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Chapter 3

BBC and CNN: The Outsiders

"The launch of 24 hour World Service Television into Asia on 15 November 1991 opened the most significant chapter in the history of BBC overseas broadcasting since its inception in 1932."

British Broadcasting Corporation Annual Report, 1992

The 1980s witnessed a sharp rethinking in Western liberal nations about electronic media policy. Monetarist ideology - reflected by Thatcherism and Reaganomics - questioned the very raison d'etre of public broadcasting and media regulation. At the same time, technology was rapidly outpacing established conventions of broadcasting spectrum as a sovereign and limited resource. These political, economic and technological changes were felt globally in the broadcasting sector.

In this chapter, the complex cross-cutting of these movements will be considered in the Southeast Asian context. For it was a combination of these broad global structural trends - as well as episodic actions of state elites and economic players - that contributed to the huge changes in the politics of Southeast Asia's television industry. In this climate, two of the West's biggest news broadcasters became established in one of the world's most restrictive news environments.

The strategic relationships - within individual states, within ASEAN and between the states and transnational players - highlight the level of interdependence among actors. The relationships which spawned the DBS services were highly fragile and tenuous. Especially important is the idea that by engaging in the international DBS television market, Indonesia undermined the media control of both its own government and its ASEAN neighbours, albeit unintentionally. As well in this chapter, the fundamental epistemological and ethical differences between the state broadcasters and the Western DBS broadcasters will be explored in order to show the magnitude of change in the standards of televisual information available to ASEAN audiences.
Communications, Commerce and Elite Conflicts

In 1993 there were twenty-one satellites in the Asian region carrying domestic and international traffic. By 1995 there will be at least thirty-eight. As explained in the previous chapter, Palapa’s genesis was rooted in domestic politics: the Indonesian government’s desire to possess an effective telecommunications system to unite the archipelago. Palapa’s subsequent move into international broadcasting was driven by economics - and possibly technological status. On the other hand, AsiaSat1 was developed at the outset as a commercial player in international communications. It was Asia’s first commercially operated regional system and was launched in April 1990. AsiaSat1 is jointly owned by Cable & Wireless of Britain, China International Trust & Investment Corporation - the Chinese government’s main investment arm - and the Hong Kong firm, Hutchison Whampoa. Hutchison Whampoa belongs to Hong Kong business figure Li Ka-shing, the entrepreneurial force behind the creation of STAR TV.

It is important to establish at the outset that services such as CNN and BBCWST and to a lesser extent Australia Television sprang from the perception of news as a commodity in the wider international television industry. Unlike the growth of international shortwave radio services after World War II such as BBC World Service, Radio Australia and Voice of America which had an overtly foreign policy imperative - their televised counterparts are business ventures. Recall Negrine’s word quoted in Chapter 1: “With the increasing internationalisation of capital and the growth of the transnational economy it would, in fact, be unthinkable for television to remain rooted within domestic settings only.”

Reflecting this view is the global spread of the Cable News Network (CNN). It is the broadcaster with the longest involvement in international satellite television and, so far, has been commercially successful. The CNN group’s operating profit in the first half of 1992 was US$88 million, on revenue of US$260 million.

Based in Atlanta in the United States, CNN is the flagship of the Turner Corporation, headed by Ted Turner who speaks of his vision of CNN’s ‘global village’ CNN began as a domestic news provider in the US using DBS-cable hybrid systems. In the early 1980s, Turner Broadcasting began entering into arrangements with cable operators in Europe, Scandinavia and Japan to distribute CNN International (CNNI), which was designed for an international audience.
In 1993, CNNI is distributed across all continents, except for large parts of Russia, on nine satellite systems and is delivered to homes and hotels using either DBS or DBS-cable hybrid systems. In addition to its own newsgathering, CNNI relies on news exchange arrangements with television news agencies such as WTN and domestic broadcasters such as Britain's Independent Television News (ITN). CNNI's annual budget is about US$40 million.8

CNN's entry into Southeast Asia via the Palapa system was a confused affair and reflects uncertainties and tensions in the Indonesian political elite. Machinations involving the Department of Information, the state-owned telecommunications company and owner of Palapa, Perumtel, the state-owned company for international telecommunications, Indosat, and the Director General of radio, television and film persist. This fragility in the government's policy process is an important factor in explaining apparent policy contradictions. It highlights the value of Negrine and Papathanassopoulos' emphasis on 'interdependence' in analysis of the politics of the new media. They suggest that "in place of a single decision-making body, there may be several layers of collaboration - from the political to the bureaucratic, from public state organisations to private economic actors - all attempting to 'manage' or 'stir' the links which emerge".9 Broadly, it would appear in Indonesia's case that the Ministry of Information is cautious towards the international satellite services whose programming challenges state broadcasting and associated issues of state cohesion and power. On the other hand, the telecommunications ministry treats the international broadcasters as potential customers - and often has closer personal links with Western industry figures through organisations such as the International Telecommunications Union (ITU).

In the late 1980s, when Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines were already established customers of the Palapa system, Indonesia's Information Minister, Harmoko, made public references to satellite broadcasting's application to the region, appearing to shun the wider international scene. The Jakarta Post reported Harmoko as saying Palapa had "contributed to the growth and development of the communications not only in his country, but in the ASEAN region as a whole".

Citing communications experts' views that the satellite has transformed the world into a "global village" Harmoko said: "We actually are a regional community as evidenced when we proclaim to the world in every political or economic encounter that we are ASEAN."10
In the same year Harmoko told an international seminar in Jakarta of the dangers of broadcast satellite technology.

*There is ... the inherent implication that it may create new problems and may give rise to the cropping up of social conflicts and the change of value systems, as receivers of new technology may uphold different sets of cultural values.*

In a codified way, the Information Minister appeared to be expressing reservations about Western satellite broadcasting services, preferring to develop links with neighbouring countries with political cultures more closely aligned with Indonesia’s.

Harmoko’s faith in his neighbours’ sharing of attitudes towards television news appears to be well-founded. A celebrated case occurred in 1992 where scenes from the 1991 Dili massacre on East Timor were shown on a Malaysian TV1 news bulletin - *Dunia Jam 10* (The World at 10 o'clock). The images and commentary were received across the region, including Indonesia, on the Palapa system. The Malaysian government offered an immediate apology, with Information minister, Mohamed Rahmat stating: “We have made a mistake for allowing such scenes to be screened during the News ... Indonesia is one of our closest neighbours and we cannot afford to hurt them. Screening such scenes can create misunderstanding.”

Later Malaysia’s Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi made a personal apology to President Suharto. Staff responsible for the news segment on the state broadcaster were disciplined and demoted. The Information Minister said the “movement of those staff would be the first in a series of steps to be taken to make RTM (Radio Television Malaysia) more effective.” Such an event underlines the collaborative tendencies of ASEAN leaderships on the issue of news and information policy.

In 1990 Indonesia’s ministry of information issued regulations covering the use of parabolic antennae, which appeared to offer conflicting guidelines. In one instance it stated: “The use of the parabole (sic) antennae [is] entirely handed over to the people with the belief of (sic) their consciousness and ability to choose and sort out those programs which are useful to them.” However, a later regulation says: “Television programs that are deliberately broadcast to Indonesia by a foreign television station abroad, is (sic) prohibited to be seen and heard by the public throughout the Republic of Indonesia.”

31
At the same time signs were emerging in the Indonesian telecommunications sector of a different policy direction. It was more receptive to involvement in the wider international telecommunications sphere. In an article in *Media Asia*, the President of Indosat, Jonathan Parapak, acknowledged the historic role of the Palapa system in nation building, but then went on to write of ‘future challenges’.

