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## **Media issues in Australian-Asian relationships**

Rodney Tiffen

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EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

PERTH WESTERN AUSTRALIA

**Media Issues in  
Australian-Asian  
Relationships, 1988**

**Rodney Tiffen**

**CENTRE FOR ASIAN COMMUNICATION  
AND MEDIA STUDIES  
OCCASIONAL PAPER**

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Australian-Asian  
Relationships, 1988**

**Rodney Tiffen**

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**Centre for Asian Communication and Media Studies**

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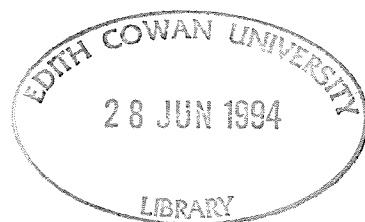
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**Media issues in Australian-Asian Relations, 1998.****Rodney Tiffen**

I confess at once that politics defies prediction: Who in December 1975, when Indonesia annexed East Timor, would have predicted that sixteen years later they would have failed so utterly to win Timorese hearts and minds that the youth of Dili, most of whom were still infants at the time of the invasion, would risk death and imprisonment to demonstrate their desire for Timorese independence?

The difficulty of seeing ahead five years has been graphically illustrated by the unpredicted and unpredictable events of the last five years. Who, even at the beginning of the years in which they happened, would have predicted the Gulf War? or the fall of the Berlin Wall? Who, before the crucial events were under way, predicted the collapse of the Soviet Empire in Eastern Europe, and the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself into fifteen countries.

Errors in prediction are not made only in the direction of underestimating change, but of underestimating constancy: We are now approaching the twentieth anniversary of the first forecasts that President Suharto would step down. After the Malari riots of 1974 and the crisis in the national oil company Pertamina in 1975-6, many were forecasting that the President's retirement was imminent. Similarly in every Presidential term since, there have been false predictions that it will be President Suharto's last.

So if the incidence of errors is sure to be high, why engage in such speculations? The short answer is because it focusses our mind on the dynamics of change, and on distinguishing the fundamentals from the ephemera in recent controversies, to try to look beyond the particularities of say media reporting of the case involving the Gillespie children or the controversy over *Embassy* to the types of incidents they are, and how the forces that gave rise to them may manifest themselves in some other way in the future.

Five years is also a problematic period to choose for our crystal ball gazing. The late Professor Dick Spann once told me that the then fashion for Third World governments to issue five year plans was particularly dangerous. It was far enough ahead for optimism and wishful thinking to overwhelm their current perceptions of obstacles and frustrations, yet near enough for their

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failure to achieve the targets to soon become apparent to all. Similarly Max Walsh has written that one of the prudential rules of journalism is the nearer the event, the more you should fudge your forecast, because you run the risk of very visibly being wrong.

However, a distance of five years from now should provide some discipline on our speculations. The further futurologists project forward, the more undifferentiated towards either optimism or pessimism their forecasts become. They become either utopian, usually on the basis of the wonders of coming technologies, or dystopian, usually foreseeing either the triumph of some dictatorial big brother, or, its antithesis, the triumph of ungovernability and chaos. My view is that history will continue to be messy, to be morally ambiguous and double-edged and the coming years will bring both changes that most of us would welcome and others we would abhor. So, five years is far enough, but not too far ahead, to focus our mind.

I want to structure my speculations around four main propositions:

The first is that national boundaries are becoming increasingly permeable to all types of movements and interchanges. The secular trend is clear: History and technology are on the side of more open borders and against those governments who seek to build high walls closing off what they call their own internal affairs.

As all aspects of international life and exchange - trade, travel, education, culture, crime - continue to become more intense, government to government relations are a proportionately smaller part of the sum of international transactions. Governments are therefore increasingly reacting diplomatically to events they do not control, and often cannot anticipate. Moreover, as all types of interchanges continue to grow, the capacity of national governments to patrol their own borders - to exclude unwanted external influences and to contain internal secrets from the rest of the world - will continue to diminish.

The transnational dimensions of what we still call international relations and of transnational influences upon national politics continue to grow. The biggest, most obvious and most commented upon are transnational corporations. Much less commented upon is the growth of transnational non-governmental organisations. The most important NGOs - like Amnesty, Greenpeace, major

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aid organisations - have much larger international networks than they had a decade ago. They are another ingredient making it more difficult for governments to maintain information monopolies.

Many contemporary political agendas require transnational approaches. All the most prosperous economies are more interlinked than a generation ago, and the prosperity of one is affected by the prosperity of others. Equally, the emergence of environmental concerns is perhaps the ultimate in transnational issues.

