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Chapter 6

Conclusion

In just a few short years, international satellite television has emerged as a key political and economic issue, not just within ASEAN, but in all the developing countries of Asia. The political importance of DBS stems from the fact that it seriously challenges the regulatory powers of the state relating to televisual information. This has serious implications for regime control, and has contributed to significant tension within government leaderships and between states and DBS players.

This tension has been illustrated most dramatically in China where, in October last year, the government banned private household ownership of parabolic antennae. While there were officially 40,000 parabolic antennae in China at the time of the announcement, illegal antennae and cables put “the number of viewers in the multi-millions”. The perceived threat to governments’ authority by DBS is reflected in a report on the ban which begins: “In a move to tighten its control of media and prolong its rule, China’s communist government has introduced sweeping rules to limit access to satellite television broadcasts.”

Such an assumption - that DBS can affect the very survival of the government of the world’s most populous country - attests to its perceived power.

For it is power that lies at the heart of the change and conflict that has accompanied satellite television into Southeast Asia. Economic, political and technological movements have altered the way in which the power over televisual information is shared or assigned. News Corporation’s purchase of Star TV has accentuated the trend of Asia’s communications industry becoming a component of global structures. Driven by economies of scale gained through access to Asia’s huge audiences, News Corporation has embraced technology to achieve true internationalisation of its satellite television services. In the process, it has dwarfed the scope of the other Western DBS news operator in Southeast Asia, Turner Broadcasting. Following the purchase of Star TV, News Corporation’s chairman and chief executive - Rupert Murdoch - unveiled plans “to develop TV channels with potential worldwide audiences”. Britain’s Broadcast magazine wrote that: “Channels with global viewing potential could

broadcast across Murdoch's television empire, which includes the US network Fox Network, BSkyB in the UK and Star TV in Southeast Asia." The commercial benefits for News Corporation under these arrangements are obvious.

However, one of the first casualties of the News Corporation takeover of Star TV has been BBCWST. News Corporation has replaced BBCWST on the northern footprint of AsiaSat1 over China with Mandarin-language movies. This move is designed to curry favour with governments whose policies and methods have been questioned in BBC reports. Having denied his motives for several months, Murdoch revealed in June 1994 that he had made the decision to "sooth bad relations with China". He added: "I was well aware that the freedom fighters of the world would abuse me for it."

While no such machinations in the DBS industry have occurred in ASEAN territories, this episode illustrates how authoritarian regimes are still able to influence events. In the Chinese case, state cooperation would greatly assist News Corporation's market penetration. Reduced political scrutiny in news services would be the price extracted from News Corporation. Editorial ethics would be jettisoned for commercial considerations. With the arrival of News Corporation in the region, liberal television news may have already reached its high water mark and is now retreating in the face of commercial considerations.

Such a development stands starkly at odds with the original structure of Star TV, under which BBCWST had full editorial control. As shown in the Bangkok uprising in 1992, BBCWST and CNNI seriously undermined the legitimacy of Thai state broadcasting and the government itself. Then, in the eyes of middle-class Thais, Western television news was a symbol of liberalism and freedom of expression. With the spectre of rapid and comprehensive vertical control of technology and services by the transnational players such as News Corporation, there is the potential for relatively monolithic and illiberal news practices to develop.

ASEAN's leadership has raised concerns about such potential private sector information monopolies. Malaysia's Dr Mahathir claimed Murdoch was "threatening to control the news in Asia". Such a sentiment underlines the paradoxes in the discourse related to DBS. For on one hand, regimes express opposition to the erosion of their television news sovereignty by the international DBS companies. On the other, they have become players in the DBS industry,
from which they derive substantial economic benefit. These policy contradictions, which first emerged in Indonesia as elements of the state separately played the roles of telecommunications broker and information gatekeeper, was the chink in the armour of ASEAN’s media sovereignty. The medium of delivery for the states’ television services, Palapa, was to be the conduit for CNN and Australia Television throughout the region. Palapa is an enduring symbol of the unforeseen and unintended consequences of technological development and quests for modernity by the state.