*Satellite operation will in the future compete on the basis of price, service offerings and very specialized services for education, commerce and industrial activities ... The challenge then for each organization is to choose the appropriate technology and to develop the most suitable information that will support the competitive needs of that organisation. The question of a regional satellite in the Asean or Asia-Pacific regions is a real one. Perhaps it is logical to think of Palapa being developed into a regional satellite.*

Parapak's emphasis on imperatives of the market and “competitive needs of the organisation” perhaps point to a philosophy among a younger, more technocratic generation of the bureaucratic elite. Parapak, at the time, was chairman of the board of governors of Intelsat and a member of the peak body of the ITU. He represents the commercially minded, internationally oriented sector of the Indonesian leadership. One Australian industry figure who had dealt closely with the Indonesian government’s telecommunications sector suggested Palapa’s international profile was like that of an international airline: as well as commercial benefits, it was linked to “image, atmospherics and status”.

It was in this rather uncertain environment that a deal was done in August 1991 between Perumtel, the Indonesian telecommunications company, and the Turner Corporation for the lease of a transponder on the Palapa satellite for CNN. At the same time another US channel, Entertainment Sports Programme Network (ESPN), also leased a transponder. The first public announcement was made by CNN and ESPN, who said they would “lease space on Indonesia’s Palapa satellite for broadcasts throughout Southeast Asia”. In addition, they said they had “reached preliminary agreement to broadcast their programmes in Indonesia via Rajawali Citra Televisi Indonesia (RCTI)”. The involvement of RCTI, whose chairman was the President’s son, reflects another dimension of the machinations of the Indonesian elite. Tensions over perceived favouritism for companies belonging to the President’s family have become increasingly public.
The Department of Information appears to have been caught off-guard. An Australian broadcasting industry executive in Indonesia at the time said Harmoko was furious at Perumtel's decision. "There was stunned silence, followed by anger over the announcement."\(^{20}\) The arrangement clearly presented problems for the administration, reflected in the ungainly public statements surrounding the deal, a highly unusual phenomenon in Indonesian politics. The status of the agreement between Perumtel and CNN and ESPN was immediately undermined when an official from the Information Ministry said "broadcasting permits had not yet been issued to the US companies".\(^ {21}\) Moreover, the director-general of radio, television and film - Alex Leo Zulkarnaen - said in *Media Indonesia* one week after the contracts were signed that "the government still prohibits foreign broadcasters from operating in Indonesia ... Indonesia's prohibition on foreign broadcasters includes anything that might be transmitted from the Palapa satellite".\(^ {22}\)

Nonetheless, CNN began twenty-four hour broadcasts of CNNI via Palapa shortly afterwards, much to the apparent consternation of sectors of the government in Indonesia, as well as other governments under the Palapa footprint. The fact that many of the 400,000 Indonesian owners of parabolic antennae could now watch CNN\(^ {23}\) placed the government in an awkward position. Singapore's *Business Times* newspaper summarised the administrative quandary thus: "Foreign media are barred by law from broadcasting directly into Indonesia but relations on dish ownership are vague and difficult to enforce."\(^ {24}\)

The tensions between the sectors of the Indonesian administrative elite that emerged during the CNN deal were to continue and remain unresolved today. These will be dealt with in chapter 4. The events in the 1980s, though, demonstrate that a complex cross-current of factors contributed to the arrival of CNN in Southeast Asia. Clearly, the economies of scale offered to an international satellite news corporation in Southeast Asia were an immediate drawcard. But why did Indonesia emerge as the collaborator? A key theme is that sectors of the bureaucratic elite - and arguably that politically protected interests in RCTI - were to challenge many of the policy assumptions in the domestically oriented information ministry. The challenge was, in part, driven by the lure of economic benefit in a time of export revenue shortages. It would appear another factor was the impact of international elite association in the state-owned telecommunications sector.
Star TV: Footprints of a Tiger Economy

The BBCs World Service Television came to Southeast Asia via a significantly different route. Yet it was a product of the same technological and economic movements behind CNN, including the ideology of deregulation. It can be argued that deregulation pressures working independently in Hong Kong and the United Kingdom contributed to the original Star TV-BBCWST partnership. Primarily BBCWST filled a waiting ‘news hole’, which had been created by Star TV. Under different circumstances it may well have been another Western news provider. Star TV was a commercial undertaking designed to capture the DBS market across Asia. Some 2.8 billion people from thirty-eight countries live under Star TV’s footprint. The architect and financier behind the project was Li Ka-shing, who accumulated his wealth in Hong Kong property development and finance and is ranked among the world’s richest 100 people. At the time the service was set up, at a cost of US$300 million, it was a wholly owned subsidiary of Hutchvision, a fifty-fifty joint venture between the Li family and Hutchison Whampoa - a company also belonging to Li. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Hutchison Whampoa is a one third owner of the AsiaSat1 satellite. Li’s venture was an example of vertical integration in the DBS industry.

When Star TV was created in 1990 there was only a loose plan for what would occupy its six channels - although the idea of one channel carrying international news was firmly in place. There was an intention, at the outset, for the service to be delivered free to anyone owning a parabolic antenna. The company was aware of the restrictions against ownership of parabolic antennae in many of its target countries. Shortly before the network went to air, the managing director of subsidiary company, Hutchison Telecommunications - Rick Siemens - was Machiavellian towards the regulatory framework.

We hope governments will go against us; it will only help our business. If a government says to its people: “No you can’t watch that”, that government is telling everyone: “hey, that is something we are missing. I want it.” It will be the people around Asia that will force deregulation. If governments ban dishes then it will be up to the people to say: “bugger [it] all, I am putting up a dish anyway and I’ll pay the fine”. It was the aim of Hutchison Whampoa to pay for the service - and make a profit - from advertising. The company set out to reach the richest five per cent of
Asian consumers. Recent figures show that the 1994 audience is 170 million people. By 1996, Star is aiming to have an audience of 400 million. Advertisers include transnational corporations such as Benetton, Kellogg’s and Levi Strauss.

Programme content is not the only aspect of services beyond the control of governments. Advertising restricted on domestic services can be delivered on satellite television. Add Star TV’s ability to evade government broadcast regulations, and it becomes an even better buy for some companies. Both United Distillers and Hennessy cognac used Star TV to target Taiwan, which limits ads for imported liquor. Manufacturers of feminine-hygiene products, including Procter & Gamble, find Star TV the only way into India, which bans such ads on terrestrial TV.

While Star TV was in its formative stages, the BBC in London remained engaged in long-running negotiations with the government for funding of the expansion of World Service radio into television. In 1989 the corporation had sought seedling funding for £3.4 million over three years, but was turned down by the Thatcher government. "The ... World Service ... long had the ambition to expand from radio into television. Unlike its French cousins in TV5 it never succeeded in persuading the government, which quite happily funded an international radio service, to fork out extra money for the television equivalent.” Instead BBCWST decided to operate as a self-funding, wholly owned subsidiary of the corporation. This structure required BBCWST to undertake partnerships with private sector broadcasters which relied on advertising for revenue. Agreements already existed with M-NET in Africa and Philips in Europe for small-scale services when BBCWST entered an arrangement with STAR TV in 1991. Under the deal BBCWST and Star TV formed a joint company Hutchison News Limited, each contributing half the equity - the BBCWST’s share being twenty-four hour news and current affairs programming. Star provides delivery of the service, markets the service and conducts local sales negotiations with cable distributors.

