstream Malaysian media has demonstrated that they are quite prepared to throw away all journalistic standards and propriety just to remain in the government's good graces. By sensationalising the alleged sexual crimes of the ex-deputy Premier, the media had in fact been carrying out its own trial of the case, prompting the Bar Council to wonder whether the embattled Anwar would have a fair court trial.

In January 1999, the charges concerning Anwar's alleged misconduct were inexplicably dropped. No one, however, needed to speculate how the local media would cover the sudden turn of events. It has been only too clear that the media in Malaysia are controlled—and that this has diminished democratic moments in the nation. In the attempt to reproduce the hegemony of dominant class interests, explanatory accounts are being blocked out. The right to reply, the right to criticise and compare, and the right to distribute alternatives have all been transgressed.

But as Williams points out, a democratic society must ensure that as many people as possible are free to reply and criticise. If Malaysians profess to be living in a democratic society, then free and responsible comment and criticism and of distributing the actual range of work must be encouraged. This cannot happen in an environment of tight control of the media and the use of repressive laws.²⁹

A call for changes

Several urgent steps need to be considered and taken before Malaysians can even hope for any real access to accurate information. Firstly, laws that give an enormous amount of power to the dominant ruling elite would have to be amended or in some cases removed altogether. It is undeniable that the ISA, OSA, Printing Presses and Publications Act, and the Broadcasting Act instil fear in journalists and prevent them from doing their job with ethical standards intact. Repealing some of the laws will allow the press some independence in carrying out investigative reporting and effectively playing its role as the Fourth Estate.

Secondly, the concentration of ownership in the hands of a small group of people or organisations must be monitored and controlled. Legislation should be introduced to prevent such concentration of power.

Thirdly, to ensure that alternative and accurate information is provided to the populace, public service media must be established through public funds. Williams has said that in such a system there should be no direct control by the government over contributors. Through the creation of intermediate bodies and of a contractual system, individuals and companies should be guaranteed certain resources for the work they want to do. The allocation of these resources should be publicly argued and open to challenge and review. The BBC is one model of public service broadcasting that can be emulated to a certain extent. Although not the ideal example to follow, the BBC at least allows debate and discussion on current issues where public opinions are formed and which allow for the interests of the society to be served.

Unless and until repressive laws are repealed and reforms take place in the media industry, the credibility of the press and the broadcasters will remain in question, and Malaysians will continue to seek information from alternative sources.³⁰ Some already have access to alternative media such as the Internet. But the majority are still not getting adequate and accurate information—on ordinary Malaysian citizens struggling to deal with the economic and political crises that are having profound effects on their lives and their country.

Notes

1. Excerpts from the speeches of Mahathir Mohamad on the Multimedia Super Corridor:
‘Vision 2020 envisages Malaysia becoming a fully developed and industrialised country in all aspects by the year 2020. As such, Malaysia needs to overcome nine strategic challenges:

- (1) Establish a united Malaysian nation made up of one Malaysian race;
- (2) Create a psychologically liberated, secure and developed Malaysian society;
- (3) Foster and develop a mature democratic society;
- (4) Establish a fully moral and ethical society;
- (5) Establish a mature, liberal and tolerant society;
- (6) Establish a scientific and progressive society;
- (7) Establish a fully caring society;
- (8) Ensure an economically just society, in which there is a fair and equitable distribution of the nation's wealth; and
- (9) Establish a prosperous society with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient.

Vision 2020 has given the focus and direction to Malaysians, especially the private sector to set bigger goals for greater achievement. Collaboration between the private and public sectors will ensure the sustenance of the nation's comparative advantage and promote its competitive edge in the global market.'

2. Excerpts from the speeches of Mahathir Mohamad on the Multimedia Super Corridor:
 - 'The Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) is located in an area south of the capital of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur. ... We hope to create the ideal environment that will attract world-class companies to use it as a regional multicultural information age hub. Our long-term objective is to encourage the development of a highly competitive cluster of Malaysia multimedia and IT companies that will eventually become world class.'
3. Mahathir, Mohamad, 'Keynote Address at the World Press Convention', Kuala Lumpur, 18 September 1985.
4. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, September 4, 1997.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Zaharom, Nain, 'Politics, economics and the media in Malaysia', in *Media Development*, Vol. 38, No. 3, London, 1991, pp. 39–42.
7. Sussman, L., *Power, the press and the technology of freedom: the coming age of ISDN*, Freedom House, New York, 1989.
8. Zaharom, Nain, 'Commercialisation, Concentration and Control: The Structure of the Malaysian Media Industry and Its Implications For Democracy', paper presented at REPUSM–GESEAS project 'Discourse and Practices of Democracy in Malaysia', 1998.
9. The term Bumiputera usually refers to the Malays, but it also includes other indigenous communities of the country. NEP was promulgated soon after a period of racial unrest, which resulted in the May 13, 1969 tragedy. The racial unrest was the result of socio-economic imbalances between the Malays and non-Malays. NEP's two-pronged objective was to reduce and eradicate poverty and to restructure society through the creation of 30-per cent Bumiputera ownership of the corporate sector by 1990.
10. Gomes, E.T., *Political Business: Corporate Involvement of Malaysian Political Parties*, James Cook University of North Queensland, Australia, 1994, p. 54, and Zaharom, Nain, 1998, *op.cit.*
11. Gomes, E.T., 1994, *op.cit.*

12. Cheong, Sally, *Bumiputera Controlled Companies in the KLSE*, Second Edition, Corporate Research Services Sdn Bhd, Petaling Jaya, 1993, and Gomes, E.T., 1994, *op.cit.*
13. Gomez, E.T., 'Anwar's men gain media control: The management buy-out of NSTP and TV3', *Aliran Monthly*, Penang, 1993.
14. Cheong, Sally, 1993, *op.cit.*, p. 181.
15. Zaharom, Nain, 'The Impact of the International Marketplace on the Organisation of Malaysian Television', in French, David, and Richards, Michael (eds.), *Contemporary Television: Eastern perspectives*, Sage Publications, London, 1996.
16. *The Star*, February 4, 1995.
17. *The Star*, May 26, 1995.
18. Cheong, Sally, 1993, *op.cit.*, p. 57.
19. *The Star*, May 26, 1995.
20. *The Star*, June 14, 1993.
21. *The Star*, April 7, 1998.
22. *New Straits Times*, May 16, 1996.
23. *The Star*, September 24, 1998.
24. *The Star*, September, 29, 1998.
25. Chandra, Muzzafar, 'The Muzzled Media', and Rehman, Rashid, 'The Day of Questioning', in Kua Kia Soong (ed.), *Media Watch: The Use and Abuse of the Malaysian Press*, The Resource and Research Centre, Kuala Lumpur, 1990.
26. Raja Aziz, Addruse, 'The Erosion of Press Freedom', in Kua Kia Soong (ed.), *Media Watch: The Use and Abuse of the Malaysian Press*, The Resource and Research Centre, Kuala Lumpur, 1990, p. 24.
27. Karthigesu, R., 'Dasar penyiaran Malaysia dalam era pasca-kolonial ke arah status negara maju', paper presented at the professorial address, University Sains Malaysia, Penang, 1995.
28. Cheong, Sally, *Bumiputera Entrepreneurs in the KLSE*, Volume Two, Corporate Research Services Sdn Bhd, Petaling Jaya, 1997.
29. Williams, R., *Communications*, Penguin, London, 1962.
30. *Far Eastern Economic Review*, October 8, 1998.

Appendix

List of National Language Papers ('98 Media Guide)

Dailies:

Berita Harian
 Harian Metro
 Metro Ahad
 Utusan Malaysia
 Utusan Melayu
 Utusan Zaman

Weeklies:

Berita Minggu
 Mingguan Malaysia

List of English Language Press ('98 Media Guide)

Peninsular Malaysia

Dailies

New Straits Times
Malay Mail

The Star
Sun
The Edge
Business Times

Weeklies/Bi-weeklies

New Sunday Times
Sunday Mail

Sunday Star

Sabah

Dailies

Borneo Mail
Borneo Post (Sabah)
Daily Express

Sarawak

Dailies

Borneo Post
People's Mirror
Sarawak Tribune

List of Chinese Press ('98 Media Guide)

Peninsular Malaysia

Dailies

China Press
Guang Ming Daily
Kwong Wah Yit Poh
Nanyang Siang PU
Sin Chew Jit Poh

Weeklies/Bi-weeklies

Mun Sang Poh
New Life Post

Sabah

Dailies

Asia Times
Morning Post
Merdeka Daily News
Overseas Chinese Daily News
See Hua Daily News

Sarawak

Dailies

Berita Petang Sarawak
Chinese Daily News
International Times
Miri Daily News
Malaysia Daily News
See Hua Daily News

List of Tamil Press ('98 Media Guide)

Dailies

Malaysia Nanban
Tamil Nesan
Thinamurasu

Weeklies

Makkal Osai



The Liberation of the Indonesian Press

By *Lukas Luwarso*

*Even in ordinary circumstances, the task of channelling balanced and objective information can pose formidable challenges for journalists. In Indonesia, the work has been made doubly hard by successive regimes that did not respect freedom of expression or freedom of the press. In 1994, however, a group of Indonesian journalists decided that they would no longer be a party—unwillingly or otherwise—to the state-engineered obstruction of information, and formed the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI). As Lukas Luwarso argues in this article, its existence alone was a rejection of the practice of having only one officially recognised journalists' organisation. In addition, AJI's hard-hitting publication, *Independen*, showed the authorities that one sector of the media was no longer afraid to reject intimidation and censorship despite the high risk of official reprisal often carried out by the military.*

The current government of President B.J. Habibie has a more relaxed attitude to the media than its predecessors, and today many of AJI's demands for greater media freedom have been met. However, Lukas Luwarso points out that there is no telling what will happen once the present regime gains more strength. The history of censorship in the past indicates that the freedoms the Indonesian media currently enjoy remain fragile.

