Facing the Challenges of Globalization: Views and Prospects of Asian Media

Interview with Dr. Sundeep R. Muppidi,
Secretary-General of Asian Media Information and Communication Center

Flordeliz L. Abanto

Communication and media in Asia are very diverse owing to the different political and economic systems, histories, cultures and religions. The region faces a great challenge in preserving its local characteristics ad identity in the face of globalization and the ubiquity of foreign media.

In this interview, Dr. Sundeep R. Muppidi, secretary-general of the Asian Media Information and Communication Center (AMIC), shares his observations on topics such as ownership and control in Asian media, impact of globalization and convergence on media content, professional development of media workers, and prospects for the Asian media.

Dr. Sundeep R. Muppidi

Dr. Muppidi has taught in various universities around the world and has published researches on Media Studies, International Communication, New Media and Communication Technologies.

An alumnus of the School of Education of Harvard University, he received his masteral degree in Mass Communication and Television Production from the University of Hyderabad, India, and his doctorate degree in Mass Communication from Bowling Green State University in Ohio, USA.

Q How long have you been involved in media-related activities and in what capacity?

A I got into the media field in 1988, first as a freelance journalist and later in various other capacities as student, media producer, scriptwriter, director, professor, media scholar and administrator.

Q As a media scholar and observer, what do you think are the media developments in the last five years that have had the biggest impact on Asian media and communication study and practice?

A There have been numerous developments and some cannot even be singled out. However, if I were to identify some that have made an impact on the study of Asian Media and Communication study and practice, then they would be the following:

1. The rise and subsequent recognition of Asia, especially China and India, as major players in the global economic scene;
2. The proliferation of media networks and related infrastructure, like schools and affiliated feeder industries, in various Asian countries;
3. The increasing importance of, and need for, media literacy in these countries to create an informed and educated media audience;
4. The increasing recognition of the urgency to address health-related issues and the role media/communication play in this campaign; and
5. The global prevalence of digital information and communication technologies and the recognition of the role of knowledge societies for future progress.

Overview on Asian Media

Q What is the state of media in Asia in terms of independence from government control and ownership? Have renowned, big-time media conglomerates maintained their hold on the industry?

A The media were never free. They only served different masters. In some countries, governments control the media while in others, they are the corporate houses or even individual owners. So, the media have their fair share of diversity in terms of independence from government control and ownership. They may be free from government but are controlled by private owners or vice versa. Their agenda are always set by one master or the other, overtly or otherwise.

Concentration of media ownership has not only increased in the past but has also become more evident nowadays because of the easy availability of such information to the common person.

There is a couple of new Asian players on the global market but slowly, these players are forging links with the conglomerates and so it is a matter of time before such a consolidation becomes visible in Asia, and also in terms of how only a few media conglomerates maintain their hold on the industry.

Q In Asia, is there a consolidation of big media enterprises buying out smaller media operations? If so, how did this affect the homogenization of news content?

A There is a consolidation, but it is too early in the process and will take time to be evident in terms of branding. However, what makes it seem diverse is that there are multiple levels, in terms of language, geography, culture, etc., that make it appear like there is a "heterogenization" of content.

However, in terms of news, most of the contents are the same—"infotainment." But there is a small element of the local news that is necessary to deliver the audiences to the channels. So the same programs and footages are dubbed, adapted or re-shot with a local flavor, or used and presented for the most part in the local language.

Q Are there new small players, like community media, that challenge mainstream media? What platforms do they use? Do these survive? How do they engage business and community support?

A Yes. There are small players, but these are very few, and very, very localized to make a substantial impact on mainstream media. They work in various platforms—community radio, video, Internet, blogs, etc. The successful ones survive because of community support, and community support comes from active participation of the members.

Challenges of Convergence

Q What reformatting or programming changes in Asian media were brought about by convergence and globalization?

A The kinds of shows on Asian networks—from *Who Wants to be a Millionaire* to *American Idol* or *Indian Idol*, to dubbed Disney cartoons—are all examples of reformatting or programming changes brought about by globalization. In terms of convergence, the same Western model is evident in the way media networks are migrating to harness the Internet in its various forms—streaming media sites, e-newspapers, websites, online polls, etc. There is a small element of the "glocal" but mostly based on a re-adaptation of the content that is available globally, and not the other way around.

Q **How do Asian media deal with the need to re-tool media workers for multi-platform content? How do they deal with staff members who resist, or have difficulty adjusting to, new platforms?**

A I personally think Asian media workers are more flexible to such options because of their educational backgrounds. Their multilingual skills, coupled with their backgrounds in science and technology, make it much easier for them —compared to the average media worker in the West—to adapt to the technological needs.

However, multi-platform content is still in its infancy in Asia, and the younger generation is on top of the technological changes and will more than fill the need at present. Most of the older generation has not seen the necessity of migrating to the new tools in a big way as yet. The presence of large alternative media industries, like the movie industry, has also acted as a buffer in this transition, and so the immediate need for re-tooling a lot of the media workers is very minimal.