Agreements between BBCWST and the commercial partners - including Star TV - give the corporation full editorial control. Programmes are scheduled and produced in London before being transmitted to the commercial networks for relay, where advertisements are inserted. These arrangements reflect developments detected in recent literature on public service broadcasting, which focuses on a convergence of marketing and political developments in the 1980s,
including the "monetarist revolt"\textsuperscript{39} that occurred in Western societies - chiefly Britain and the US. This led to broadcasting becoming "a potent symbol of a collision of ideas over how Western society should be organised, not just economically, but also culturally, creatively, morally." \textsuperscript{40} The arrival of the technology to enable the BBC's external television service coincided with the working out of these ideological forces.

Finally, in briefly exploring the editorial ethos behind BBCWST television, it is worth considering the words of Negrine relating to British broadcasters.

\begin{quote}
[\textit{Broadcasting institutions have always defined their position as being within the liberal democratic (capitalist) political system. They, therefore, implicitly endorse its main principles.}]^{41}
\end{quote}

Undoubtedly, BBC World Service Radio has developed its status as a high quality international broadcaster to reflect the information perspectives of the liberal democratic bloc to which Britain belongs via the EEC and the broad Western strategic and economic system. This appears to have carried through to the television service. Editorial staff for BBCWST news and current affairs production are drawn, in equal proportion, from three places: BBC World Service Radio at Bush House, BBC domestic television and a new unit dedicated to BBCWST. In addition, staff in the corporation’s fifty overseas bureaux and the 250 correspondents and stringers contribute to the television service.\textsuperscript{42} All other programming is drawn from the BBC’s domestic service, and tends to be “short shelf-life documentary material” in order to minimise pirating.\textsuperscript{43}

The Bush House traditions are in evidence in the BBCWST newsroom. In addition to one third of the BBCWST staff coming from the radio service, the choice of lead stories on the Asian television service are made in consultation with senior journalists in Bush House.

\begin{quote}
The Bush House philosophy is two things: the spread of English culture - which is something I don’t think most of us would subscribe to here; but much more is the belief that truth is terribly important. There’s no such thing as objective news gathering, but you’re objective as you can be.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

In contrast to the state news services of Southeast Asia, there is little emphasis on development journalism. It is in fact viewed with suspicion in London.
We don't give a stuff quite frankly about irrigation and how to make the best paddy field in the world. It is not our business to do that ... [W]e run a series of programmes that the UN make, UN World and that kind of thing which they're welcome to really. You could do a bulletin every day about development issues in various parts of the world but that is not our business. Our business is news. That [development news] is manufactured information and it suits local governments to proselytise what they're doing ... I think we're cynical enough here to know that.\textsuperscript{55}

Clearly, these news values and judgements are in sharp contrast to those promoted by governments in Southeast Asia.

In summary, the arrival of CNN and BBCWST within the space of a few months reflects the search for an audience by transnational broadcasters seeking to achieve economies of scale in the vast, untapped markets of Asia. Each settled on different institutional arrangements. CNN's deal with a state-owned company in Indonesia was obviously not unanimously endorsed by all elements of the government. The tension among the elite reflects the divergence of interests between the sectors of the state: those in the Ministry of Information wanting to sustain the imperatives of national cohesion, those seeking to earn export revenue and international prestige in the telecommunications field and, perhaps, those opportunistic business groups such as RCTI which provide an entree to international companies as business partners.

BBCWST's arrival via the Star TV network stemmed from the perceived need of a publicly funded organisation to diversify into the commercial sector on the bases of declining government support and technological change. The creation of Star TV by a wealthy conglomerate was primarily a business venture spurred by economic gain. This assessment is borne out by the October 1993 sale of sixty-three per cent of the company to Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation for US$525 million.\textsuperscript{46} In 1989, Lent flagged this development, even before Star had emerged under its original ownership. "As possibilities of lucrative media acquisitions in the West dwindle, and as some Asian publishing outfits and broadcasting systems become more economically profitable, groups such as Murdoch, or Hersant, or Maxwell, or Thomson, in their lust for more and more properties, will increasingly look to Asia and other parts of the Third World."\textsuperscript{47} What effect this trend has on Southeast Asian societies and how the governments attempt to deal with it are the key issues in the next chapter.
Chapter 4

Confrontation and Collaboration

"We may not be able to check foreign TV intruding into our lives for very much longer."

Lee Kuan Yew, Prime Minister of Singapore, 1988.¹

Despite the early signs heralding the arrival of CNN and BBC DBS services in 1991, governments in ASEAN seemed ill-prepared to defend their televisual information monopolies. Policies and strategies towards satellite television varied widely between governments. Occasionally the policies - even within the same country - have been haphazard and ineffective. Following a meeting of the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union called to consider the arrival of DBS, its secretary general proclaimed: "The reaction at this stage is a little bit mixed ... We didn't have a consensus and I doubt if we will ever have a consensus on this because of the diversity of our membership."² By mid-1994 the ABU had decided to draft a code of ethics for satellite broadcasters. The organisation's secretary general said the foreign broadcasting "intruders were not going to go away" and "guidelines should be set so that their programming should not upset or offend audiences or governments in the region".³ The ability of an organisation such as the ABU, let alone ASEAN governments, to enforce such a code is highly questionable, as we shall see in this chapter.

This chapter examines the state responses - with particular attention paid to the internal dynamics of government and relations with the international economy. The complexity of the relationship between the state, the international markets and social forces implicit in the interdependence model should be borne in mind when sifting through the evidence concerning the response of the governments. Assessing the impact of events on political patterns is more problematic, although important clues lie in recent studies on democratic transformation and the liberalising influence of the middle class. In addition, the interrelated issue of changes to the domestic broadcasting environment is important. It is critical to consider the changes in the context of broad global political and economic movements.
As mentioned in Chapter 1, elements of Southeast Asia’s liberal press judged the arrival of DBS services as a blow to authoritarian state control in the region. A headline in Bangkok’s The Nation grandly announced: “Satellite set to beam Asians the truth”, while the Far Eastern Economic Review predicted:

The notion that sovereignty includes state power to control television within a nation’s borders will be shattered. Governments will lose their control over what people watch on TV ... [D]isputes over the attempts of nations to squelch (jam) radio waves from Radio Australia or the BBC World Service are nothing compared to the ability of satellite television to challenge states’ stranglehold on information and news.

A closer examination three years later reveals a more complex situation. While there clearly have been changes to broadcasting policies in the wake of DBS, states have maintained a degree of control in developments through punitive regulations and through industry involvement. An important component of the latter strategy has been collaborative cable television projects. Others are the apparent rush by each country to develop its own domestic satellite system and to ‘modernise’ the production and programming styles of state broadcasters.

As we have seen in Chapters 2 and 3, the DBS services were poised to deliver news and information with a style and ideological perspective not previously widely available in the region. As the disputes between foreign journals and governments in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore in the 1980s illustrated, issues of state power were at the heart of the relationship. Often these were articulated by governments in terms of national unity and development. The Southeast Asian states attempted to maintain their central role in television in light of the arrival of BBC and CNNI.