Lukas Luwarso is chairperson of the Alliance of Independent Journalists (AJI) in Indonesia.



Human beings desire freedom, but all around us freedom is restricted and obstructed. In Indonesia, freedom has come in trickles, although the fight to obtain as much of it as possible has meant the loss of hundreds of thousands of lives. Today, that fight continues as the country's political leaders continue to withhold freedoms that people in other nations have enjoyed for years, perhaps generations.

Indeed, even such a concept as 'freedom of the press', which is instantly recognised and respected in democratic countries, is still difficult to put into practice in Indonesia. Even during times of relative easing of controls of the media, as is the case now, journalists remain wary, for there is no telling just when a clampdown will be imposed on the media once more. Experience has told us that once the new rulers become sufficiently strong, the press is put under pressure, and intimidation and threat of closure soon follow. That

is what happened during the regimes of Presidents Sukarno and Suharto, and no one is certain that President B.J. Habibie will break the pattern set by his predecessors.

For Indonesian journalists, it is always a ‘Year of Living Dangerously’, no matter who is in power. True, there have been periods of press freedom, such as one that held from 1945 to 1949, at a time of our independence from the Dutch colonialists, and from 1966 to 1974, after the removal of Sukarno. But note that this was all during the beginning of a new rule. Once the new leader got settled in, the local press had an iron boot pressed hard on its neck.

Sukarno, our first president, waited until the Dutch were finally out (the colonialists tried to hold on to Indonesia for four years after we proclaimed ourselves independent) before he started to rein in the media; he also abolished parliament in 1959, and proclaimed himself President for Life in 1963. But his rule was cut short after the military took over the government following an aborted Communist coup (in which Sukarno himself was implicated).

For his part, General Suharto let the press have relative freedom after he formally took over from Sukarno in 1967, as acting president, but stopped it a year after he was finally elected as Indonesia’s chief executive in 1973. With the military having a major say in how the country was run, keeping the people, as well as the press, in check was not much of a problem for the government.

You could say, working as a journalist in Indonesia is interesting, challenging—and risky.

That is expected in a country where the state always endeavours to obstruct and restrict the press. But another result is that the journalistic code of balance and objectivity is compromised. Under such circumstances, a journalist is turned into a political activist whose allegiance is clear, as opposed to someone who is supposed to be without bias. It is a far from ideal situation, but that is what happens when the state puts obstacles to the free flow of information.

The Alliance of Independent Journalists (Aliansi Jurnalis Independen or AJI) has identified three main hindrances impeding the flow of information in Indonesia in the Suharto era: a licensing system for the press (SIUPP), only one organisation for journalists, and the intimidation and censorship of

the media. These factors, in addition, had succeeded in thwarting the press from being effective in its role as a societal watchdog and an institution that advances democracy.

The existence of AJI was in fact already a rejection of the concept of a single press organisation controlled by the state. At the same time, AJI rejected licensing stipulations applied to the press. Above all, AJI rejected intimidation and censorship of the press.

Under Suharto's rule, Indonesian journalists had tended to compromise in these three areas. Although they complained about the restrictions imposed on them, they did nothing. AJI, however, took a firm stance in rejecting them.

And so, apart from forming a competing organisation to rival the state-approved press group, AJI also published an unlicensed newspaper. After nearly two decades of journalists bending their knees in submission to the regulations handed down by the authoritarian government of President Suharto, a new generation of journalists stood erect and tall, no longer willing to be held back from doing its duties to report and to analyse, to give the people the news and information they needed to make decisions.

'No' to one press organisation: the beginnings of AJI

For almost half a century after the proclamation of the Republic of Indonesia, Indonesian journalists had known only one journalists' organisation: the Union of Indonesian Journalists (PWI). But this group had been trapped in state corporatism and was being used as a means to repress and intimidate the press. Instead of being an organisation that represented journalists, championed their rights and protected and empowered their profession, the PWI became a tool against journalists and their trade. It is no wonder then that many journalists easily lost their courage in the face of threats from authorities. Warnings, reprimands and bannings that flowed regularly from the authorities to an already cowed press brought forth no reaction from PWI, which should have made a stand, along with the Press Council.

But then came June 21, 1994, when the government banned three popular magazines—*Tempo*, *DeTik* and *Editor*. The move had come shortly after *Tempo* had published a story on the questionable financial dealings of members of the Suharto Cabinet. The authorities, though, never pinpointed which articles in these magazines had particularly offended them, saying only that the publications had threatened 'national stability'. Perhaps they thought that was enough. After all, the banning of the media was no longer

unusual in Indonesia by then, and authorities probably considered explanations to be superfluous.

The closure of the three magazines, however, aroused an unexpectedly stern reaction from Indonesians. For days after, demonstrations were held, attended not only by angry journalists, but also students and activists from non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Among the journalists, special scorn was reserved for the PWI, which not only did not lift a finger in protest at the magazines' closure by the state, but had also even called the government's stance 'understandable'. To journalists, it was no secret that the PWI had long been transformed into nothing but an arm of the Ministry of Information. But the group's non-reaction to the ban was the clearest sign that it had become an anti-journalist organisation.

On August 7, 1994, a group of young journalists formed the AJI, the establishment of which to some extent shook the hegemony of the PWI. This was proved through the vicious efforts of the Ministry of Information and the PWI to destroy the new organisation. The PWI swiftly dismissed 13 of its members who were involved in AJI and requested media companies not to employ AJI journalists. Dozens of AJI journalists either had their work frozen by their publications or were requested to resign.

Editors-in-chief considered unsympathetic to the government saw their recommendations repealed and their rights as editors lost. One PWI board member issued this threat to an editor-in-chief who was known to have AJI members in his staff: 'The important thing is that AJI members are not allowed to work as journalists. If they want to work for press companies, then it should be as janitors.'

Yet while the birth of AJI was hastened by the banning of the three magazines in June 1994, it already had begun germinating when young journalists in several cities established journalistic discussion fora. These were the Independent Journalists' Forum of Bandung, the Yogyakarta Journalists' Discussion Forum, the Press Club in Surabaya and the Solidarity of Independent Journalists in Jakarta.

Established in the early 1990s, these fora were fluid and informal, since, at that stage, it was almost impossible to form a formal organisation for journalists apart from the PWI. Such media discussion groups became oases for journalists who had no real organisation that would give voice to their aspirations. At the same time, though, journalists were also encouraged to form such groups because of the sudden decision of the Suharto government to

declare a period of *keterbukaan* or openness, saying that Indonesian society was mature enough to stand a livelier press. Of course, that did not stop authorities from flexing their muscle whenever they found it fit to do so; the 1994 shutdown of the three magazines also showed just how little ‘openness’ the government could actually tolerate.

After the establishment of AJI, the tendency of the Suharto regime to co-opt and only recognise just one organisation in each sector of society began to invite opposition. In the labour sector, the Indonesian Union for Prosperous Workers (SBSI) was formed as a competitor to the state-sponsored All Indonesia Workers’ Union (SPSI). The official women’s organisation Dharma Wanita found itself facing numerous rivals as new women’s NGOs emerged. Among students, various ‘committees’ or ‘solidarity groups’ were formed to compete with student organisations recognised by the government.

AJI and these various ‘private’ groups, along with a number of NGOs, went on to establish an opposition network. They attempted to appear in the political sphere by appropriating the function of political parties and the parliament, both of which had been silenced by the executive.

AJI set up a network among young journalists in various regions, while conducting training for student press activists and organising demonstrations. Among those journalists who retained pretensions of being ‘objective’ and ‘professional’, AJI was seen to be drowning in politics.

The first three years of AJI were difficult. Instead of increasing its ranks during those years, the AJI saw its membership diminish. A number of AJI members, whose publications had been banned, were forced to apologise to the PWI if they wished to return to work as journalists. In truth, many journalists claimed to be sympathetic to AJI but refrained from signing up, since those known to be AJI members risked dismissal or being sidelined in their work. Worse was the risk of imprisonment. At least six AJI members ended up behind bars, four for publishing the underground magazine *Independen* and two on account of their reporting.

**Rejecting press
licensing: The
publication of
*Suara Independen***

By the time the Suharto government thought of offering *keterbukaan* to the local press in 1990, the media had been repressed for so long that self-censorship had become the norm, while those who could not help expressing themselves resorted to euphemisms to avoid reprimand and official retaliation. The press did take some advantage of the government’s supposed softening and took up issues that had long been absent in newspapers and

magazines, such as the political aspirations of Muslim groups, the businesses of the ethnic Chinese and the problems of East Timor. But these topics were still subject to much careful editing so as to make them more palatable—or at least less threatening—to the authorities.

Indeed, by then, the majority of the Indonesian mass media had become little more than the government's mouthpiece; whatever was said by high-ranking government or military officials was printed, and many times headlined by newspapers.

It would not be excessive to say, therefore, that the fettered Indonesian press played a role in preserving the power of the regime that was oppressing it. A number of tricks employed by the press in order to survive in fact indirectly strengthened the stranglehold of the Suharto regime. The press is partly responsible for the internalisation by Indonesian society of the regime's slogans—including 'latent communist threat', 'stability and development', and 'ABRI/military as the dynamisator'—that were used to justify the government's actions, however questionable. The press repeated them all, word for word, without attempting to analyse what they meant or did not mean.

This press that was not free also took part in teaching fear—of freedom—to society. Or at the very least, journalists played dumb, so long as they still received financial benefits from the work that they did. Indeed, it was during the Suharto era, beginning in the mid-1980s, that the local press began to taste the fruits of its labour. The information industry (for that was what it was) was reaping sizable rewards and journalists were enjoying their share of the media's healthy profits. This coincided, not surprisingly, with the rapid economic growth that Indonesia itself was experiencing. Meanwhile, government officials were apparently raking it in as well. But this went largely without comment from much of the press: as the finances of journalists improved, their social conscience became increasingly blunt. Increasing circulation and advertising became the main aims of the press. Profit, not the quality of news, became the priority.