Somewhat related is the tendency of dissatisfied groups in any country to appeal to an international audience to buttress their cause. Indeed the United Nations, now its every stance is no longer a pawn in Cold War politics, is likely to be more activist and important on many issues. Particularly interesting here has been the international forums on indigenous peoples, the domestic political balance on this, the most apparently internal of issues, being transformed by international visibility. A parallel but contrasting example concerns the importance of immigration in the contemporary world. Stephen Castles has estimated that there are 100 million people in the world living in a country other than that they were born in. Immigrants' problems and diaspora communities increasingly complicate state to state relations. Emigre networks also make it harder for states to contain information within their own borders. The continuing flow of information from East Timor, where all the conditions for sealing it from international view are otherwise so propitious, is a telling example.

The final transnational influence is the oldest, one of the institutions which pre-dated the nation state - religion. We have sometimes seen the capacity of Christian, especially perhaps Roman Catholic, networks to limit and oppose state despotism in particular countries. The biggest change, today, of course is the growing influence of Islam, whose transnational influence has been greatly boosted in recent decades both by the support of petro-dollars, and following the fall of the Shah, the ideological power that comes after a successful revolution.

This quick listing is sufficient to show that the growth of transnational traffic in goods and services, in people, in ideas, information and political symbols is increasingly important politically. But we should conclude it with a specifically



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media example. The growth of fax machines, telephones, e-mail and international travel have all weakened the capacity of nation states to act as gate-keepers, deciding what information their citizens can import and export. The most powerful mass medium, television, is now also beginning to emerge as an international force. It is hard to grasp the astounding growth of access to TV in Asia: in 1965 Asia had 12% of the world's TV sets; in 1990, it had 32%.<sup>1</sup> Admittedly, TV in all these countries except Japan, is very much at state direction. But it is a force, which typically produces unintended impacts, which its controllers cannot foresee nor control. Added to this, of course, is the growth of satellite TV, still in its infancy, but likely to challenge patterns of political control in the coming decade or two.

Domestic political activity is increasingly influenced by news from elsewhere. The greatest domino effect in world history occurred in Eastern Europe, not through the march of arms, but by the spread of information. The news of what was happening in neighbouring countries inspired and emboldened dissidents in their own countries. Political ideas and ideals now move across issue communities and through mass media much more quickly.

The trend towards increasing transnationalisation does not lead to any necessary diminution of conflict, nor of any automatic democratisation in currently authoritarian countries. Rather there are increasing tensions and contradictory trends.

Consider the case of the most economically dynamic but still politically authoritarian regimes in East and Southeast Asia. On the one hand, their economies are at least semi-open, dependent centrally upon their links to international economies for their growth. Moreover their societies are semi-open - with much greater international movement of people and information. In Malaysia, for example, there are 100,000 graduates of the Australian education system.<sup>2</sup> However, in the cases of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, it could also be argued that the regimes have become more efficiently authoritarian - eliminating rival centres of authority, and centralising and routinising patterns of patronage. However the regimes' desire for control is in an at least some tension with the other forces towards openness, and we are likely to see contradictory movements in all these countries towards and away from greater media freedoms, especially while the current generation of rulers are still in power.

The desire to maintain state control against the onslaught of international information is illustrated in a story from Singapore, which sounds like an urban myth, but which I am assured is true: an *amah* put out a wok to dry on the roof, and within an hour the authorities had visited the house to check whether it was an illegally established satellite dish.

Another apparent contradiction in the trend toward transnationalisation is that it does not mean any reduction in the force of nationalism as a political sentiment and ideology. Just as the bewildering pace of change in the secular world often encourages a psychological yearning for a return to the certainties of fundamentalist religion, so in an increasingly complicated and uncertain transnational world, recourse to nationalism is one of the most popular proposed remedies when things go wrong, and national resentments will always have a strong popular constituency.

This is true not only of the post-colonial sensitivities of many Asian countries, but also of Australia.

Which brings me to my second proposition: Australian media coverage of Asia, overall, will not improve.

There may be significant ups and downs in particular organisations or in coverage about particular countries - for example in the last few years, *The Australian* has given much improved coverage of our region. Similarly it is likely in the next couple of years there will be improved coverage from Indonesia. Five years ago, in the aftermath of many incidents beginning with East Timor-related coverage and climaxing with the David Jenkins articles on the Suharto billions, there were no Australian staff correspondents based in Jakarta. It is likely that by this time next year there will be four, and so a more regular and reliable diet of Indonesian news. However, the general outlook is bleak.