In this climate, there were certain regulatory responses concerning ownership of parabolic antennae which were easier to enforce in some countries than in others. As described in the previous chapter, Indonesian regulators had created their own serious administrative problems by delivering domestic television via satellite which required parabolic antennae. When the telecommunications sector later granted permission for CNNI to use Palapa, rules banning people to watch the broadcasts proved ineffective. Similarly in Malaysia, delivery of the three national networks via Palapa saw a proliferation of parabolic antennae in more remote parts of the country - especially the eastern states on Borneo. This has made subsequent government attempts to restrict ownership of parabolic
antennae difficult. Thailand has had a different experience, in that narrowcasting operators screening CNN and several other Western news services in Bangkok existed several years before the DBS services arrived.⁷ Permits were required to own a parabolic antenna until 1992, and were restricted to a privileged few in government and corporate circles.⁸ Each of these countries will be dealt with in more detail below after we have examined the case of Singapore.

Unlike the other countries in this study, the geography of Singapore mitigates against the proliferation of parabolic antennae. In the first instance, the tiny island state does not require a satellite broadcasting system to cover vast distances across inaccessible mountains or oceans. The Singapore Broadcasting Corporation’s three channels are delivered via low-power microwave signals.⁹ All reception equipment must be licensed.¹⁰ Secondly, the high population density of Singapore has so far made detection of parabolic antennae relatively easy.

Shortly before the arrival of the DBS service in Southeast Asia, a Singapore government paper stated:

_Singapore has yet to allow the installation of satellite dishes because such equipment would provide unlimited access to foreign TV programmes. There is a wide range of foreign TV programmes, some of which purvey values and lifestyles which are unacceptable to the majority of our people. As we are a multi-racial and multi-religious society, we must also be careful of programmes which may be offensive on racial or religious grounds._¹¹

This statement was consistent with themes developed during the 1970s and 1980s dealing with both the domestic and foreign media. But at the same time there was an awareness in industry and government circles of the economic imperatives tied to communications development.

_Singapore’s international and national economic interests are reflected in its development of communication and information industries. These support other growth areas placing Singapore as a key player in regional tourism and convention services._¹²

Singapore’s Communications and Information Minister - Mah Bow Tan - appeared to be aware of the dilemma, as he sought a policy to “better reconcile the two seemingly opposite goals of nation-building and business efficiency in television broadcasting”.¹³
However, Singapore’s reluctance to open its information sector to match the rhetoric of the market economy is perhaps not an isolated case. It is fruitful to widen the scope of investigation for a moment to explain this. Lim contends that other policies in the republic follow a similar pattern.

Rather than serving the market and the capitalist economy ... many state policies in Singapore have been undertaken more for the entrenchment of the state itself, even at the expense of competing with private enterprise and restraining and occasionally deforming the growth of the market.\textsuperscript{14}

Such tension between a state’s policy of an open economy and a closed political system is a characteristic in all the countries in this study, albeit in different forms. In the case of Indonesia, Liddle asserts that the slogan and policy of ‘development’ is the “link between a repressive political system and a market economy”. It is an arrangement “used to increase the New Order’s power”.\textsuperscript{15} This theme is important when considering responses to DBS.

The Singapore government’s response to DBS has three key components: it has maintained bans on parabolic antennae in homes; it has collaborated with the less threatening international news provider in the development of a cable television news service; and has undertaken limited deregulation of state broadcasting.

In 1990 the \textit{Business Times} reported that there was only one privately owned satellite dish in Singapore capable of receiving foreign television programmes - at the United States embassy.\textsuperscript{16} However under pressure from the business sector in the wake of CNN’s celebrated coverage of the Gulf War, a small number of financial companies were given parabolic antennae licences “in a bid to promote the country as an international business hub”.\textsuperscript{17}

The remaining two strategies of developing a cable television news service and reforming the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation appear to be an attempt to put cheaper alternative systems to DBS in place before technological pressure and public demand grew further. The creation of the Singapore Cable Vision (SCV) subscription service\textsuperscript{18} in 1991 saw both CNN and BBC bid to provide material for the news channel. The BBC “insisted” it should be given control of the entire channel to “preserve editorial integrity”. However, the Singapore government said it needed to “maintain programming arrangements” - a euphemism for a gatekeeper role or censorship. CNN agreed to the government stipulation and won the contract.\textsuperscript{19} A Reuters report in \textit{The Nation} newspaper quoted a Singaporean journalist’s explanation for the government decision:
In a hypothetical emergency in Singapore, the kind of contract which BBC wanted would not allow the government to cut off its beam in the country... I'm sure in the back of their mind, they [the government] had this concern about losing political control.\(^{20}\)

There also appears to be disapproval of BBCWST within the Singapore government over what the service has already been reporting elsewhere in the region. A BBC executive comments:

We've had complaints from Singapore, but we're not officially taken in Singapore. But we're seen in government offices. People in those offices see things that the people in the country don't see, then complain about them.\(^{21}\)

The Singapore government's plans to partially privatise SBC is designed to pre-empt demand for more Western programming, while maintaining a gatekeeper role. The strategy entails a privatised SBC “forging alliances with foreign channels.”\(^{22}\) Information and Arts Minister - George Yeo - said “government quality controls” would continue under the privatised SBC through a regulatory state board.\(^{23}\)

Malaysia’s government has a similar attitude towards the international DBS services, but is encumbered with widespread proliferation of privately owned parabolic antennae. The total number of households, including hotel rooms, able to receive material from the Palapa satellite is put at 68,000.\(^{24}\) Nonetheless, as the BBC and CCNI DBS services began in 1991, the government announced that private satellite dishes would be banned under amendments to the Telecommunications Act. Only a select group could possess the equipment: the King, the state Sultans, the Prime Minister and the deputy Prime Minister.\(^{25}\) Explaining the policy the Information Minister - Mohamed Rahmat - said: “We have rather strict censorship in this country... We want to know what is arriving from the sky.”\(^{26}\) The minister also alluded to dangers of racial tension: “Here in Malaysia, communalism and communism is [sic] still a danger for us. With satellites, I don't rule out the possibility of clandestine TV. It could be very dangerous for a multiracial society.”\(^{27}\)

These fears held by the governments of Malaysia and Singapore appear to be key factors in DBS policy. Executives from two Western broadcasters interviewed for this paper say concern for racial harmony is a recurring theme in talks with officials. The governments’ views were probably reinforced by communal
rioting in India in December 1992 following the demolition of the Ayodhya mosque by Hindu militants. The event was extensively and immediately covered by BBC and CCNI. While the violence was clearly due to underlying religious tension, there is prima facie evidence that coverage fanned violence. A Reuters report from Bombay quoted police and political leaders as saying the broadcasts by CNN and the BBC helped trigger a communal backlash. 28 India has been one of Star TV's most successful markets, with an estimated 1.5 million households using the service at the time. 29

India’s defence minister - Sharad Pawar - said: “Millions of people saw the mosque being demolished on the BBC and CNN and their anger was uncontrollable.” 30 The style of coverage on the international services was a departure from that of the state broadcaster Doordarshan. “In the past, Indian television could delay news of major disasters, such as the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi.” 31

In fact in Singapore, the Gandhi assassination in 1984 led to communal tension between Sikhs and Hindus in the ‘Little India’ area of the city - tension that was not allowed to be reported in the Singapore media. 32 With international DBS services, it would be unlikely that the ‘Little India’ episode could be stopped from being reported to Singaporeans.

Just a few weeks before the 1992 riots in India, the Malaysian government made its first concrete policy response to DBS since banning dishes the previous year. Energy, Telecommunications and Posts minister - Samy Vellu - announced further changes would be made to the Telecommunications Act allowing the government to act against owners of illegal parabolic antennae. Fines of up to M$100,000 (A$62,000) and/or jail terms of up to three years could be imposed under the new law. Owners had one month to dismantle their antennae. 33 In contrast to industry estimates of tens of thousands of parabolic antennae in Malaysia, Samy Vellu told parliament that there were about “500 dishes throughout the country, with most of them in Sarawak”, 34 a state on the island of Borneo.