To be fair, this focus on personal financial gain became a sort of escapism for journalists who had become frustrated by their inability to do their jobs fully because of the continuing repressive conditions, including the ever-present threat of having their press licences (SIUPP) revoked should they make a wrong move. In order to publish, you had to have a SIUPP. To obtain one, however, was extremely difficult, and this was not only because the criteria for getting such a licence were unclear. It was no secret that only those who were close to the people in power could obtain a new SIUPP.

From the outset, the SIUPP was exploited as a tool to control press ownership. And when the Ministry of Information decided at the end of the 1980s not to issue any new SIUPP, this piece of paper became an extremely expensive commodity to be bought and sold.

It was this situation that prompted the AJI to publish *Independen* even without a SIUPP. But apart from representing a rejection of ‘permission politics’, *Independen* also functioned as an alternative medium for those readers dissatisfied with the news content of the mainstream media.

At first, *Independen* was published as a newsletter for AJI members, and thus tackled solely issues concerning the press. In due course, it was agreed that *Independen* should also provide a space for general news, specifically what was not covered by the mainstream press. *Independen* thus became an outlet for reports of AJI members that could not be published elsewhere. Soon, it was playing the role that should have belonged to the mainstream press, if only it had the courage: as disseminator of the news behind the news, analysing issues that affected Indonesian society as a whole.

One investigative report that appeared in *Independen*’s edition no. 10 particularly caught the public’s attention. Published in the lead-up to National Press Day in February 1995, the report exposed the ownership of shares by then Information Minister Harmoko and his family in several mass media organisations. Of course, this piece of information had already been widely discussed in media circles, albeit only in whispers. But rather than let it remain an unclear issue—as the licensed press was not prepared to expose it—*Independen* decided to make it its cover story.

The report revealed that the Information Minister and his family possessed shares in 32 media companies, including several of the more prominent ones. Some of these shares were not directly registered in Harmoko’s name. For example, 28 per cent of the shares in an economics weekly were in the name of one of Harmoko’s siblings. In the prominent English language daily *Jakarta Post*, five per cent of the shares were in the name of Harmoko’s wife. To be sure, their ownership of these shares would have been perfectly valid, provided that they were purchased. But it was common knowledge that the shares had been obtained free of charge by Harmoko’s family. More precisely, they had been demanded from the media firms’ owners as ‘requirements’ that would smooth the process of obtaining a new SIUPP.

When an *Independen* journalist sought confirmation of the story from the

Minister for Information Harmoko, he had refused to answer, and instead shooed away the reporter as someone coming from a 'feral publication'. But this did not stop *Independen* from pushing on; in its March 1995 edition, it published 'Suharto III, The Political Elite Compete'. Several days after this edition came out, the publication, which by then had become a 32-page monthly magazine, was banned because authorities said it was spreading hatred, pitting society against itself, as well as causing unease and fanning anti-state sentiments among Indonesians.

The banning of *Independen* was announced together with the banning of a number of books (the Indonesian government each year releases a list of 'forbidden' books). This meant that anyone known to have read *Independen* faced legal sanctions. This ban was accompanied by the arrest of three AJI members, Ahmad Taufik, Eko Maryadi and Danang Kukuh Wardoyo, who were subsequently tried and sentenced to two to three years in prison. The AJI office was raided and searched by security forces; a number of AJI board members were pursued by intelligence agents and were forced to go into hiding.

But all this did not lead to the death of *Independen*. The monthly soon resumed publication, although it took on a different name, *Suara Independen* (Independent Voice). By changing the name slightly, readers of the magazine were protected from legal sanctions since they could argue that the 'new' publication was not among the banned materials. Still, *Suara Independen* had to go underground, which just made it all the more sought after and awaited not only by authorities but by readers who could not find the information it offered anywhere else. In the middle of 1996, the authorities extracted another 'sacrifice' from the magazine. Andi Syahputra, a mere distributor of *Suara Independen* who knew nothing about the magazine's production, was arrested and sentenced to 30 months in prison.

Despite all the risks involved in putting out *Suara Independen*, AJI continued to publish it, though only in photocopy form as there was no longer any printer willing to take it on. AJI was not prepared to back down from what it saw as its responsibility: to provide the public with information that was free from government censorship. The lack of a licence mattered little. In going on with *Independen*, what AJI wanted to convey other press organisations as well as the public was this: Do not surrender so easily.

Vigilance needed to keep the press free

Information, like water, is difficult to dam. Although impeded, it will always find a way to continue to flow. The Suharto regime for 25 years may have

succeeded in systematically obstructing information, but it could not keep it under control for too long. The killing-off of three highly successful, hard-hitting magazines in June 1994 in fact gave rise to a spirit of opposition.

It has been said that President Suharto's downfall in May 1998 was largely because of the economic crisis. So long as he had kept the people fed, it was argued, he had been all right. But physical hunger was not the only impetus for the Indonesian people to seek his ousting. Once they were taken off the steady diet of lies from the mainstream media and the government, and switched to the information available from the alternative media, including the Internet, Indonesians immediately saw what a sham their government was.

In late 1997, as the economic situation grew worse, even the mainstream press decided that it could no longer be silent. The newspapers began placing student demonstrations and demands for reform on the front page, something they had never dared to do before. Angered, Suharto proceeded to whip out his once reliable tactics of intimidation, accusing the press of 'hyperbole and spreading disinformation'. In the past, that would have been enough to shut up the press. But Indonesian journalists were no longer listening to the government.

Suharto's resignation gave Indonesia the opportunity for change. For journalists, this has meant the possibility that freedom of the press will finally be guaranteed. The new information minister has revised the press licence stipulations and regulations about journalistic organisations. The government can no longer revoke SIUPPs arbitrarily, and a new SIUPP is now extremely easy to obtain. Between June and October 1998 alone, 297 new SIUPPs have been issued—compared with 241 SIUPPs given out during the 32 years of the Suharto regime.

Another positive development has been the recognition of journalists' right to establish a new organisation apart from the PWI. AJI, which for four years had operated as an illegal group, has now been recognised officially, enabling members to open branches in seven provinces. This has boosted membership numbers from about 200 to some 700 in November 1998. Hundreds more journalists are signing up as AJI members while even more branches are in the process of being set up.

Aside from AJI and PWI, there are now at least eight press organisations as well. There is a boom in the press industry, not only in terms of new groups, but also in new publications. In the euphoria that followed the sudden resig-

nation of Suharto, this is only to be expected. Political parties themselves have mushroomed; there are now 108 of them, when there used to be just three.

Thus, in the post-Suharto era, a number of AJI's demands have begun to be realised: journalists are free to form organisations, the licensing system has been revised and freedom of the press has more or less been attained. Yet this does not mean that AJI's struggle has come to an end. Indonesia is currently in a transitional period. It is as yet uncertain in what direction change will finally proceed. A number of oppressive regulations remain and so does the possibility of their use to once more snatch away what freedoms have been won. The character of the Habibie government cannot yet be predicted. It is wise to keep in mind that not only is President Habibie a former protégé and close family friend of Suharto but a number of current government officials also come from the ranks of 'Suharto's people'. There is no certainty that the Habibie government will not revert to old policies, including the restrictions on the press.

This being so, the next task at least for AJI is to help establish a strong civil society. AJI is also working to spread commitment and a firm principle of independence among journalists. It needs to be said that AJI activists previously steeped in 'political' opposition must now undergo a reorientation. But one of the more urgent aims that needs to be accomplished as soon as possible is a guarantee of freedom of the press that must be institutionalised in the form of legislation. Unfortunately, at present, the result of the formulation of draft mass media laws to replace the 1982 Press Laws remains unclear.

Once a guarantee of press freedom has been attained, then the next step would be to increase professionalism among journalists and consolidate solidarity among colleagues. This can be accomplished through the formation of a solid trade union. This is despite the fact that a trade union for journalists is somewhat of a 'novelty' since journalism in Indonesia is viewed more as a profession than a trade. But then the existence of a strong and professional journalists' trade union may just be the thing that would enable journalists to help themselves in the face of various political and economic pressures, before they venture forth and help the public.

Moreover, obstacles to information do not always come from the government; media company owners and even the rest of society can also thwart the truth from coming out. Just recently, a group claiming to represent 20 Muslim organisations sought legal action against a magazine that, it said,

defamed Islam. Apparently, the publication had a story containing a quote from an ethnic Chinese woman who said she was one of those raped in the May 1998 riots. According to the woman, her attacker told her she was being attacked because she was Chinese and 'non-Muslim'.

Meanwhile, the behaviour of the Habibie administration is becoming a cause for concern as it is adopting the style of Suharto's regime in obstructing freedom of expression.

Just several weeks after being named Suharto's successor, for instance, Habibie broached his idea of instituting a licensing system for journalists; a month after, he announced a government regulation that restrict freedom of expression. Luckily enough, both policies were rejected owing to fierce public resistance that formed soon after the news was announced and its implications were analysed in the media.

Habibie has also not shirked from ordering the military to take stern action in handling demonstrators. The new President has even told his security forces to blacklist Dr Jeffrey Winters, a US academic who is an Indonesia expert, apparently because Winters revealed in a paper the involvement of several Habibie Cabinet ministers in corrupt practices.

The winds of change are sweeping Indonesia today, but it is yet unclear where they will take the country eventually. Freedom remains under threat, and it is the duty of the press and the rest of Indonesian society to see that it does not get blown away from their grasp.

