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Globalization and the Media – Shared Responsibility

I. GLOBAL VALUES VS. THE CLASH OF CIVILIZATIONS

The “clash of civilizations” seems to have been exacerbated in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 and more recently, the March 11, 2004 tragedies. New flare-ups of conflict and atrocities in Iraq and the Middle East also seem to demonstrate that divisiveness among peoples with different religions, cultures and political systems has become more pronounced. At the same time, we have seen evidence that globalization has boosted the forces of cohesion in many parts of the world and fields of endeavors. For example, the dramatic expansion of the European Union has proven that people from disparate cultures and traditions do yearn for universal values out of the belief that the well-being and ideals of a tightly-knit community of nations can be enhanced through a “win win” formula of measured, meaningful integration – and not necessarily at the expense of diversity.

It is too early to say that advances in the media and mass communication in the age of the Internet will help in accentuating the positive, centripetal aspects of globalization. That the gory images of war and summary executions could spread across the globe in nano-seconds could serve to more speedily and efficiently instigate hatred and extremism. However, it is the shared responsibility of media professionals in different parts of the world to use their ever-more powerful tools to inculcate the values of tolerance and empathy – and to render unacceptable bigotry and ultra-radical solutions to cultural and historical contradictions.

Nom del diàleg: Diàleg orient - occident
Data: 2 Juliol
Sessió: “Ètica i globalització: valors globals, valors locals”

Ponent: Willy Wo-Lap Lam



In helping to cement global values, the media could perhaps begin in fields that do not have a direct bearing on ideology. These include the fight against trans-national crime such as drug trafficking and the smuggling of human beings; child labor and degrading workplace conditions; AIDS, SARS and other epidemics hitting both rich and poor countries; and environmental, conservation and energy issues such as global warming and the worldwide shortage of resources from petroleum to drinking water.

Seeing is believing. While government departments and institutions may be prevented by ingrained traditions and bureaucratic inertia from seeing and thinking out of the box, the ubiquitous and seemingly unstoppable reach of the Net – and global TV networks and news agencies – is having a strong impact on the behavior of ordinary people. With the growing importance of the civil society particularly in Asian countries – and the fast-expanding clout of international and local-level NGOs – the media has a big role to play in spotlighting conflicts and malaises all over the world.

Less constrained by the ideology and national-security calculations of their respective governments, people-level organizations including NGOs are in a position to bridge the East-West gap – in addition to taking part in relief work regarding global hunger, AIDS, water shortage, and other scourges. The media, however, has to show the way by providing unbiased coverage and well-balanced analyses.

II. IN SEARCH OF A MULTI-POLAR WORLD MEDIA ORDER

In the past year, major media in the U.S. have been criticized for giving too much benefit of the doubt to the White House's justification for invading Iraq. The controversy over the “pro-government bias” of important American networks, websites and newspapers has been highlighted by the fact that these media units have a global reach unparalleled to any time in history. Many small towns and villages in Asia and Africa – at least those

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with electricity supply – get their news, particularly foreign news, primarily from Western TV and news agencies. And it is incumbent upon these transnational media behemoths – which more often than not take Western or American values as the autonomic global standard – to ensure objectivity and multiplicity of perspectives. Otherwise, charges of “media imperialism” – which are at time justified – may impede the benevolent role that a globalized media could play in a deeply polarized world.

Coverage of the global anti-terrorist movement – particularly the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, which are destined to be defining moments of the 21st century – has been enlivened and in a sense improved by a number of media upstarts in the Arab world. The emergence of Al Jazeera and other Arab media has done much to provide alternative voices and balanced coverage regarding a plethora of convoluted, multi-faceted cultural and military confrontations.

But bankrolling a new TV station, newspaper or news agency is a horrendous business proposition. The start-up of a regional or multinational media company – which must maintain expensive bureaus in at least several cities – is contingent upon huge investments from entrepreneurs with a globalized vision. This is true even in First World countries such as the U.S. The humble and somewhat haphazard beginnings of CNN showed the immensity of problems of finance, advertising and distribution.

Since the early 1990s, various attempts to set up a “Chinese CNN” in the Greater China region have proven unsuccessful. This is despite the perception that there should be enough potential in terms of advertising and subscription fees in China’s 1.3 billion people market alone. Moreover, China-towns all over the world are hungry for Chinese-angled but otherwise unbiased news coverage. On the other hand, modest successes have been achieved by quite a number of news services and agencies based in countries and cities including China, Hong Kong, India, Japan, and Russia that have user-friendly English versions. It is hoped that English-speaking countries in other parts of the world would use more of these

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news purveyors to help lay the groundwork for a multi-polar global media order.

The worldwide successes that have been scored by the Asian movie industry – whether it be Bollywood and South Korean dramas, Chinese kung-fu, Hong Kong action flicks or Japanese art-house and samurai offerings – show that the gap between East and West can somehow be bridged at specific junctures. Despite the tendency by many professionals to mix information with entertainment, however, the news media is a distinctly different, and more difficult-to-popularize genre. Yet perhaps more than film and other art forms, the cross-pollination of Asian and Western news services, values and operations could have a salient impact on the future of globalization, particularly the fostering of universal humanitarian values.

III. SHARED RESPONSIBILITY OF THE GLOBALIZED MEDIA

As discussed, electronic and print media around the world have a shared responsibility to introduce to their respective audiences news and viewpoints that dovetail with the ethos of openness and affirmation of diversity. In this age of information and globalization, old norms such as censorship and bigotry are out of sync with an increasingly well-educated and discerning public.

However, many Asian nations, including those that have acceded to the World Trade Organization (WTO), still put up formidable obstacles to foreign news media entering their markets. In the name of banning pornography and political infiltration, quite a few governments have employed thousand upon thousand of Cyber-cops to police the information superhighway. While such market and political barriers may in the short term help to protect local industry and indigenous culture, visionary leaders at the relevant ministries of information, media and culture should take the long-term view: that only when their fellow countrymen have uninhibited

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access to information and perspectives on a globalized setting can they develop into mature, tolerant, and intellectually sophisticated world citizens.

Take China as an example. The new administration of President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao has sent encouraging signals about their commitment to transparency of governance, media openness and even the “media supervision of the government.” While most electronic and print media are still run by or affiliated with the authorities, there has been a welcome proliferation of angles and viewpoints. In line with China’s WTO obligations, party and government officials are slowly but surely opening the door to joint venture and even wholly foreign-owned media and cultural corporations particularly in the areas of marketing and distribution. While Beijing needs to consider more thorough-going reforms such as scaling back censorship and allowing joint-venture news operations, the limited but positive developments in the globalization of the Chinese media have already helped produce a new generation of professionals and entrepreneurs with an international, forward-looking outlook.

In other large Asian countries such as India, the influx of foreign capital and know-how in the field of news media and information dissemination has also produced more good than harm, both for economic development and the nurturing of a new generation of world citizens. It is hoped that with more East-West cross-fertilizations – particularly Asian TV networks, websites and newspapers finding niches and audiences in the Western world – the goal of a globalized media fostering common values of symbiotic growth and mutual tolerance may be realized close to the first-quarter mark of the new century.