Up until the end of 1986, one could argue that Australian media coverage had been a lag indicator in Australian-Asian relations, usually running behind contemporary outlooks and opportunities in political debate and policy movement, but nevertheless moving in the same broad direction; that as Australia's overall enmeshment with Asia increased, so the quantity and

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quality of media engagement with Asia was improving, albeit belatedly and partially.

Now that proposition is too optimistic. The primary reason for greater pessimism is the trend in the political economy of Australian media since the great ownership convulsions which began in 1986-87.

The economies of East and Southeast Asia have been much more dynamic than have the Australian media industries, which have been going through a period of contraction and economising which is likely to continue.

Triggered by changes in Government policy, we have had the greatest shake-out of media ownership in the nation's history. In a frenzy of activity at the height of the share boom, all Australia's TV networks changed hands, as did three quarters of the metropolitan daily newspapers. In the long hangover since, seven daily newspapers have closed, as have a few weekly titles. All the TV networks have changed owners again, and the industry recorded, thanks entirely to its owners' debt binges, its first losses since the very first years of Australian TV.

The result is that all Australia's commercial media are much meaner organisations than they were. Most obviously, there has been a general cutting back on the resources devoted to news gathering. Some of these have been quite drastic, and it could be argued that the TEN network, in particular, now falls short of providing the independent and comprehensive news services, its licence conditions state it should.<sup>3</sup>

More embracingly, there has been, in my view, a distinct change of attitude, where the "bottom line" rules above all else. At the risk of over-generalising, I would argue that there is much more of a sense of what can we get away with? What is the minimum expenditure on news gathering consonant with maintaining our revenue? And it is unlikely that maintaining or expanding the resources for covering Asian news would count as a means of increasing audience. Those in organisations arguing on the basis primarily of professional obligation, of the responsibilities of journalism, seem increasingly embattled.

Two other trends derive at least partially from the parlous economics of the media industry. One is that the gap between the best and worst of the

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Australian media is still growing. Even the best media organisations are financially very strained, but there remains in them much more of a sense of relating to Australia's major issues. In contrast, the tabloid press and the commercial TV stations have moved even more in the direction of easy audience gratification.

A related trend is that in those media organisations the centre of gravity is now even more firmly parochial. Their sense of newsworthiness is even more constricted to themes familiar to the lowest common denominator of their audiences. Witness, for example, the trend in commercial TV in what are loosely called their 'current affairs' programs. Each of the networks has one. In each case it is a nationally produced program, with state current affairs programs having been one of the casualties of the ownership changes. But each has moved away from covering that day's news, from covering almost any political topics to more and more human interest type topics. In the diet of schmaltz, false sensation and trivia they now present is it possible to imagine a serious story on Australia's Asian future?

Thus lack of commitment of resources, and very constricted notions of newsworthiness, will continue to plague our coverage of Asia, and the grounds for pessimism are growing rather than contracting for large sections of the Australian media.

The preceding is a discussion of regular rather than extraordinary coverage. However we should now address one of the biggest changes in media capabilities over the last generation - their capacity to respond immediately and intensively to something they define as a major crisis. The meaning of saturation coverage of an international story is now qualitatively different from say two decades ago.

Vietnam was called the first television war. But coverage of the Gulf war was far more overwhelming - in its speed, in the range of international locales it used, in the sheer volume of coverage, it dwarfed anything from the Vietnam era. It was only in 1975 that daily satellite news feed, of ten minutes a day shared by all four channels, began. Since then the volume and variety of sources have grown enormously, such that in the mid 1980s there was an explosion of international coverage on TV. Although in terms of regular

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output that has now diminished somewhat again, on a major story like the Gulf War, it is feasible to talk of continuous coverage for some days.

It should be noted in passing here that the commercial channels in Australia have increased their international coverage essentially by plugging into British and American sources. In routine coverage that has not helped us view the world according to our own regional priorities. Both British and American TV is relatively weak in its coverage of Southeast Asia, and to a lesser extent of East Asia.

Nevertheless, the capacity for saturation coverage, and immediate, graphic TV coverage of major stories leads to my third proposition:

On major stories, the media will more commonly be implicated in the development of the events they are reporting upon.