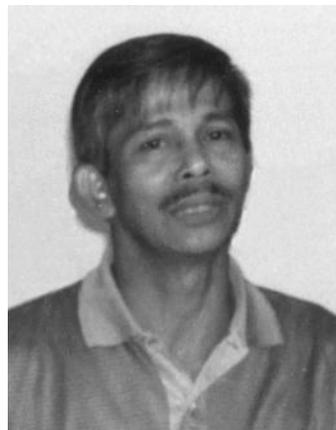
Indonesia: The Web as a Weapon

By Tedjabayu Basuki

In this contribution, Tedjabayu Basuki shows how the Internet proved instrumental in bringing an abrupt end to the regime of President Suharto of Indonesia in May 1998. Data communication technology had made an unremarkable debut in Indonesia through the banking sector in the 1970s; however, two decades later, student activists, non-governmental organisations and disgruntled journalists found their way to the World Wide Web—and an alternative path towards freedom of expression. There they posted and read news not carried by the mainstream media, discussed issues considered taboo by the government and formed coalitions dedicated to bringing about political change in Indonesia.

By the time the Indonesian authorities realised what was happening, dissident 'Netizens' were already too far ahead in their work to be stopped; at the same time, copies of the reports posted on the Web were being downloaded, photocopied by the thousands, and reaching even more people. Among the most damaging pieces of information disseminated in this way was a report detailing the wealth of the Suharto and Habibie families. The author argues that as fax machines were to the students in Tiananmen Square, so was the Internet to Indonesian activists.

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Capable of cutting through time and space, the Internet offers a means of communication not previously dreamed of. It has created important new possibilities as it shrinks distances and provides an astounding volume and variety of information to those who have computer access. One result of this is the acceleration of the development of solidarity networks among peoples, regions and countries. In Indonesia, it has even managed to help topple a strongman who, until his unscheduled resignation in May 1998, had been Asia's longest reigning post-war ruler. To Indonesia's powers that be, controlling the Internet has become close to being an obsession.

But there seems to be no way of controlling a medium, which has thwarted people who have succeeded in repressing all forms of free expression for more than three decades. Try as it might, the state apparatus seems to be unable to anticipate and contain the extremely speedy development of the Internet, which in Indonesia is still free of censorship. Thus, while activists

belonging to the 'illegal' faction of the opposition Indonesian Democratic Party (PDI) may be on the run from authorities, they are free to convey their propaganda on the Web, and even insult the head of the armed forces and the President if they feel like it.

Indeed, there is as yet no match for the speed and capacity of the Internet to disseminate information and views, making it a medium that is greatly superior to all others for that purpose. Although Indonesians are still shackled by repressive regulations and state control such as the Anti-Subversion Law, a small piece of equipment combined with a telephone cable has enabled them to speak their minds without much fear of official retribution. They can travel throughout the country and even beyond its borders without the state being able to hold them down. Many have already stumbled on a number of simple-to-use but sophisticated tools such as Pretty Good Privacy (PGP) that protect Internet users from state censorship. Further safeguards are available through the anonymity offered by Hotmail, Yahoo and Iname, among others. Of course, it has been a bonus that there is a scarcity of people among the security forces and intelligence service who have Internet savvy.

The 'Net-ting' of Indonesia

The truth is that Indonesian authorities, like their counterparts in other countries, simply could not have imagined that an ordinary piece of equipment called the computer would produce something like the Net, and that this would be too powerful for them to control. After all, when data communication was first used in Indonesia, it was by Bank Indonesia. This was in the mid-1970s; even uber-geek god Bill Gates of Microsoft still walked among mortals then. The Indonesian government itself later developed inter-computer communications for state universities aimed at fulfilling administrative needs with respect to curriculum development.

But then the arrival of PC clones and the subsequent proliferation of pirated computer programmes enabled students and other computer buffs to develop their creativity in the realms of both software and hardware. This accelerated the Indonesian middle class's ability to absorb new advances in the computer field and made Indonesia one of the leading countries in PC usage.

Indosat, a state company that manages satellite communications, soon introduced a global data communication service, and provided packet switching in the form of leased line and dial-up services. But these services did not attract many clients because of their high cost as well as a slowpoke data transfer speed of just 2,400 bps for a leased line.

Then came Lintasarta, a joint venture company (comprising Indosat and the state-owned Bank Indonesia) that opened up new access through Internet networks. Through a joint venture with SprintNet USA, data communications users—then still limited to big and medium-sized businesses that often used US-based Internet Service Providers (ISPs) such as America On Line and Compuserve—were able to reduce their communication costs because they no longer had to pay for long distance calls and could instead make local calls.

May 1995 witnessed the emergence of Radnet, the first ISP in Indonesia, followed several months later by IndoInternet, a joint venture company between the government-owned company PT Indosat and investors from the private sector. After that, dozens of other ISPs set up shop, primarily in Jakarta and Bandung. The government's own ambitious project to open Internet access throughout Indonesia was realised when, in 1996, the Indonesia Postal Service agency decided to expand its business by opening ISPs in every provincial capital. It is no exaggeration to say that 1996 was the year cyberspace routes opened up for Indonesian society, or at least for the middle class, just one year after *Time* magazine proclaimed 1995 as the 'Year of the Internet'.

By 1998, ISP subscribers in Indonesia were already some 100,000 in number. Many of these subscribers belonged to the middle class (a term that is not really appropriate to use because in Indonesia it refers more to financial worth), although there were also some members of that small stratum of society known as the upper class, which includes both business people and bureaucrats. Students were also among the most avid Netizens by then, as were non-governmental organisations (NGOs).

An interesting development has been the emergence of Internet 'shops' in big cities. These are usually cafés or telecommunication centres that are equipped with computers with Internet access. In university towns these cafés are extremely popular among students because of the low cost—around Rp. 2,000 per hour (prior to the economic slump).

It is from these sites that many activists and students are able to receive news about events that are not fully reported in the mainstream media. Because every café also provides a printer for hire, users are able to obtain hard copies of the material. With a speed that is hard to estimate, print-outs of alternative news are then distributed down to the grassroots.

Subversion in cyberspace

It is hard to pinpoint just when it was that the Web began to be transformed into a weapon of dissent in Indonesia, but it is clear that Indonesian students studying abroad had discovered its many uses earlier than their compatriots at home. Many of these students overseas at first began using the Net to conduct academic discussions through online conferences they created as well as through listservs or mailing lists. Student networks soon sprang up, such as IndoZNet for those studying in Australia, ISNet for Muslim students and ParokiNet for the Roman Catholics. But it did not take them long to realise that cyberspace also afforded them the opportunity to talk about topics considered taboo back home, such as human rights abuses and the repressive policies of the Indonesian government.

Then there was also John McDougall, an American, who had begun an information company in 1984. McDougall's firm specialised in research findings and quality articles from the Indonesian media. While he sold these commercially, McDougall also disseminated the data he compiled to various newsgroups and Internet conferences. He encountered such enthusiastic response that in 1990, he set up a free mailing list that subsequently became known throughout the world as 'Apakabar' (How do you do).

Apakabar offered a wide range of views, from the radical to the moderate, from pro-democracy activists to intelligence officers masquerading as Netizens. These state agents were supposed to counter any negative information about the regime, and they did their job using both polite and coarse language. But the genuine Apakabar aficionados were almost always able to spot which ones were bogus Netizens, and argued against the disinformation to such good effect that most of the latter soon fell silent. Apparently, only a few of these pro-government militants were able to stand using such a democratic—and at times approaching anarchic—medium.

This mailing list subsequently played a central role in spreading up-to-date information about Indonesia. It is also likely to have been an important factor in accelerating Indonesian society's awareness of the need to re-assess its values. Apakabar had become a site for extremely open and democratic debates on Indonesia, helped no doubt by McDougall's willingness to allow anonymity to any Apakabar user who requested it. In the end, the US-based Apakabar's success inspired a number of groups in Indonesia to spread ideas and democratic ideals through mailing lists, as this was safer than using the print media that had all sorts of restrictions.

While all this was going on, Indonesian NGOs were also busy discovering the Web. Probably the first NGO to obtain access to the Internet was Wahana

Lingkungan Hidup (WALHI), actually a forum for various environmental groups, that in 1989 got a link-up with an ISP in Europe. Sadly, a lack of human resources meant that this access was not used to full effect.

It took some more years before Indonesian advocacy NGOs began tapping the power of the Net. In 1990, the LBH (Legal Aid Institute) obtained Internet access and started to post reports about the human rights situation in Indonesia on Apakabar. But it was not until five years later, when the group posted an Urgent Action (UA) on Apakabar, that cyberspace was finally recognised as a real battleground between the pro-democracy activists and the supporters of the Suharto rule. The UA, consisting of only three short sentences, was a protest against the murder of a woman labour activist who had been leading a workers' strike in East Java; the military was the suspected killer.

In less than six hours after the UA was posted, the fax machines in the Office of the President, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Ministry of Defense and Security were jammed with hundreds of sheets of protest from around the world. This event dramatically changed Marsinah, a young and unknown village girl from East Java, into a workers' heroine known worldwide. It also sparked an NGO-instigated online information war against one of the harshest military regimes in the world.

By that time, though, the Internet was already hosting Web sites and listservs run by Indonesian journalists and academics who were increasingly chafing under the state's repression of mainstream media. This intensified after the banning of three leading magazines *Tempo*, *DeTIK* and *Editor* in June 1994.

Fearing the same would happen to them, the rest of Indonesia's local publications practically surrendered to the authorities. But ex-*Tempo* staffers and its management decided to go online and developed the 'Tempo Interaktif'. This was most probably the first step in the use of the Internet as a tool of dissent by journalists who felt oppressed by the Suharto regime. Student activists downloaded the contents of *Tempo Interaktif* to make hard copies, which were then sold on campuses and among NGOs.

People thirsty for knowledge regarding what was really going on in Indonesia began flocking to the Web. This rise in interest was accommodated by the emergence of the likes of SiaR, MateBEAN, MeunaSAH, MamberaMO, KDPNet and AJINews, which complemented materials offered by other sites and listservs.

Such online information and news are considered to have been crucial in strengthening public conviction that it was time for the Suharto government to go. Among the most explosive material that used to be found only on the Internet was the list of assets of the Suharto and Habibie families and their cronies, compiled by Dr George Junus Aditjondro. This was downloaded and then circulated in photocopied form while Suharto was still in power. After his resignation, the mass media began to quote Aditjondro's research. Recently, various publishing houses put it into book form.