Elsewhere in ASEAN, governments are now following Indonesia’s lead into the telecommunications industry. Malaysia launched the two-satellite Measat system in 1994 for both domestic and international customers. The Science and Technology Minister - Law Hieng Ding - alluded to issues of both sovereignty and economics when he said: “Now we are paying an exorbitant sum for using satellite facilities and getting pictures from some of our neighbours.” A private Thai company - Shinawatra - has been granted an eight-year monopoly to operate the Thailandsat system, which is expected to be launched next year, while Singapore Telecom has also signalled it will enter the satellite communications industry.

When it comes to regulatory strategies towards parabolic antennae, the ASEAN states in this study can be divided into two distinct groups. After faltering attempts to prevent people using the antennae to watch foreign television, Indonesia and Thailand adopted ‘open skies’ policies. The governments have sought to accommodate the technological change and to carve out roles for themselves in the new arrangements. Television industries in both countries are currently undergoing major organisational changes as a result. In Malaysia and Singapore, however, the bans continue. In Malaysia’s case, the policy is something of a failure. This stems from the decision of the government to intervene only after tens of thousands of parabolic antennae had already been installed. The greatest dissent towards the restrictions is in Sabah and Sarawak, where the centre’s authority is weakest. Many of the antennae are in remote locations in these states. On the other hand, Singapore appears to have achieved total obedience. With its small geographical area and highly organised surveillance systems, Singapore has maintained its televisual media sovereignty, a unique achievement in the 1990s. However, the policy of banning parabolic antennae in Singapore and Malaysia will soon be overtaken by technology. European firms have already developed and marketed non-parabolic DBS reception antennae. For Asian systems “physically inconspicuous” antennae of
between thirty and sixty centimetres in size that “look no different from antennas (sic) used for terrestrial television” will be available in the “not to distant future” according to the Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union.12

Accounting for the range of experiences between the four countries in this study is assisted by the interdependence approach to state media relations, developed by Negrine and Papathanassopoulos. Their emphasis on the layers of collaboration within a state system, with bureaucratic and economic links, has been reinforced by the empirical data presented in this paper. The state is clearly not a monolithic entity. By tracing the complex interactions within the state, and with external players, it has been shown that the governments have sought to “counter the loss of autonomous control”13 by extracting economic rewards. Additionally, the interdependence approach underlines the complexity of policy development and responses. This helps explain the apparent policy contradictions, particularly in Indonesia where elements of the state leadership were working towards sharply differing strategic goals.

In this environment, there have been important and rapid changes to the way political information networks operate in the region. This has broader effects on the very conduct of politics. The most clear demonstration of the impact of DBS occurred in Bangkok during the 1992 civil uprising. The DBS services acted as vital two-way conduits of information, both at a mass level and an interpersonal level among the elite. Demonstrators were emboldened by the coverage, perhaps knowing it was being aired simultaneously across the world. CNNI and BBCWST were able to be juxtaposed with the military-backed regime’s overtly propagandist coverage of the unrest, further undermining the legitimacy of the government and later forming the basis of calls for broadcasting reform in Thailand.

DBS is only one factor in a complex web of change. Broader technological, political and social movements are required for the international media services to have a catalytic affect. However, a state’s attempt to maintain national cohesion in the face of real class or racial tension has been seriously undermined. This may explain the depth of political reaction to the screening of scenes of the Dili massacre on Palapa by Malaysia’s TV1. Staff at TV1 in Kuala Lumpur were demoted for showing scenes in September 1992 that the Western news services had been showing for months. Malaysia’s foreign minister flew to Indonesia to apologise to President Suharto. With the proliferation of DBS delivery systems, such political collaboration among ASEAN's state elite will not be effective for
much longer. News coverage of regional crises in the future centred on communalism - or as in the case of Indonesia, a political succession - will increasingly be beyond the control of the state.

More broadly, efforts by governments to place a "moratorium on modernisation"¹⁴ have become increasingly untenable. To a degree Indonesia and Thailand have acknowledged this, while Singapore and Malaysia continue to hold out against the trend. Post colonial patterns of news presentation in ASEAN that feature themes of nation building and social harmony are being challenged and eroded by DBS services that do not follow the same newsgathering principles. The arrival of international news and information services - as part of wider cultural and economic exposure - has the potential to disperse Western liberal values among audiences previously shut off from such material. "[C]ommunity expectations have radically changed; exposure to transnational broadcasts has stimulated demands for more sophisticated programming and for greater variety."¹⁵

ASEAN’s governments are having to rework their broadcasting policies under the combined pressure of technology, international markets and the rising middle class. While the states are involved in the international market place, they are unlikely to be able to quarantine the commodity of news information. The ability of foreign people to travel with relative freedom within these countries means television pictures and information can be gathered. Technological changes mean the televisual images can now be exported from and imported into these countries without the collaboration of the state itself. The extent to which states can contain events will depend on their ability to hold back the aspirations of an increasingly affluent middle class, by a mixture of political paternalism and providing alternative programming, in which the governments maintain some of their regulatory grip as information gatekeepers.