This policy caused stresses within Malaysia’s federal system. The apparent widespread use of parabolic antennae for international television reception on Sarawak led the state government there to announce it would pass laws to legalise their use. 35 The Federal government said it would not allow the Sarawak
law to be implemented. Nonetheless, the parabolic antennae remained on the black market for between M$4,000 (A$2,500) and M$5,000 (A$3,125), including installation and a six-month guarantee. Ultimately the federal government, possibly realising its original position was unable to be enforced, made Sarawak a special case. Shortly afterwards another concession was granted, this time to hotels of three star ratings and above to receive CNN so tourists would “be able to keep up with international news around the clock”. These episodes of policy uncertainty in Malaysia illustrate the efficacy of the interdependence model in analysing developments in new media. They show that that there are several layers of collaboration within the state system which contribute to the ultimate links that emerge between the state and the international economic players.

Like Singapore, Malaysia has adopted a policy designed to pre-empt programming on the DBS service. It is seeking to achieve this through corporate reform of the existing terrestrial television industry and the introduction of subscription television services. The subscription news service (SNS) will be delivered via terrestrial systems, but will require a decoder. The government says both CNNI and BBCWST material will be used in the service. However, the 18 hour-a-day service will draw on 48 hours of BBCWST and CNN programming. The ability to censor the international services is implicit in this arrangement. Two other subscription channels will televise entertainment and movies and sport. It would appear that the government's aim is to draw people away from the expensive and illegal option of buying a parabolic antenna by offering this foreign fare, albeit processed and potentially censored.

In Indonesia, the tensions within the government that preceded the arrival of CNN on Palapa persisted once the service commenced. The chief policy cleavages developed between the Information Ministry and the state-owned telecommunications companies. Only weeks after the service began, CNN sought to encrypt its signal to owners of parabolic antennae in Indonesia, which would require them to rent a decoder. The move appeared to be a fait accompli and details were released to the regional business press. By paying an additional US$1.1 million (A$1.67 million) per year to Indonesia, CNN would be allowed to run a subscription service. However, the policy disagreement between the Information Ministry and the Telecommunications ministry spilled into the public arena. The Information ministry’s position was argued thus: “Coupled with worry about foreign cultural invasion, the concern led to demands that CNN should acquire an Indonesian broadcasting licence.”

44
broadcasting executive dealing with the Indonesian government at the time says Jonathan Parapak at Indostar did not clear the deal with the Ministry of Information. The director general of Radio, Television and Film - Alex Leo Zulkarmaen - “pulled rank” on Parapak under instructions from Information Minister Harmoko. The deal went into limbo and CNN continues to be a free-to-air service.

Towards the middle of 1993, the Indonesian government announced a radical shift in policy, possibly acknowledging the futility of many of its restrictive regulations towards DBS. Harmoko announced that six private television stations would be set up in addition to the four existing networks and all would have to relay their programmes by satellite within “two or three years”. The Indonesian English-language newspaper, The Jakarta Post, reported that Harmoko “expressed confidence the nation was ready to face the onslaught of commercial television from local as well as international networks, some of whom have already made their presence felt in Indonesia.” Harmoko said, “I’m no longer pessimistic about the resiliency of our people in absorbing television programmes.”

Thus, Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia have all sought to exploit limitations to the foreign DBS services. Those limitations are cost, language and, of course, legal requirements. It is clear that the rapid changes in broadcasting regulations have been sparked by the threat from DBS. A consequence will be greater amounts of Western programming via subscription services and deregulated state broadcasters. The material will, however, be vetted and dubbed or subtitled into the national language. Nonetheless, predictions of the shattering of sovereignty and loss of control are probably exaggerated.

Driven by desire for market share and increased profits, the international services will seek to counter some of the programming initiatives taken by the deregulated indigenous broadcasters. For instance, BBCWST televeses daily a special news bulletin, Asia Today, and plans to begin offering a Mandarin soundtrack. Australia Television is televising short news bulletins in Indonesian, Mandarin and Thai and all services are bolstering their coverage of the region. CNN has opened new bureaux and launched the Business Asia programme. This does not mean Western liberal ethics will diminish with the changes. If anything, BBC coverage will become more comprehensive if the service is a financial success.
There are scandals going on in Southeast Asia which we would like to expose, but on our kind of budget we can't do it ... and CNN, which has a better budget, doesn't do it either. I would like Asia Today not to be ten minutes pull-together which has virtually no money. I would like to see it a properly funded, half hour programme.48

Such comments only reinforce the radical changes in global broadcasting. The idea of a service like the BBC being a market-driven, private sector player in Asia could scarcely have been imaginable two decades ago. Recent comments, however, by Star TV's new owner - Rupert Murdoch - cast doubt on BBCWST's long term prospects on the network.49

Impact on Broader Political Change

Assessing the impact of foreign news DBS services on the politics of the region is a formidable task. The ground is moving constantly. Lack of market research means the attitudes of those watching these services cannot be scrutinised. The political climate and staggered arrival of DBS services has not encouraged such research. However, in the light of regime responses canvassed in this chapter, market developments and theories of democratic change, it is possible to explore the political situation in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia in the context of broad political liberalisation, of which DBS could be seen as a component. Attempts by ASEAN governments to cling to the televisual information monopoly would suggest that the states themselves think values detrimental to their power base would enter the minds of their citizens.

Drawing on studies of democratisation in South Korea and South America, Hall offers useful insights into the role of the educated working class and middle-class in times of political change. He describes these groups as having "a set of interests and a style of life which make it hostile to clumsy statist attempts to control economic life and the freedom of movement and information upon which their skills depend".50 This phenomenon is evident throughout ASEAN to varying degrees. In the case of Malaysia, there is evidence of growing middle class disquiet with restrictions on information and political activity. Per capita GNP in the country increased from US$1,953 to US$2,854 between 1988 and 1993. This, according to the Far Eastern Economic Review gives Malaysia "one of the fastest growing middle-classes in the region". "Privately, at least, an increasing number of younger and more sophisticated Malays are starting to question some of the government's long-standing curbs on political freedom."51
In Singapore, with “80 per cent of the population in the middle class”\textsuperscript{52} the declining vote of the authoritarian PAP to around 60 per cent suggests there would be a demand for alternative political viewpoints. This is despite the observation by Haas in 1989 that Singaporeans will “continue to be quiet, fearing to express themselves until they vote” because of the government’s ‘repressive’ style.\textsuperscript{53}

It is not only the reporting of events within ASEAN member countries that has the potential to influence political patterns. Broader Western movements and ideas may accompany the broadcasts as well. Extensive coverage of the Western liberal political process, such as the United States election will perhaps affect middle class perceptions about their own political systems. Such a view was reflected in an interview by an Indonesian sociologist who recalled that in late 1992 a student protest in Jakarta saw students holding banners proclaiming, in English, “Clinton yes, Suharto no”. The event was not covered by the Indonesian media, but the interviewee recalled that the students in the protest were from wealthy middle-class families, who, most likely, watch CNN.