There was also the GoRo-GoRo on the SiarList mailing list. Actually a collection of political jokes about Suharto and his supporters, GoRo-GoRo became immensely popular and was widely disseminated. The jokes were eventually published in a book that was printed in tens of thousands.

Even today, young journalists frustrated that their reports do not get published in full in the print media post their works on the Internet. Some journalists have even formed an online discussion group called 'Kuli Tinta' (Slave of Ink). The SiarList itself remains as a news agency that publishes political and economic news as well as articles on human rights.

For those without access to a computer, children selling newspapers on the streets sold hard copies of downloaded Internet news at low prices. The Internet news sold very well, but the children were unknowingly putting themselves at risk. In 1996, the police arrested two university lecturers (in Yogyakarta and Pekalongan) apparently for possessing hard copies of Siar news items downloaded from certain mailing lists. Recently, police officers also arrested two children selling photocopies of downloaded materials.

Efforts to control and censor

Other countries in Southeast Asia have since tried to thwart dissension on the Web by imposing restrictions on Internet access. In Indonesia, the Suharto government used to hint about similar restrictions through the Minister of Post and Telecommunications who said regulations were needed to protect youth from the dangers of pornography and guerrilla politics via the Internet. Senior armed forces officials also criticised postings that were 'divisive' or that 'incited' or 'endangered political stability'. Fortunately, though, regulations on the Net have yet to be introduced.

Still, ISP users in Indonesia have reported attempts to censor the flow of information on the Net. E-mail sometimes fails to reach its destination or is delayed for several days. E-mail addresses known to be used by dissidents are said to be subject to censorship attempts by unknown individuals within

certain providers. In the days before the student demonstrations in 1998, access to ISPs in Jakarta was very difficult. It may well be that this was because too many people were trying to use them at the same time. But many observers believe that the providers were being forced to sabotage the system.

A number of business conglomerates such as Freeport McMoran, for example, apparently censored postings from certain mailing lists. Every posting from any of these mailing lists was returned to the provider from which they were sent with the note 'User Name Unknown'. A number of sensitive postings were also discarded for the reason that the address to which they were sent was not known.

For their part, many Indonesian Netizens have always been wary of the Web, despite its seeming invulnerability to outside 'threats'. Almost all advocacy NGOs, for example, agreed early on that the Net did not necessarily free them from the risk of official retaliation for what they did in cyberspace. Eventually they concluded that in addition to using commercial ISPs, they also needed e-mail access that did not have any direct link to the Internet.

In 1994, the advocacy NGO community developed a restricted e-mail system called the NusaNet Consortium. Today, there are five towns in Indonesia that function as NusaNet sub-hosts. NusaNet also plays a major role in disseminating alternative news from the Internet to the NGO community. According to its users, the NusaNet e-mail system and the newsgroups within it are fairly secure because they generally use the PGP encryption system for inter-NGO communications.

But there will always be hackers. In the Indonesian experience, though, Net infiltration so far seems to be more concentrated on the issue of East Timor than anything else. In February 1997, hackers, apparently from Portugal, infiltrated a Web site run by the Indonesian Ministry of Foreign Affairs that was regarded as having disseminated lies about East Timor, a former Portuguese colony that was annexed by Indonesia in 1976. The hackers not only got the site, but also managed to change the appearance of the Web page, altering the greeting 'Welcome to the Department of Foreign Affairs Republic of Indonesia' to read 'Welcome to the Department of Foreign Affairs Fascist Republic of Indonesia'.

Prior to this, in late November 1996, the home page of the BPPT office that had been singing praises of the technological developments under then Minister of Research and Technology, B.J. Habibie, was also penetrated by Portuguese hackers. The attack, it was said, had been made to mark the fifth an-

niversary of the Sta. Cruz tragedy in which a still undetermined number of unarmed pro-independence demonstrators were shot dead by Indonesian soldiers. Such hacker attacks were repeated on various official Indonesian government sites that functioned as propaganda tools, including the home pages of the armed forces, the police, the Ministry of Defense and Security, as well as the ruling party Golkar. In retaliation, pro-Indonesian government hackers attacked a Web site in Portugal that was known as the 'den' of politically conscious computer activists.

The Internet in Indonesia's future

For most Indonesian Netizens, though, the Internet obviously goes beyond East Timor and its myriad problems. It is not far-fetched to say that while the students in Tiananmen Square fought the Chinese government with fax machines, Indonesian students, NGOs and journalists marked a new era by speeding up the downfall of a corrupt regime partly through the might of the Internet. To be sure, not only were intense discussions about democracy and human rights held in cyberspace and then disseminated through photocopies of downloaded materials, much of the militant actions aimed against Suharto were coordinated on the Net.

Today, the Internet continues to be crucial to Indonesia's future, and is still regarded as an alternative medium for views and news that would otherwise remain unheard and unwritten. While Indonesian authorities are less strict on the media these days than they were during the Suharto regime, there are still reports that go unpublished and vital information that does not get to the people. The Internet has thus continued as the one venue in which people can express the otherwise inexpressible and have access to information denied them in the mainstream media.

But there are indications that the Net may also evolve into a mainstream medium of sorts, especially now that the cost of producing print media has risen sharply. Newsprint now costs almost Rp. 9,000 (USD 1) per kilo. There are also the overhead expenses of editorial offices and other production needs—such as film, batteries, electricity, telephone, and printing—to consider. Not cheap even during pre-crisis days, all of these now run astronomical tabs.

Although various forms of mass media have emerged recently, observers see this as merely an element of political euphoria. There is no doubt that the mainstream print media in Indonesia are under the threat of bankruptcy. One means of ensuring their continued existence is to evolve into paperless media and go online. It is highly possible that Indonesian media organisations may yet find themselves competing in cyberspace.



Philippines: The Problem with Freedom

By Melinda Quintos de Jesus

Rambunctious and often irreverent, the Philippine press enjoys freedom that is perhaps the least limited in Asia. However, as Melinda Quintos de Jesus argues below, this was not always the case. Less than 13 years ago, the Philippines was under a regime that had little tolerance for dissent and criticism of any kind. Yet even while most of the mainstream media at that time were cowed into submission, some journalists still occasionally tested the temper of the authorities, and an underground press churned out photocopied 'subversive' material. Soon this developed into the so-called 'mosquito press' that pricked the powers that be more incessantly. When opposition leader Benigno 'Ninoy' Aquino Jr was assassinated in 1983, the alternative media became determined to go beyond the boundaries drawn by the military-backed government of President Ferdinand Marcos.



That the press in the Philippines could not contain its criticism of government even under a repressive regime is the legacy of history, the author explains. 'Serial colonisation' ensured that there would always be a segment of the press that would act as watchdog against government excesses, even as the majority of the newspapers—owned by businessmen—kowtowed to authorities and politicians. Since the departure of the colonial masters, succeeding governments have had to suffer a press that has taken them to task with varying degrees of frequency and venom.

Today, that oppositionist stance is nurtured all the more in a democratic climate. But the freedom enjoyed by the Philippine press is often unmatched by an equally generous sense of responsibility. At the same time, the media are becoming more and more embroiled in corporate and political turf wars because of the owners' business interests and political alliances.

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The press in the Philippines remains an interesting case to observers of democratic development in Asia. It stands out in Asia for its autonomy from government control. Its newspapers are noted for their freewheeling ap-

proach to news, their unrelenting criticism of government and politics, and a distinctive flamboyance in editorial style.

Twelve years after the downfall of the Marcos dictatorship, the commitment to freedom has remained strong. During the turbulent transition from dictatorship, journalistic exercise continued with hardly any interference from government control. Through various political crises or disasters and calamities, both the Aquino and Ramos administrations did not waver in their commitment to a free press.

In the period of democratic recovery, the press has remained a vibrant feature of national life. The same exuberance shown by the 'alternative press' in challenging government controls colours news coverage now that a free press system has been installed. The results have not always been for the better. Headlines and photos scream for attention. Personalities lead the stories, the more controversial the better. But whatever the faults of the press, it has retained a special place in public life, perceived as the much-needed watchdog of those in power, in government and in the establishment community.

A matter of history

Most observers quickly conclude that the character of the press in the Philippines originates in the country's colonisation by the United States, a period which lasted almost 50 years. US journalism has been identified as the most libertarian in its treatment of the media, with the First Amendment doctrine protecting the practice and role of the press as 'watchdog' of society. But the oppositionist or critical stance that typifies much of Philippine journalism today had its beginning long before the American period, when revolutionary publications aided the struggle against Spain, which had ruled the islands for nearly four centuries. Indeed, the first newspapers were published by the Spanish community in Manila, serving the socio-political as well as commercial interests of the ruling elite.

In the second half of the 19th century, Filipino reformers turned to the instruments of the press as a vehicle for dissent and for expressing public grievance. The pressure for reform as well as for radical change led to publications in Spanish as well as in the Philippine language, Tagalog. *Diariong Tagalog* (Tagalog Newspaper), edited by Filipino lawyer Marcelo del Pilar was bilingual. The nationalist propaganda paper, *La Solidaridad* (Solidarity), most often cited as a model of the press advocacy of revolution, was published in Spain and written in the Spanish language by Filipinos living as exiles in Europe. The paper was smuggled into the country and read by the Filipino elite who had begun to agitate for reform and turned against the co-

lonial government. Later, a publication in Tagalog, *Kalayaan* (Freedom), would do the same for the masses. Journalism in the name of political advocacy gave expression to the pent-up feelings of a subject people, evolving a dramatic style that would serve as rhetoric for dissent as well as revolution.