It cannot be suggested, however, that all state broadcasting influence and structure will be swept away by a wave of transnational DBS companies. Limitations exist to the penetration of DBS: language, cost and government regulatory and marketing strategies. Primordial loyalties to language and political culture should not be underestimated, especially if elements of civil society are not able to provide a clear oppositionist focus in the media. Malaysia and Singapore aim to counter public demand for international DBS by offering a range of cheaper subscription services to their citizens, before DBS reception equipment becomes undetectable. Once the Southeast Asian media has finished
its current period of readjustment, the impact of indigenous language broadcasting structures is likely to increase in significance, as local producers respond to niche demands using the benefits of increased access through technology and deregulation. There is scope for states and indigenous organisations to use their economic power to exploit DBS technology, as shown by the founder of Star TV, Li Ka-Shing. In response, transnational broadcasters are adjusting some of their programming to suit cultural and linguistic sensibilities of the region. This is driven by marketing and the need for political accommodation with states.

A senior Western television executive said in 1992: “The Asia-Pacific has become something of a laboratory where all the big issues of broadcasting are being tested”.

Judging by the emerging commercial structures in the region, the result from the laboratory will be that values flow from the West in greater proportion than they flow to the West. This constitutes media imperialism, so extensively articulated by the developing world in the 1970s and 80s, but only now being felt in television because of technological developments which have loosened the grip of the state. The effect in Southeast Asia is a radical change in the style, language and political orientation of news. Its consequences are already being felt in the relationship between ASEAN’s states and their peoples.

Direct broadcasting by satellite has provided a technological means of making the mobility of television images even greater than the written word. When combined with the internationalisation of the commercial structures of television, this mobility means power over television news and information is moving irrevocably from state control to the global market. It is inevitable that there will be ongoing broadcasting policy contradictions and uncertainty in Southeast Asia - as well as conflict surrounding the nature and purpose of news - during this shift in power.
Interviews

The following interviews were conducted to gather data for this paper:


Donald, Bruce, Project Director, Australia Television International, Sydney, 18 May 1993.


Hawke, Ben, Managing Director, Australia Television International, Sydney, 2 August 1993.

Onwimol, Somkiat, Pacific International Communications, Bangkok, 10 February 1993.


Siriyuvasak, Ubonrat, Faculty of Communication, Chulalongkorn University Bangkok, 11 February 1993.

A further six interviewees requested anonymity. They were two senior executives from Australian public broadcasting organisations, a sociologist and an economist in Indonesia, one communications analyst in Malaysia and a Western diplomat in Bangkok.
Notes:

Chapter 1


2. These were the words used in the subsequent report by correspondent, Brian Barron. BBC World Service Television News. 19 May 1992. BBC Television News Archives, London.


7. The Palapa satellite system delivers CNN, ESPN (US sports channel), Home Box Office (US movie channel), Australia Television, and channels from Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the Philippines.

8. The primary footprint requires a small (2m to 3.6m) dish for reception. Palapa’s fringe footprint, which requires a dish of up to 13m, is much bigger - stretching from Nepal, across central China to Korea and across the Pacific to New Caledonia and most of Australia. Quoted in Australia Television information pack, Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Sydney, 1993.

9. Star is an acronym for Satellite Television Asian Region.


36. Fourteen interviews were conducted in Australia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and the United Kingdom.

Chapter 2


7. The principles of Pancasila are: Belief in one and supreme god; a just and civilised humanity; national unity, democracy- led by the wisdom of consensus among representatives; and social justice for the people of Indonesia.


19. Rukunegara seeks greater unity of the Malaysian peoples; maintenance of a democratic way of life; creation of a just society with equitable share of wealth; a liberal approach to cultural traditions; and the building of a progressive society oriented to modern science and technology. Syed Arabi Idid, “Malaysia”, in Achal Mehra (ed.), p. 49.