Such influences and developments are clearly part of broader movements. As Khushu points out:

\begin{quote}
This issue needs to be explored in the perspective of the ever increasing human contact in all forms, of which television is only one. These include international radio, ... free flow of printed material and, at the inter-personal level, even international tourism.\textsuperscript{54}
\end{quote}

Khushu’s point is a very important one. For instance, BBCWST and CNN DBS services can be received in Burma. However, because of the SLORC administration’s strict isolation of the Burmese economy and polity, there is little evidence that pressures of liberalisation are occurring there to the same degree as in ASEAN countries. Among other things, there are few opportunities for CNN or BBCWST to gather news pictures or interviews in Burma. While restrictions for Western journalists do apply in the ASEAN countries in this study, the relative abundance of Western visitors for business or tourism makes them difficult to police. Other influences include books, magazines, academic and business contact. Burmese society has not been exposed to the same complex matrix of structural and episodic influences, of which DBS is only one variable.
Summary

The ASEAN governments have adopted policies designed to hasten development through exposure of their economies to the international market. This has led to an increasing economic interdependence, which in some cases involves the trading of cultural commodities such as television programming. In the case of Indonesia, it has meant elements of the state have become international telecommunications players. Simai observes that a cycle of information liberalisation flows from this exposure to international markets.

The information revolution has become in itself a major source of the globalization process in general. It has been even more so in globalizing the economies of the Asian countries. Many of the global flows at the last part of the century are information based, using the rapidly expanding network of cables and satellites.55

What has emerged from this chapter is a sense of rapid change and political uncertainty faced by regimes with the arrival of DBS. Control of news is clearly not something given up lightly by the state after decades of monopoly. The lengths to which some governments have gone to prevent intrusion by BBCWST and CNN are testament to that. In the face of formidable economic and technological forces - not to mention the Western inspired trend of deregulation of the 1980s - the governments have clearly been pressured to give ground. In the case of Malaysia and Singapore, the state has maintained its gatekeeper role in the news and information sector so far. As Karthigesu points out:

Here, where the political climate is mainly authoritarian, the broadcasting industry ... has begun to be rapidly converted into profitable business enterprises, capitalising on its entertainment potential, but without showing any liberalisation in terms of political expression.56

The proliferation of entertainment channels in new state services is perhaps designed to divert attention from the DBS news services.

These changes in Southeast Asian broadcasting flow from a combination of structural factors and on-going strategic interaction between elements of the state and international economic players. Returning to Negrine’s interdependence theory, recall that governments “counter the loss of autonomous control” by “exploiting the network of interdependent relationships in order to extract...
suitable economic or other rewards for internal consumption". In addition to the rewards flowing from collaborative involvement in the television industry, all states plan to have their own satellite programme by the decade’s end. This is likely to intensify competition to introduce more international DBS services into the region.
Chapter 5

The Thai Case: May 1992

For three days and nights in May 1992, the centre of Bangkok was the scene of violence between security forces and demonstrators seeking political reform. Rallies, involving up to 150,000 people, were held to call for the resignation of the unelected Prime Minister, General Suchinda Kraprayoon. The number of people killed in clashes during the period 17 to 20 May remains unclear, but at the time was put officially at 40, unofficially at 100 or more. The city was placed under a night-time curfew and emergency rule was declared. The violence ended when King Bhumibol Adulyadej called in political leaders and told them to end the conflict. His intervention was not based on any constitutional power, but rather was obeyed on the basis of deeply felt respect for his authority.

In this chapter, the information structures that operated during this brief and violent national crisis will be explored. The DBS services will be a central reference point. The civil unrest is the first opportunity to analyse the importance of DBS as a variable in a time of crisis in ASEAN. DBS’s use by Thai people both as an information source and as a counterpoint to the state broadcasting news services will be considered.

At the outset, however, it is important to emphasise that an exploration of the politics of DBS must be conducted against the background of Thailand’s overarching social, economic and political movements. Three key components are the role of the military elite in political and economic life, Thailand’s rapidly increasing exposure to the international economy and the associated rise of the middle classes in Bangkok. The changes in political culture and class relations stemming from internationalisation of the economy appears to have challenged the power of the military, with the conflict coming to a head in May 1992.

*For much of this century the military’s leaders have effectively held control, but now the country’s growing middle class has begun challenging their authority. Executives, technicians and housewives believe that Thailand is capable of governing itself democratically, without the general’s interference.*

50
For the military, state television has been developed as a tool of control. As will be shown in this chapter, the leadership attempted to maintain that use of television during the May 1992 political crisis.

One of the most striking characteristics of the Thai media is the difference in levels of political control between television news and press reporting. As canvassed in Chapter 2, the press arguably has the most liberal record in the region, while television news is heavily controlled and censored by the government. The Thai press tradition means evidence dealing with the uprising in Bangkok in May 1992 is in relative abundance and will be used extensively in this chapter, along with material from international print media, BBC television news archives and interviews with Thai broadcasters and analysts and a Western embassy official who witnessed and analysed the events.

**Policy Background**

Policies towards international television news services during the 1980s hinged on regulation and cost to restrict access to a privileged political and commercial elite. By 1990, CNNI - and United States domestic news services - were available on a subscription television service IBC, which received one of two pay television franchise licences from the regulatory organisation - the Mass Communication Authority of Thailand (MCOT). The other service, with more local programming, was Thai Sky. While locally described as cable services, both IBC and Thai Sky are delivered terrestrially using microwave technology. These services were allowed on the basis that the state could censor programmes, a prerogative exercised by the government during the May 1992 incidents.

Private ownership of parabolic antennae officially required a government permit until 1992. Permits were granted to government officials of “at least C8 rank”, company managers, MPs, senators and city councillors. These rules apparently could be manipulated. According to the *Bangkok Post*, a parabolic antenna and licence could be arranged for between 30,000 and 100,000 baht (A$1,875 and A$6,250). “Try calling any satellite dish company for purchase and installation of a dish, and they’ll say ‘no problem’. They can manage to get you a licence and install the dish within a few days. They’ll find a company or individual with complete qualifications to apply for the licence on your behalf.” Price acted as a clear limitation to the ownership under these arrangements. Nonetheless when the government lifted the regulations on DBS antennae in February 1992, there were an estimated 15,000 already installed in Thailand, almost exclusively the
preserve of the military, administrative and socio-economic middle classes in Bangkok.\textsuperscript{8}

At the time regulations were lifted, the communications minister - Nukul Prachuabmoh - said the move was “a response to government policy of free trade competition”.\textsuperscript{9} The minister’s inclusion of such powerful political or cultural ‘products’ as information in the general sweep of ‘free trade’ highlights the conceptual ambiguity towards the issue within the state. While minister Nukul adopted a rather neo-liberal perspective, the military sought to maintain televisual information as a state monopoly. These policy divisions were creating tension within the state. They were to contribute to violent and dramatic events in the coming months as television became both a conduit for and a symbol of a wider political struggle.