On the other side of the Pacific, Spain and the United States had gone to war against each other in 1898. As a Spanish colony, the islands were ceded to the United States with the defeat of Spain. Filipinos waging revolution against Spain had just proclaimed their independence that same year. The centennial of Philippine freedom observed in 1998 was for that first but short-lived republic proclaimed by the Filipino general who became its first president. General Emilio Aguinaldo thought the United States had come to their aid against Spain; but his army soon had to regroup their forces to challenge the new colonisers. The Filipinos lost that war and Philippine independence from colonial rule would be postponed for almost half a century.

Writers would continue to play a role in the national struggle as soldiers engaged in rebellion and resistance against the foreign conqueror or oppressor. At the turn of the century, publications like the *La Independencia* (Independence) and later *El Renacimiento* (The Rebirth) provided outlets for revolutionary expression as the United States began its major colonial enterprise across the Pacific.

The extended US regime schooled Filipinos in US experience, in a Republican style two-party system of government and a press that saw itself as the 'fourth estate', with enough clout to play the role of watchdog of government and other forces in power. With the outbreak of World War II, the Philippines became occupied territory of the Japanese.

Serial colonisation set a pattern for the use of the press by authorities in pursuit of their ends, to control and to regulate the population. At the same time, anti-colonial forces used the same instrument for their purposes, confronting and challenging the powers that be.

The press as a business enterprise

The press during the American period reflected the dichotomy in public sentiment. American-published newspapers, such as the *Manila Times*, voiced their defence of the colonial regime. Filipino politicians launching their campaign for autonomy realised they needed a press vehicle to aid the cause of self-rule. Then Senator Manuel Quezon, who later became president of the Philippine Commonwealth, found wealthy friends, among them the Madrigals and the Elizaldes, who were willing to fund the *Philippine Her-*

ald to serve as a forum for their politics. The *Herald's* success evolved into a chain as owners acquired more newspapers, including the *El Debate* (The Debate), *Mabuhay* (Long Live), *Herald* and *Monday Mail*, collectively called DHMM.

This enterprise exemplified the development of the press as a full-fledged business. Alejandro Roces established the *Tribune-La Vanguardia* and *Talibab* chain with the magazine *Graphic*. His son, Ramon, published the vernacular *Liwayway* (Dawn) and followed this up with others in different local languages. These specialised in serialised novels and short stories, more than news, and gained popular following in the provinces.

The Japanese occupation interrupted press history, so to speak. Bombs destroyed DHMM's plant in 1942. The established news organisations were all dismantled or taken over by the Japanese to ensure editorial control, while the former editors were either arrested or forced to go into hiding. In counterpoint, guerrilla forces put out anti-Japanese leaflets, typewritten or mimeographed.

After the country's liberation from Japanese occupation forces, the press would bloom once again. With news free from censoring authorities, people were eager for any kind of newspaper. Newspapers took all forms. With newsprint in short supply, some of these newspapers were printed on whatever was available, even the lined pad paper used by schoolchildren.

Soon, the pre-war leaders in the press industry got back to business. The Roces groups revived the TVT chain, the *Manila Times* and *Liwayway*. Another pre-war publication owned by the Americans, the *Manila Daily Bulletin*, was bought by Swiss businessman Hans Menzi. The *Herald* resumed publication with the Elizaldes as owners. It would be sold later to the Sorianos who owned San Miguel Corp., the beer company. The Lopezes also got into the publishing game, buying the *Manila Chronicle*, a paper started up by journalists kicked out of another paper for having formed a union. This period marked the end of the small advocacy papers that first gave shape and form to the Philippine press.

These owners were business rivals, competing with one another for economic opportunities and resources. But while they held on to their roles as businessmen engaged in other issues of commerce and industry, they also made possible the growth of the press as an institution strong enough to influence the course of national affairs.

After independence from the United States in 1946, post-war journalism was primed to play the role of government adversary, engaged as an ally of the opposition political parties until a change of hands and parties was caused by the next election. But there had always been room for press collaboration with those in authority. News companies were operated as a business, whose owners were also engaged in other economic and political interests. Investments in the press reflected earnings gained from shipping, sugar, and other financial issues. The press orientation towards the establishment remains a recurring theme and issue in the practice of the press up to the present.

A journalist remembering those 'good old days', Amando Doronila, noted how media proprietors then recognised editorial autonomy within limits. But they ruled out the advocacy of ideas and practices that would bring down the system. In some way, the competition of market forces worked out some kind of check-and-balance, which in its course also benefited journalists.

The development of the broadcasting news media gained momentum from the growth of newspapers. Newspaper owners soon invested in radio and later in television. Radio got started in the American period. Commercial television began in 1952 with the very first station, DZAQ Channel 3, opened by Alto Broadcasting System, which was owned by Antonio Quirino, brother of then President Elpidio Quirino. In 1956, the Chronicle Broadcasting Network owned by the Lopezes had its start with one radio station. It bought Alto Broadcasting System the following year. It would eventually grow to become the largest and most financially stable broadcasting company in the 1990s. In 1960, Republic Broadcasting System, which started in radio in 1950, also opened another TV station, DZBB-TV or Channel 7, the precursor of GMA-7.

These enterprises were based on advertising revenues. Programming was commercial in orientation, dependent on mass appeal and shaped by the popular taste. The newspapers and other broadcasting media operating at the time heralded the modern enterprises that make up the industry at present.

Radio and television mainly served the purposes of entertainment at first. But public affairs and news are now mainstays of programming, providing for some a competitive edge. Radio and television programmes prove their high impact and reach in the broadcasting of news and live coverage of events. Broadcasting journalists have also begun to explore in the medium for in-depth documentary reports and investigative exposés.

**Martial law:
homegrown
repression**

Newspapers were suppressed by President Ferdinand Marcos when he declared martial law in 1972 to enable him to extend his term of office, thereby changing the course of the Philippine press. Marcos was a popular politician from the northern provinces of the country who rose to the ranks of the ruling party and became a prominent national political figure. He became president in 1964 and won an unprecedented second term in 1968. Because he could not run for a third term, he manipulated proceedings in a Constitutional Convention to secure a legal excuse for his term extension.

There was a total blackout on the press the day martial law was proclaimed on September 21, 1972. This was followed by presidential decrees and executive orders to secure the control of the press by the government, aided by military coercive force. One-man rule would dominate the context of press operations and conduct for over a decade.

Dictators are more sentient of the power of the press, said Anwar Ibrahim, then Deputy Premier of Malaysia, when he spoke at a press forum in Manila in 1995. Marcos was a dictator, although he posed as a friend of democracy.

Along with Proclamation 1081, Marcos issued orders to the military to close down the press, claiming it had served as the tool of communists and other public enemies. Journalists were among those who served time in jail. Military censors were installed and a licensing mechanism made sure that only Marcos friends and relatives would be favoured with permits to operate media enterprises. These censors reported to the national defence chief and the minister of information. In time, censorship went from strictly applied military checks to softly delivered guidelines. Later a Mass Media Council followed by the Media Advisory Council supervised the industry. These officials, while handpicked by the President himself, worked to establish good relations with the press. These manoeuvrings softened the process of press control. The mainstream press claimed that the government did not control it. Rather, it said that it followed a framework of self-regulation.

Self-regulation came with its rewards. This period also saw the bribing of the press, rewarding its leaders generously with perks, privileges and power. The rank and file got used to the practice of 'envelopmental journalism', a play on the term 'developmental' communications that was being pushed in the international arena by other authoritarian governments in the Third World. In the Philippines, envelopes with money were passed on to journalists attending press conferences, covering public officials and events, institutionalising pay-offs, which would make worthwhile any kind of assignment and coverage to the glory of the powers that be.

The conditions of censorship and restraint did not prevent the mainstream press from flourishing, given their virtual hold on advertising revenues. Such public following even of sanitised and cosmetic news suggest the strength of the news habit. People will buy whatever is available. The newspapers of the day looked credible enough. Those who did not have other sources of intelligence had no reason to question the provenance of the news. People wanted to know what the government had to say. News is information for the day and this was enough to sustain the daily habit.

Bulletin Today was still owned by Hans Menzi, by then a Marcos friend who also served as aide-de-camp of the President. *Daily Express* was published and owned by Roberto Benedicto, another Marcos crony. A brother of Imelda Marcos owned the *Times Journal* group of publications. In broadcasting, Benedicto took over the Lopez empire and launched Banahaw Broadcasting System. Radio Philippines Network operated Channel 9 and Intercontinental Broadcasting System operated Channel 13. GMA-7 was taken over by new owners Gualberto Duavit and Menardo Jimenez.

In 1981, Marcos lifted martial law but continued to rule with little challenge and opposition. But the growing strength of the Communist Party of the Philippines—New People’s Army (CPP-NPA)—and the militant Muslim organisation Moro National Liberation Front gained ground in rural areas and operated an underground network in key cities. The military would persist in human rights violations, conducting searches, arresting and detaining without warrant suspected rebels including journalists. In the shadow of the Marcos press, ‘xerox’ or mimeograph reports flowed through the underground.

The assassination of Benigno Aquino Jr

During the 1970s, two weekly newspapers, the *We Forum* and *Malaya*, published by journalist Jose Burgos constituted the ‘mosquito’ press. These articulated criticism of the regime. Its buzz and drone, while perceptible, did not threaten the government, but its initiative paved the way for others to follow in time.

As the Marcoses stayed in power, the press soon articulated the more defined grumbling about the political situation. Within the formidable realm of Menzi’s *Manila Bulletin*, women columnists blazed the trail for criticism of government in the mainstream, right in the heart of the paper’s op-ed section. None of these women could be credibly charged as being communist-leaning. And so their criticism was more effective, resounding in many circles within the establishment.

None of these critics was ever allowed total freedom of expression. Not a few columns were cut or were censored entirely. Critical writers would be summoned by the military for interrogation as a way of intimidating them. But they soon gained public attention and following. Their work reminded the public what free commentary and unfettered reporting could be like.

The obvious contradiction of the regime was beginning to wear down the logic of government. While Marcos was careful to continue to appear as a believer in democracy, by mid-1983 these journalist critics had all been eased out of their posts.