28. Lent, ibid
29. *Bumiputera* literally means "sons of the soil" and is an expression to emphasise the special rights of people of Malay ethnicity in Malaysia's multi-racial society. See David Joel Steinberg (ed), *In Search of Southeast Asia: A Modern History* (Revised Edition), Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 1985, pp. 411-413.


37. Recently a narrowcast cable system, Singapore Cable, has been established as a subscription service.


48. Paul Tickell, p. 3.


Chapter 3


17. "US television networks to use Indonesian satellite", *Far Eastern Economic Review*, Vol. 153, No. 37, 12 September 1991, p. 59, emphasis added. The wording "throughout Southeast Asia" was perhaps designed to overcome Indonesian Information Ministry regulations banning services "deliberately broadcast to Indonesia by a foreign television station". By labelling CNN and ESPN pan-regional services, the implication that they were specifically targeting Indonesia appeared more difficult to sustain.


23. Because of irregularities in broadcast equipment standards, not all owners of parabolic antennae could view CNN in colour.


47. J. Lent “Mass Communication in Asia and the Pacific: Recent Trends and Development”. In *Media Asia*, 16, 1, 1989, p. 17.

**Chapter 4**

1. Quoted in “Satellite TV gets mixed reception in Asia”, *Business Times* (Singapore), 20 September 1990.


18. SCV is delivered via UHF and comprises a news channel, a movie channel, Home Box Office and a Mandarin language entertainment channel, Mark A. Huckill, “Impact of Satellites in Singapore”, Paper presented to Seminar on the Social and Cultural Impact of Satellite Broadcasting in Asia, 1-3 February 1993, p. 3.


30. *ibid*


45. Interview with Ben Hawke, Managing Director, Australia Television, Sydney, 2 August 1993.


57. R. Negrine and S. Papathanassopoulos, p. 51.

**Chapter 5**


23. Chamlong abandoned the hunger strike several days later without the conditions being met.


42. Interview with Western embassy official, Bangkok, 11 February, 1993.

43. Interview with Western embassy official, Bangkok, 11 February, 1993.


52. Interview with Somkiat Onwimol, Pacific International Communications, Bangkok, 10 February 1993.

53. ibid.


Chapter 6

1. “The Detailed Regulations of the Government Rules For Satellite TV Receivers - Ministry of Radio, Film and Television”, People’s Daily (Beijing), 27 February 1994. Some institutions are able to apply for parabolic antennae: education, scientific research, finance, trade and journalism facilities; hotels over three star standard; and work and residential compounds for foreign citizens.


10. ibid.


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Watts, David, “Royal family acts to stem Thai turmoil”, The Times (London), 21 May 1992, p. 11.

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“Censorship makes more people want to buy satellite dishes”, Bangkok Post, 1 June 1992, p. 19.


“MP makes out a case for satellite broadcasting”, *The Straits Times*, 28 March 1990.


“Murdoch may split Star in two”, *Television Asia*, No. 2, October 1993, p. 5.


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The Centre for Asian Communication, Media and Cultural Studies.

Edith Cowan University.

The Centre seeks to provide a focus for the study of communication and culture in the Asia region. Australia’s increasing involvement in Asia requires an awareness of Asian media processes and institutions, their cultural positioning and discourses. Additionally there is a need to understand the way in which the Australian media report Asia. These two discourses intersect and shape both the flow of public information between the two regions and their understanding of each other. An attempt to achieve an awareness of this complex process determines the aims, objectives and research programme of the Centre for Asian Communication, Media and Cultural Studies.

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The Centre aims to:

• develop a research profile in the field of Asian communication, media and cultural studies;

• promote an awareness of the importance of the emerging mediascape to contemporary Asian affairs;

• bring together academics, journalists and students working in the area to explore current and relevant issues and topics in the field of Asian communication and cultural studies;

• organise seminars, workshops, and conferences to promote research in the field;

• publish works that promote an awareness and understanding of the field;

• establish a Visiting Scholar programme
Research.

The Centre has established research programmes in Indonesia and China that look at the impact of satellite television and cable television systems respectively. The Centre is also involved in research that is examining issues relating to the 'law of the skies', an issue that is perceived to be of great significance throughout Asia.

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