Audiences

Q **What are the significant statistics and profiles of new convergent media users or audiences in the various countries in Asia? Do the new platforms further widen the digital- and info-divides among populations? How are the media and the government bridging this gap?**

A The new convergent users are mostly young, college-educated, upper-middle class, technology savvy, early- to late-adopters of innovations. Unfortunately, the gap is widening because access to the other populations is a major issue. The individual governments have been unable to address the basic needs of their populations for many decades, and so the situation is not any different with new technologies. They do not have any credible efforts to show even in this direction in terms of bridging the gap between those who have access and those who do not.

Q **How has the new platform transformed content and media consumption?**

A The new platform has transformed content both in form and format. From traditional media content available in audio CDs to half-hour episodes on television, to three-hour movies available on VHS tapes and DVDs, the new format has spawned formats like MP3s, streaming video, video on demand, TiVo's, etc., so much so that television networks are now moving programming content from a "push" model to a "pull" model.

Globalization

Q How has globalization (i.e., import of foreign materials) affected the local culture and the media industry? Does this cause mixing of genres or media content? How do local audiences and the industry respond to globalization?

A I believe that globalization has affected the local culture and the media industry in both good and bad ways. It has opened up the local media markets to global competition but at the same time, it has also exposed the local viewers to global content. So, also, the local media houses have updated their technological and production tools to match global standards, thereby providing a new market for their own products. Overall, I think cultural hybridization of form and content and increasing choices in what are available are the norms, in terms of genres and media content for the local audiences.

Q How does globalization allow for a diaspora among expatriates? Does it shape/reshape the national identity of an expat and how?

A This is a topic on which an entire thesis can be written. What Appadurai calls the 'mediascapes' and 'ethnoscapes' do shape the identity of global diaspora. Every interaction shapes the identity of an individual, and national identity is no exception, more so when the interaction is in a globalized and technologically interconnected world like the present.

Identity per se is not linear or singular and, therefore, national identity is itself a fluid concept. Therefore, yes, they do shape/reshape the national identity of an expat. In a world where geographical boundaries have lost their original purpose, national identities are supplemented by a number of other identities—a member of civil society, of causes and campaigns, of identifying with global leaders and movements, and even with events.

For example, as the World Cup is on, big numbers of people around the world support teams that are not from their own countries. How should it matter then which team wins? Well, there is a certain identification with a team, based on media coverage, or branding, or a favorite player, or a perceived result, and so it need not be based on your national affiliation.

Q What is the role of civic/citizen journalism in bringing about participatory democracy?

A Civic journalism or citizen journalism has a role to play in the public sphere and new technologies are providing citizen activists better tools to reach,

mobilize and create awareness among a larger audience. The multiple levels, in which these operate, also are a good counter to the concentrated nature of the mainstream media that can block out alternative views and voices. Blogs, community radio stations, social networking sites, etc., all provide new opportunities for increased participation to develop a democratic and vibrant public sphere, thereby contributing to bringing about participatory democracy.

Q **How will you describe and analyze the exchange of information/knowledge among Asian countries? How does this exchange influence governance, diplomatic relations and regional policies, if any?**

A In Asian countries, the exchange of information/knowledge is determined more by regional histories and bilateral relations, and not by the utility of such exchanges, for the most part. Such regional histories also shape the manner of governance, diplomatic relations and their regional policies, as there is a sense of mistrust of the "other" in these regions.

Important players that could have made a positive difference in this effort are the media but unfortunately, the media have lost their focus and, in fact, contribute to the escalation of this mistrust. The only way the media try to survive, or get ahead in the race for audience eyeballs, is by appealing to the primal instincts of humans by either sensationalizing events or creating scare tactics or mass hysteria, such as in India- Australia or India-China, and not in terms of a constructive dialogue or feel-good programming efforts.

The Future of Asian Media

Q **What is the prospect and future of Asian media?**

A There is a lot of potential and a very bright future for Asian media, but there is a long, disciplined and difficult road that needs to be traversed by all concerned. I have said this before and will reiterate it now: that there are five challenges to Asian media that need to be addressed to ensure that we unlock its potential:

1. Media need to develop the integrity, independence and constructive focus that is important for developing societies like those in Asia;

2. There is a need to build professionally trained manpower and resources, e.g., developing Asian resources for course content, like textbooks from an Asian perspective and experiences or examples, so that solutions derived are specific to the region;

3. There is a need to promote media literacy education in view of the proliferation of media and to raise a media-literate generation that will become an informed and aware media audience;
4. There is a need to enhance our capacity to use communication for social change (especially in health), if we need to alleviate poverty and address a lot of social needs; and
5. Although I am not a technology determinist, I believe that there is a potential in building knowledge societies that can be harnessed from technological, political, socio-economic and cultural perspectives, and that it can only benefit Asian populations more than any other.

FLORDELIZ L. ABANTO is president of the Philippine Association of Communication Educators (PACE) and currently teaches at the St. Scholastica's College in Manila whose Communication Department she chaired from 2008 to 2010. She obtained her AB degree in Broadcasting from the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication (UPCMC) in Diliman, and her MA degree in Communication from Bangkok University, Thailand. She trained in Educational Broadcasting at the South Carolina Educational TV, USA. She is pursuing her Ph.D. in Communication at the UPCMC. She is the executive producer and co-host of the multi-awarded Cultural Center of the Philippines and DZRH radio program, ***Sugpuin ang Korupsyon--Walang Kukurap (Fight Corruption--Be Vigilant).***