On August 21, 1983, opposition leader and former Senator Benigno Aquino Jr returned to the Philippines after three years in the United States. Imprisoned by Marcos for some years, he had sought permission to leave the country for medical treatment and while in the United States was offered a fellowship by Harvard University. Aquino accepted the invitation and stayed there. But he decided to come home after receiving reports on Marcos's failing health. He said he would try to persuade the regime to institute a peaceful transition in the event of Marcos's death.

Aquino was shot by his military escorts upon arrival on the airport tarmac. Hundreds of thousands lined to pay homage at his wake. More than a million marched to bring his body to burial. This event, which enraged so many Filipinos, went virtually unreported by the Marcos papers. No television station dared to show footage of massive crowds. Only the Roman Catholic station Radio Veritas aired live reports from the site of these transforming events.

Ninoy Aquino's assassination blew the lid that had long held down the ferment of dissatisfaction and discontent. The Marcos government had been for some time the favoured recipient of foreign investors and international donors. But the money did not result in productive projects. Instead, a financial crisis had begun to strangle the economy, compounded by Marcos's extravagance and corruption. The business community finally found its voice to question rampant cronyism that dealt out financial deals to Marcos's friends and relatives.

Public and press unite for a cause

With the death of Ninoy Aquino, the public stirred from its complacency. In the Philippines, readers are a passive audience for the unfolding action of politics, viewing the confrontations of the high and mighty as mere observers. Only in historic passages are they drawn into the fray to affect and determine the outcome of conflict and controversy.

History has shown how the press in the Philippines aids political change. One of the most dramatic experiences involved the people's protest and participation in the toppling of the Marcos dictatorship in February 1986.

Certain conditions catapult the press into a leading role. A critical mass must unite on a cause. Viable alternatives must present themselves for action. The press impact and reach enable a larger community to consider common options. Newspapers are the means by which people can communicate even without actually getting together. In controlled regimes, publications go 'underground' or provide an 'alternative' to the establishment press. The press can galvanise a dispersed community into concerted action. One of the initial strategies to erode Marcos's control was a press boycott that cut down the circulation of the controlled press.

The 'alternative' press grew in the aftermath of Aquino's assassination, drawing strength from a broader readership and the activism in the streets. *Malaya, Mr. & Ms. Special Edition, Veritas Newsweekly* and the progressive *Business Day* offered news that could not be found in the mainstream. Distributed widely in Metro Manila as well as in the provinces, these newspapers gave voice to the political opposition, a voice long banned from the Marcos media. It also provided a forum for other anti-Marcos forces, including the CPP-NDF, the MNLF and other Muslim militant groups.

The result of such collaboration exemplified what can be achieved when the press strikes a responsive chord in the public pulse. The alliance between press and public proved strong enough to change the way things were. In this brief period, the press fulfilled its inherent potential to bring people together, described by Alexis de Tocqueville when he wrote: 'The effect of a newspaper is not only to suggest the same purpose to a great number of persons, but to furnish means for executing in common the designs which they may have singly conceived.'

The press demonstrated the positive impact of a free press during a crisis. As more people found out about the Marcoses' cronyism, their hidden wealth, and the chain of human rights violations committed to perpetrate control, support built up and aligned with opposition protest forces.

Unfortunately, the collaboration between press and people did not provide any coherence to the debates that engaged the new government that emerged. The liberated press did not necessarily assist democratisation and the emergence of new politics, a process that could have taken place during the democratic recovery under President Corazon Aquino.

After Marcos

The ascendancy of a non-political president suggested the possibilities for radical change in the Philippine political system. The press that had helped to topple the dictatorship could have encouraged the growth of a ‘new politics’ to help a reformed political class to emerge.

But the crisis conditions that strengthened the ‘alternative’ press were gone. In the period of transition, people began to turn away from political concerns. Overnight, the press of the underdog became the establishment press. With the installation of a new and presumably enlightened regime, the role of the press as an agent of change and reform was diminished or dismissed.

The press reverted to its usual form or posture—journalism of the ‘fourth estate’, an institution oriented towards the exercise of power. With the government still trying to get back on its feet, the press quickly emerged as a central actor on the political stage, exercising power on its own.

The press was eager to project its autonomy from the new administration, although many in its ranks personally supported the victory of Corazon Aquino. Within a few months of the new administration, press criticism began to question Aquino’s decision to govern through the Freedom Constitution while drafting an independent commission to write a new charter. Through referendum, people ratified the charter, which enabled the government to call for parliamentary elections. The vote for the 1987 constitution and later the elections for Senate and Congress served to consolidate government’s legitimacy, although political turbulence continued to hound Aquino’s authority.

The recovery and re-establishment of the free press was a far simpler task than the restoration and consolidation of a democratic government. The contrast between the two institutions quickened the journalistic pulse to criticise government failures without appreciation of the massive difficulties that the new administration faced, including the staggering debt left by the previous regime.

In 1986, 26 newspapers were operating in Manila, with 10 claiming national distribution throughout the archipelago. Outside Manila, some 120 community newspapers served the local media market. Of five television networks, one (PTV-4) was government; two (RPN-9 and IBC-13) were sequestered from Marcos cronies and administered by the new government’s nominees. Two (ABS-CBN and GMA-7) were privately owned. Radio, the medium with the widest reach, provided more entertainment than news.

The press was allowed free rein even during the five major coup attempts against the Aquino government. A highly politicised military had been one of the legacies of Marcos regime, and factions within the armed forces found it hard to accept that their ambitions for more power had no place in the democratic government that followed—especially when many of them thought they deserved more credit for the downfall of the dictator.

Two of the military rebellions staged between 1987 and 1989 were particularly violent, with some 52 people dying in the August 1987 coup attempt, and at least 100 during the December 1989 uprising that lasted six days. Many of the fatalities were civilians.

Yet, even when it appeared that the government was on the verge of being beaten by the rebels, there was no attempt to close down media or to issue guidelines to reporters. The press was free to report the situation as it saw fit, even as some members of the media showed open sympathy for rebel forces and were even predicting the fall of Aquino. ‘On-the-spot’ reporting on street clashes between military and rebel forces sounded no different from coverage of a basketball game, with what seemed like a countdown for one or the other side’s victory. At times, radio reporters would provide information about troop locations, enabling rebel forces to monitor troop movements and field snipers to shoot at soldiers on the streets.

Aquino did file a libel suit against then *Philippine Star* columnist Louie Beltran for writing that she had hidden under her bed while the August 1987 coup attempt was going on. The lower court found in her favour, but the Supreme Court later acquitted Beltran and his co-accused.

The President, however, did little else to establish any limit on what the press could report on whenever military factions tried to topple her government, thereby setting a difficult precedent for anyone else in her place. When the National Telecommunications Commission closed down two radio stations, it did so only after administrative due process to determine that the stations had knowingly carried rebel disinformation.

It was this kind of irrepressible and irresponsible media conduct that called for interventions within the press community itself, but there came few and far between. The post-Marcos press community prided itself on the vigour of its stories, its frenzied approach evident not only during coups, but also in the coverage of other news, whether sex crimes, the private lives of public figures or the alleged appearance of the profile of the Virgin Mary on the palm frond. The spirited style of reporting and news delivery secured popu-

lar following. If the practice suffered from lack of discipline, it claimed the virtues of freedom and independence. There were very few apologies made for the inevitable lapses in news judgement and shoddy journalism.

The establishment of the free press was essential to the process of democratic recovery. But as others have argued, change in politics and the press was accomplished primarily in name and form.

Old and new money, old and new business interests made up the ownership structure of news organisations. As in the past, newspapers served as instruments of power for the interlocked interests of economic and political elites. As in the past, journalism depended once again on funding from the establishment, the joined forces of political and economic groups. Such a press could not but reflect the limited cluster of similar but competing interests.

The press may have been liberated from official regulation, but it has remained vulnerable to external pressures, be they vested interests of their owners, of their owners' friends, their political patrons, their favoured friends, or opportunities for their own personal gain.

Recurring problems

There are institutional or cultural conditions that continue to impede the growth of the free press. While newspapers and television news programmes have proliferated, the public often ends up quite confused about the complex dilemmas of development. Reporting is marred by inaccuracies, misquotes or quotes out of context, subjective slanting, and sensational and misleading headlines. Commentary and opinion columns often take up one side against another on an issue, without context or perspective, driven sometimes by other partisan agenda.

In the freewheeling market of ideas, readers get an overload of conflicting reports and opposing points of view. A person wishing to be well-informed feels he or she has to read at least three newspapers to figure out what actually happened.

Newspaper circulation in the Philippines is remarkably low in relation to the registered voting population of now 27 million. Estimates in the early 1990s ranged from composite readership of a little over a million, tabloids included. Most of the smaller newspapers are losing money because of low readership and consequently low advertising revenues. But they continue to operate with financial losses that can go up to an estimated P25 million

annually. A newspaper is perceived as exerting influence. Thus, the financial expense is an affordable price to pay for the clout that owning a paper gives.

There are more than 70 languages spoken in the Philippines, and there are many places where the national language, the Tagalog-based Pilipino, is neither spoken nor understood, much less so a foreign tongue like English. While English is still the medium of instruction up to university level, the readership of English-language papers is confined to the middle and upper classes, which make up a minority of the country's 70 million people.

The cost of publication is another barrier. Although prices are subsidised either by advertising revenues or by owners, newspapers remain an expensive commodity. The cheaper tabloids, produced with little editorial support, publish mainly police stories and accounts of sex, scandals and crime.

There have been major improvements in the communication infrastructure of the more successful news organisations. Computerisation and other technological advances have changed the look of some newsrooms and their newspapers. But the industry on the whole is plagued by inadequate resources. Few newspapers maintain news bureaus around the country. Only a few retain a national network of correspondents and contributors, paying for their inputs by the piece or column inch. Only a few news organisations provide on-the-job training or regular opportunities for professional development.