\textbf{Countdown to Conflict}

General Suchinda Kraprayoon, former supreme commander of the Thai military, was appointed prime minister on 7 April 1992. His career path was by no means unique. Of Thailand’s 19 prime ministers, Suchinda was the 10th to come from the military.\textsuperscript{10} His appointment was constitutionally legitimised by the dominant parliamentary alliance of five parties - which acted under pressure from the military-led “National Peace-keeping council (NPKC)\textsuperscript{11}” effectively a military junta. While the MPs endorsing the appointment had been elected in national polls the previous month, the state apparatus largely remained under the control of the NPKC.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, state television was a key element of NPKC control. It was an issue openly discussed in Thailand’s liberal press. An editorial in the Bangkok Post published three days after Suchinda’s appointment observed:

\textit{Since the (22 March) election, all four national commercial stations have reportedly been operating under an unspoken code of minimising any coverage critical of the National Peace-keeping Council or the ways in which it was orchestrating political developments. The situation apparently took a turn for the worse following the appointment of former military chief Gen Suchinda Kraprayoon as the country’s new prime minister, as there was a virtual news blackout on dissenting voices from various quarters. Of the four stations, two are said to have received verbal instructions to present only}
coverage that is supportive of Gen Suchinda's appointment while the news editors at the two other stations are reported to have exercised "self-censorship" to the same effect, apparently fearing adverse repercussions if they were to present the negative side of the story.\textsuperscript{13}

The policy of state control of television was consistent with attempts to protect the political and economic interests of a powerful section of the elite. The Thai military has a long record of involvement in economic activity in both the private sector and in statutory organisations. It was to be the most active censor in the coming weeks. In a somewhat prophetic conclusion to its editorial of April 10, the \textit{Bangkok Post} said:

\textit{Censoring the story by presenting the rosy picture while suppressing the negative side only serves to fuel further resentment and frustration which can prove detrimental in the end.}\textsuperscript{13}

The state control of the electronic media was to become a recurring theme in the following weeks as protests against Suchinda’s appointment grew. When parliament was convened on 17 April, opposition MPs wore black suits with anti-Suchinda slogans embroidered on them, while hundreds of people protested outside. Their chief grievance was that Suchinda was not an elected politician. Under the headline “No TV lights to brighten the ‘political darkness’: Electronic media ignore ‘mourning of democracy’.” \textit{The Nation} recorded that “[t]he three government-owned television stations and the other two owned by the army ... gave scant attention to the protests”.\textsuperscript{14} In one remarkable episode, news footage containing the sound of opposition MPs jeering the Prime Minister in parliament was dubbed with applause before being televised.\textsuperscript{15} Demonstrations the following week at the Royal Plaza in Bangkok drew more than 50,000 people but failed to win television coverage.\textsuperscript{16} The same protests led Army Radio to brand protesters as “uncivilised, primitive and anarchical”. In a commentary, the radio service said opposition politicians should “promote and help in nation-building, in solving national problems”.\textsuperscript{17}

The censorship during this time was two-pronged, with the use of both direct censorship and encouragement of self-censorship. Military censors directed the order of news items on the military channels - 5 and 7. Stories containing criticism of the government were excluded. The army stations were considered ‘weather vanes’ for the remaining government-controlled news services: 3, 9 and 11. A Thai analyst noted: “They [Channels 3, 9 and 1] have been following the
Army channels’ lead and exercising self-censorship rather than incur the wrath of the military.\textsuperscript{18} There is also evidence that elements of the military were behind efforts to intimidate news organisations during this period. The publisher of \textit{The Nation} and a journalist from Reuters were harassed and journalists were also assaulted by the prime minister’s bodyguards.\textsuperscript{19}

On the last day of April, the government made an official move to counter the growing criticism. A junior minister in the office of the Prime Minister - Piyanat Watcharaporn - announced that state media were not to broadcast any opposition “attacks” against the government.\textsuperscript{20} The sense of political crisis escalated with more protests against Suchinda and a call, in turn, by him for the press to “impose a degree of self-censorship to ensure law and order and help the country's economy”\textsuperscript{21}. The call went unheeded and within a few days \textit{The Nation}, in a page-one editorial, was openly calling for Suchinda to step down.\textsuperscript{22} International news media were beginning to take a closer interest in political events, spurred by the hunger strike of opposition leader - Major General Chamlong Srimuang. Chamlong proclaimed that he was on a hunger strike “to the death”\textsuperscript{23} to press for Suchinda’s resignation and for an elected prime minister.\textsuperscript{24}

On 8 April the Interior Minister - Anan Kalinta - said the press “should not give foreigners an impression that there was no democracy in the country”.\textsuperscript{25} The next day international television news coverage of street protests involving some 30,000 people was prevented from being transmitted from Thailand. While it appears that no order had come from the government for the action, a senior telecommunications bureaucrat warned the Thai stations responsible for relaying foreign material to “exercise good judgement in deciding if any particular footage is proper for overseas transmission”.\textsuperscript{26} Two stations acted on this advice by refusing to send anti-government footage on behalf of Visnews and Japan’s TV Asahi to their head offices. CNN, which uses Visnews footage, announced that it would continue to cover events in Thailand through telephone reports,\textsuperscript{27} presumably aided by stills photographs and file footage. An organisation closely monitoring the situation was the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Thailand (FCCT), which represents journalists in their dealings with the government. The FCCT took up the issue of the blocked footage with the MCOT and normal arrangements were restored within a few days. The FCCT’s chairperson at the time, Dominic Faulder, judges that the obstruction of the Visnews and TV Asahi was more likely the work of an over-zealous official rather than government policy.
There was some sort of self-censorship underway and foreign TV crews found themselves being obstructed. There was no official policy. When efforts were made to clarify the situation, it was decided at a very high level that this [censorship] shouldn't happen.²⁸

There is evidence, though, that systems were set in place by CNN to get footage out of Thailand if the ban on playout facilities had persisted. The Bangkok Post reported that during the short ban, tapes of demonstrations and anti-government statements were flown to Hong Kong and then relayed by satellite to Atlanta.²⁹ In an off-the-record briefing, a Western diplomatic observer confirmed these contingency arrangements for CNN, adding that Singapore was another point to which Visnews and CNN tapes were couriered for playout. Clearly, any government attempt at restricting the outflow of news material from a society as open as Thailand is almost impossible. As events during the following week were to show, restricting the inflow proved a formidable task.

**17 to 20 May: Contrasts in Coverage**

The government moved to resolve the political agitation by force on the evening of 17 May, declaring a state of emergency. One of its first targets was the press. As security forces began arresting protesters - sparking violent scuffles - restraining orders were issued against newspapers. The papers were told to “refrain from publishing articles or any other documents which carry contents detrimental to national security, safety or inciting public unrest”.³⁰ While the Bangkok Post blanked out sections, The Nation continued to report accounts of the violence, juxtaposed with government statements from state television.³¹ Government censors twice blacked out coverage referring to the crisis in the US owned newspaper, the International Herald Tribune. On 20 May orders were issued for the closure of The Nation and Bangkok Post, however, the King made his celebrated intervention only hours later and the orders were never carried out.

The terrestrial channels continued to provide pro-government coverage during the three days of violence. The Nation reports that the stations highlighted the “patience and suffering of the security forces, [while] avoiding mention of civilian casualties”.³² In a broadcast statement, the Prime Minister urged Thais to monitor “accurate and unbiased” news about the disturbances through radio and television only.³³ Suchinda claimed the conflict had been engineered by an opposition leader, Chavalit Yongchaiyudh, in a bid to create a communist-style system for Thailand.³⁴
At the same time BBCWST and CNNI were leading their international bulletins with the news from Bangkok. Tens of thousands of people were able to watch these reports in Thailand via DBS, although CNN reports via IBC’s subscription service were censored. Just hours before the state of emergency was declared on 18 May, BBC reporter Alexander Thompson described the scenes at a rally in Bangkok:

For several hours the rally had passed off peacefully with a generally well-disciplined crowd which grew to more than a hundred thousand listening to speaker after speaker demanding that general Suchinda resign as Prime Minister. Speakers also criticised the prominent role the Thai military plays in political life here. The crowd represented a broad cross section of Thai society. Many believe the army’s approach to politics is crudely out of date. But General Suchinda has repeatedly said he will not be swayed by mass protest and right from the start there were fears that peaceful protests might get out of control.