Problems of competence plague press performance and raise questions about the relevance and the quality of journalism education in the universities and colleges. Journalism courses, subsumed within mass communication programmes, call for review and re-evaluation at this point.

The strength of press freedom

Yet, despite these problems, a number of critical factors sustain the strengths of press freedom:

Primarily, a legal framework enshrines the value. The constitution of the Philippines protects the press from government regulation, leaving only basic franchise laws to guide the operation of broadcasting. There are libel laws to provide recourse for those publicly aggrieved by the press. But a long tradition has the courts favouring the press with their decisions. The celebrated libel case filed by President Aquino saw the complainant upheld in the lower court, only to have that decision overturned in the high court.

The history of the press as a watchdog has enshrined its freedom as a cherished value. Whether validated by experience or not, public perception sees the press as the comforter of the afflicted, an institution that may serve justice by shining light on the truth that is hidden or by forcing it out through fair and open discussion. Filipinos look to the press as a vehicle for the necessary exchange of ideas, for vigorous public debate.

Unfortunately, it is not entirely assured that the press serves the public as well as expected. The most disturbing issue hounds the press from the past. The persistent practice of envelopmental journalism has survived the changes in government. There are no wholesale payoffs institutionalised by the government, as in the time of the Marcoses, but journalists acknowledge that other versions of the practice remain rampant. Institutional efforts to investigate cases and to impose sanctions have fizzled out, with no satisfying results.

The Philippine Press Institute (PPI), a national association of publishers, promoted a system of ombudsmen, but these press officers have had little clout in their organisations. The National Press Club formed an ethics committee to probe charges of payoffs to members, but its recommendations have been largely ignored.

The positive side shows newspapers that have made efforts to clean up their own backyards. And there are enough examples of journalists who have kept themselves above reproach and who conduct themselves with professionalism and integrity.

Toward a culture of competence, ethics and responsibility

After 1986, media non-governmental organisations led by journalists themselves have launched programmes and projects to address the issues of press development.

These include the Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism, Policy Review and Editorial Support Services (PRESS), the Center for Media Freedom & Responsibility and some projects of the Evelio Javier Foundation. The PPI has also undertaken programmes for training and review.

Remedies could be explored in skills- and issues-training, in awards for excellence, in best practice models in investigative reporting, in media monitors which present case studies of coverage, in media fora, workshops, round-table meetings, in press studies and reports that examine the problems and explore solutions.

But press development will be limited until readers demand more. The experience has proven that sensationalism and 'infotainment' sell. Newspaper publishers know that ordinary readers neither read the news critically nor write to complain about inaccuracies and false reports. Beyond the efforts of the press to raise the quality of their service, media literacy training for the public and newspaper campaigns would help to promote a more thoughtful and demanding readership. With consumer pressure, newspapers may be forced to exercise their freedom to create a better product.

As has been pointed out time and again, the media reflect the reality out there. The media hold up a mirror to what society is about, its virtues as well as its vices. The improvement of the press in the Philippines is related to the quality of its readers and in the willingness of readers to be engaged as active consumers of the press and as engaged participants in the political process.

Filipinos used to say when Marcos went about unchallenged that the people get the government they deserve. The same can be said of the press. In a democracy, there is no free lunch.

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An Introduction to the

People's *Health Assembly*



Coordinating Group: Asian Community Health Action Network (ACHAN) ♦
Consumers International (CI) ♦ Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation (DHF) ♦
Gonoshasthaya Kendra (GK) ♦ Health Action International (HAI) ♦
International People's Health Council (IPHC) ♦ Third World Network (TWN) ♦
Women's Global Network for Reproductive Rights (WGNRR)

A broad, participative project scheduled for December 2000.
(Extract from an information brochure)

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CHARACTERISTICS OF THE

THE PEOPLE'S HEALTH ASSEMBLY is a long-term process, the actual Assembly being only the peak event among several other activities. The Assembly will be preceded by extensive preparatory activities and will be followed up by advocacy, campaigning and improved networking among the participating individuals and organisations. The PHA will be organised in a way that allows broad participation in order to involve a large number of people and stakeholder groups in the preparations.

PRE-ASSEMBLY ACTIVITIES Activities leading up to the PHA event in December 2000 are threefold:

Analytical work which will focus on a broad analysis of the major health issues facing the world, in order to provide a solid basis for policy formulation, advocacy and development of innovative solutions. The effort will mainly draw on existing analyses and data, but will also, where needed, involve original research by resource persons with recognised expertise. This background documentation will be used to guide discussions within countries and regions and promote people's action for health.

Country and regional meetings. Drawing on, but not restricted to the analytical work, country and regional discussions will deepen understanding of and elaborate strategies to address priority health problems. These meetings will serve three major purposes: to bring together large numbers of health and development workers, community members and decision-makers; to engage critically with the above analyses; and to form a local or regional basis for future health development action.

Case studies, experiences and 'people's stories' from as many countries as possible will be collected. These will describe people's direct experiences of health and health problems, their own analysis of causal factors, their initiatives, examples of success stories, failures and proposals for the future.

Products of these processes will be analytical and discussion papers, case studies and people's stories. These will contribute to the development of a

PEOPLE'S HEALTH ASSEMBLY

People's Health Charter. The draft Charter will be widely circulated for input during the pre-Assembly process and will be presented at the Assembly for further refinement and endorsement. It is recognised that the task of involving people all over the world is ambitious and will necessarily draw on existing networks and organisations.

THE PEOPLE'S HEALTH ASSEMBLY EVENT The actual Assembly will be held from **4-8 December 2000** near Dhaka, Bangladesh, with approximately 600 participants. Assembly activities include keynote addresses, analytical presentations, sharing of people's testimonies and stories on health practices and concerns, workshops, debates, cultural and audio-visual presentations, exhibitions and the discussion and endorsement of the People's Health Charter. The Assembly will be an exciting, vibrant, and inspiring event and an important landmark in global health development. Directly following the Assembly, a one-week special 'Forum' will be organised for those who want to deepen their understanding of the issues and enhance their skills. Activities will include opportunities for exchanges among the participants and local and regional health and development activists, development of networking and advocacy strategies, hands-on experiences and field trips.

POST-ASSEMBLY ACTIVITIES Post-assembly activities will be as important as the other phases of this process. They will include the dissemination, promotion and wider endorsement of the People's Health Charter; coordinated advocacy and lobbying at the local, national and international levels; and the publication of material related to the PHA.

GET INVOLVED! BE PART OF A WORLD-WIDE INITIATIVE. LET YOUR VOICE BE HEARD!

Please fill in the attached form, to indicate your interest, and help us by distributing copies of this brochure to other interested individuals and organisations.

This brochure can be found on the PHA website at www.pha2000.org or www-sph.health.latrobe.edu.au/pha where it can also be downloaded in plain text format and as Adobat Acrobat pdf-file for electronic distribution.

THE NEED FOR A PEOPLE'S HEALTH ASSEMBLY

There is now an urgent need to place health at the top of the policy agenda. Past policies and practices need to be scrutinised and new broad-based visions formulated. Every effort is needed to regain the imperative that health, and health for all, is one of the most important goals for everyone to strive for.

Governments and international organisations have largely failed to reach this goal, despite much rhetoric. Genuine, people-centred initiatives must therefore be strengthened, both to find innovative solutions and to put pressure on decision-makers, governments and the private sector.

Responding to these needs, a People's Health Assembly (PHA) will be organised in the year 2000 by a group of concerned civil society organisations and networks. The Assembly will bring together the knowledge and experiences of different groups and communities around the world with the aim of analysing and assessing these. It will identify the main problems, trends and challenges in order to develop strategies to achieve health for all in the future.

The PHA is a broad, new initiative seeking to involve as many people as possible in formulating their own health agenda and setting their own priorities. People's long and rich experiences will be presented, discussed and translated into clear, practical and democratic policy guidelines. Alternative analyses of the root causes of the global health crisis will be stimulated. Strategies



and alternatives for achieving the goal of health for all will be developed.

The PHA will be a unique event. It is an opportunity for you and for everyone else who believes that the current health situation is unacceptable and that communities and civil society organisations must play a more important role. Through the PHA, you can be part of a world-wide effort to improve the situation and point the direction for the future.

GOAL

The goal of the People's Health Assembly is to re-establish health and equitable development as top priorities in local, national and international policy-making, with Primary Health Care as the strategy for achieving these priorities. The Assembly aims to draw on and support people's movements in their struggles to build long-term and sustainable solutions to health problems.

OBJECTIVES

The following objectives will guide the People's Health Assembly process:

- ❖ *To hear the unheard.* The Assembly will present people's concerns and initiatives for better health, including traditional and indigenous approaches. Their direct experiences of ill-health, its causes and possible solutions will also be presented, discussed and analysed. Action plans will be worked out and refined;
- ❖ *To reinforce the principle of health as a broad cross-cutting issue.* There will be emphasis on the intersectoral dimensions of primary health care and focus on health development, rather than health services. The problematic aspects of vertical, non-integrated programmes will be highlighted;
- ❖ *To develop co-operation between concerned actors in the health field.* The importance of strengthening the links between the different institutions and actors in the health field will be emphasised. Such



revived and/or new partnerships will be built on the principle of equity and accountability between the parties;

- ❖ *To formulate a People's Health Charter.* Based on thorough analyses of world health problems as well as existing policies and programmes, a People's Health Charter will be formulated. Concrete recommendations regarding policy and practice will be made to governments, international organisations, the business sector, non-governmental organisations and people's movements;
- ❖ *To improve the communication between concerned groups, institutions and actors.* Communication and networking among individuals, groups, organisations and institutions will be developed during the Assembly and sustained and strengthened thereafter;
- ❖ *To share and increase knowledge, skills, motivation and advocacy for change.* During and after the Assembly, opportunities will be provided for in-depth exchange of experiences and development of skills. The People's Health Charter will provide a base for advocacy, policy-formulation and campaigns at the local, national and international levels.

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