The contrasts in style and content with the state run services are obvious. In the words of a BBCWST executive, the coverage of Thailand’s political turmoil was organised and executed according to well-established editorial practices.

What we aim to do, like any decent journalist, is to get some way to the truth of the matter. We approach it in exactly the same way as we would approach any other disturbance of this kind anywhere in the world, whether it was in Europe, America, the UK or, as it happened in this case, in Thailand. So you use the same journalistic measures and aim not to exaggerate the situation, you try to get to the bottom of what’s going on, trying not to play up the violence ... and most of all you have to try to explain things to everybody else who isn’t Thai that this matters.

The coverage continued around the clock, climaxing two days later with the shootings and violence in the centre of Bangkok. The report of the scenes at the Royal Hotel, described in the opening paragraphs of this thesis, was one of the last before the King's intervention. In addition to the descriptions of the violence and loss of life, that report on 19 May referred to the protesters as the “democracy movement” and the “bruising” and “disturbing” tactics of soldiers. In a follow up report from Washington, BBCWST reported the negative reaction of the US, European and Australian governments to the violence, including the suspension of military aid. BBC World Service radio increased its evening Thai language broadcasts from 15 minutes to 30 minutes in response to the unrest.
A crucial development - influenced by international television news exchange networks in general and the BBCWST service in particular - was the intervention of the King on 20 May. It came after his daughter had witnessed the violence on French television, which was using BBC footage. Princess Sirindhorn in turn appeared on CNN calling for an end to the violence. She said “The most important thing I wish now is to have the killing and violence stop. All of us are Thais, no matter which group we belong to or what opinions we have.” Her comments immediately reached Bangkok’s public via the CNNI service. A Western embassy official recalls:

*She [the princess] went on air and gave an interview from Paris. It came into Bangkok from CNN via IBC. She was not being directly critical of Suchinda, but calling for an end to violence. It was very influential in the King’s intervention.*

In addition the King spoke to his daughter via telephone after she had seen the violence on French television.

*The King was being sheltered. Princess Sirindhorn saw the material in France. She expressed concern. It was one of the first times the King had heard from someone he trusted.*

Shortly afterwards the BBC received a request from the royal household for a copy of the tape which was retrieved from the archives in London and relayed to Bangkok. Clearly in this elite environment, the immediacy and power of DBS information became a new variable in the conduct of politics.

In a broader context, it is difficult to isolate DBS from associated technological, socio-economic and political movements that drove the events of May 1992. But the key effect of the discrepancies between the coverage on state television and the DBS services was probably to further erode the legitimacy of the Suchinda government. Newspaper reports and interviewees suggest demonstrators were both angered and emboldened by the DBS material.

Clearly the existence of the BBC and CNNI services provided a great number of people with more accurate information when the government stations were running propaganda and the newspapers were under threat of closure. Combined with the technology such as mobile telephones and facsimile machines, the government could not stop vital oppositionist communications links from operating. Days after the violence subsided, the *Bangkok Post* reflected on the role of the new technologies.
The unquenchable thirst for information, verifiable or not, mirrors people’s grave concern and confusion over the pro-democracy developments. Having lost faith in their once favourite media, public television, many now turn to any and every channel they can gain access to: telephone, fax, word of mouth, leaflets, computer bulletin boards, cable and satellite television... One of the ‘hottest’ videos among Bangkok news-seekers is one featuring BBC coverage of the raid on the Royal Hotel in the small hours of 19 May, taped by satellite dish owners.45

While at the time the impact of DBS on the political events was largely a matter of conjecture, data emerging shortly afterwards lends weight to its importance. Sales of parabolic antennae increased by 30 per cent in the month after the unrest, to the point where suppliers could provide no more.46 Figures from Bangkok’s biggest mobile telephone company shows the number of calls more than doubled during the crisis.47 The telephones were considered early in the protests to be “the most reliable way of communicating during the political crisis marred by a misinformation campaign on state-run television and radio stations”.48

Ratings figures show that the majority of Bangkok’s residents tuned into the government and military controlled stations in record numbers during the crisis. Research by Ogilvy and Mather showed that 6.2 million, or 76 per cent, of the population watched television news on 20 May. The average audience is 3.5 million.49 On their own these figures tell us little, except that perhaps there was a hunger for information. The widespread distribution of the BBCWST and CNNI reports, as well as newspaper criticism of the ‘propagandist’ nature of the terrestrial television services, almost certainly undermined the efficacy of the government broadcasts, especially among the middle class.

Another phenomenon lending weight to the importance of DBS, both during the crisis and in its aftermath, has its use as a reference point or standard in communications policy debate. Within days of the crisis, forums were being held in Bangkok to reflect on the perceived failings of the Thai television industry. One Thai writer asserted that access to international services, especially by elite groups, raised awareness about standards of government controlled networks. “Thais have access to international news networks such as CNN and BBC; they have come to appreciate world standards of news presentation, and thus reject the government’s blatant attempts to deny them access to information.”50 Subsequently, television liberalisation has become a catch-cry among intellectuals and newspaper publishers.51 A participant at a seminar at Bangkok’s Chulalongkorn University in June 1992 recalls the high hopes of participants.
At the end of the panel held at the university, all parties made a circle and joined hands in such a way that it was a solemn declaration that we will make a promise of commitment to freedom of television news in the media.\textsuperscript{52}

However, two years later little structural or legislative change had occurred. One development has been the scrapping of two orders dating back from 1976 that television and radio were obliged to run government news broadcasts. In addition there are signs that there has been a change in journalistic culture in the wake of the May 1992 crisis, with the international services being seen as a role model.

I think it [DBS] has been very important. It had a great impact on the class of people who were pushing the issue [of liberalisation] because they now have a concrete example. The CNN broadcasts from satellite were videotaped all over the city. For the ruling class, the military as well as civilian, they realise they cannot stop satellite broadcasting. We use that as an example to tell the government that this is going on in satellite broadcasting and we must try to reorganise our terrestrial broadcasting. We agree that nothing much has changed since May. This is why we keep on having to push the government.\textsuperscript{53}

In a sense the educated, affluent middle classes who took part in the uprising used the BBC and CNNI services as an experimental ‘control’ when assessing the performance of the state-run services. The state services have clearly been found wanting by this group.

**Summary**

The evidence presented in this chapter shows there are two distinct themes to emerge from analysing the role of the international DBS during a time of crisis. First, it can be a crucial component in the information network. Combined with other technology such as video recorder, mobile telephone and facsimile machines, DBS television reduces the ability of the state to monitor, control or stop information which may not be in its interest. Even with coercive powers, control of domestic television and radio and the option of punitive action against newspapers, civil disobedience continued using the hardware of an affluent and politically organised middle class. The thousands of affluent protesters became colloquially known during the civil unrest as *mob mua thue* - the mobile phone mob.\textsuperscript{54}
Second, by reaching such a high level of conflict, the differences in standards and ethics between the domestic and international service was brought sharply into focus. It has placed Thailand's television industry under intense scrutiny and appears to be hastening moves to deregulation and the adoption of new broadcasting technologies in the private sector.

But when all the technological aspects have been canvassed, it is the change in social and economic structures in Thailand linked to its exposure to the international marketplace that is at the root of developments. An event such as the political crisis of May 1992 highlights the difficulty of elements of the state to isolate information in an economy where free exchange of goods at a national and international level is commonplace. DBS was clearly an important variable during and after the crisis. It informed and emboldened the political activists. However, DBS can only contribute to change if other social, political and economic conditions are at a certain stage of development. Technology, ideas and economic pressures interact to spark such movements in a society.