To see how the media coverage feeds back into events, let us consider in turn the three major recent TV stories from the region. The first was the fall of Marcos in 1986. Various estimates put the number of international media people in Manila at the time as well over 1000.<sup>4</sup> The very intensity of their presence must have helped the morale of the demonstrators. The impact of the coverage was strongly against the regime, with themes of corruption, dictatorship, and brutality against democracy, courage and reform. Even the visual images of the two leading protagonists, Marcos and Cory Aquino, seemed to visually epitomise a struggle between corruption and purity.

In my view the international media limited what the Marcos regime could do to stay in power. Put simply, if there had not been such a massive Western media presence, it is likely the episode would have developed into a much bloodier confrontation. The Marcos regime was very tied to American support, which it could not afford to alienate by such a public military suppression. The American government's responses were, it can be plausibly argued, constrained by the American TV coverage.

Consider the international media dimensions of the second major episode, the Tiananmen Square demonstrations and massacres of May-June 1989. Firstly the demonstrators' timing was affected by the arrival of Soviet Premier Gorbachev, whose credentials as a reforming and democratising communist leader, were well known to them, much better known than developments in

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Eastern Europe would have been known to Chinese students a decade earlier. Secondly, they were clearly emboldened, tragically so it turned out, by the intense international media interest in what they were doing. Finally reflect on the many dimensions of the symbolism of Chinese dissidents not reaching into their own past, but instead erecting a papier mache Statue of Liberty which they parade before the international media. It shows they were invigorated by the international spread of ideas, but also I think that partially at least they were deliberately playing to an international audience to seek to bolster their domestic pressures. They were as keen to communicate the truth of what was happening to an international as to a domestic audience. There was a great upsurge in the use of faxes and e-mail by dissidents to contact academics, media and NGOs in the West, all effectively evading state attempts at censorship.

In this case, of course, the response of the Chinese gerontocracy paid no attention to Western audience sensibilities, but cracked down brutally on the demonstrators. One wonders however if the next generation of Chinese leaders will feel able to do likewise.

The third case involved the city with the most sophisticated communications infra-structure, the Bangkok riots and subsequent change of government in May 1992. Consider how new communication technologies interacted with the development of events. Firstly, the demonstrators were able to communicate with each other quickly by use of their mobile phones. They were dubbed the "mobile-phone mob", and this instrument increased the effectiveness of their demonstrations. For the first time satellite transmission of Western TV news coverage, over and above state-controlled domestic TV transmission, became a factor. Demonstrators who had access to satellite dishes made videotapes of coverage, which they immediately copied and distributed all over the city to counteract the information monopoly the regime exercised over domestic television. This no doubt contributed to the decisive intervention by the King, and the ousting of General Suchinda as Prime Minister.

What do the three cases have in common?

1. Key events took place in the capital city, and Western correspondents routinely had access to that city.
2. Key participants spoke English.

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3. TV coverage was logistically feasible, and visually compelling.
  4. There was a moral polarisation around themes immediately salient to Western audiences.

Contrast these factors with a case which has not received such prominent coverage, and where international coverage has had no impact on the regime - namely Burma. There is a lack of routine media access to the country, an inability to cover, or televise, key events, which are dispersed and/or happening in rural areas. Few participants speak English. And the regime is oblivious to international opinion, and relatively immune from international sanctions. The only factor they had in common was moral polarisation, with a strong positive image in the Western media of Aung Sang Suu Chee.

Although not a major problem in the episodes discussed, one of the dangers of intense coverage, is of course that it is filtered into story lines immediately salient to its audience, and that there are pressures towards a distorting moral simplicity. At any one time, the momentum of news coverage is usually very much in one direction: when was the last time you saw a story about the *limits* of corruption in Japan?

In the examples discussed, I suppose international media coverage has emerged as on balance a good thing, something more often than not pressuring the participants towards a more reasonable outcome. Western governments have been induced to respond, when their inclinations might have been otherwise. There is no guarantee of course that that response will always be beneficial. Sometimes it will be but a cynical juggling of appearances. Witness the recent case of the Bosnian girl victim of war shown on British TV which prompted the British Government to undertake action to help her, but without any apparent awareness that there were thousands more like her who had not appeared on TV. (While speaking of events in the former Yugoslavia, it is pertinent to ask how the realisation of the media's impact is affecting behaviour towards it. We should remember that more than 35 journalists have already been killed in the wars in the former Yugoslavia, more than were killed in the whole of the Vietnam war, and for the first time there is evidence that journalists have been targeted precisely because they are journalists.)

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So far, there has not been any incident involving such intense international TV coverage in the three remaining original members of ASEAN - Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia - whose governments are the ones which have been most critical of Australian media. Particularly in Indonesia's case the relative absence of American coverage seems particularly curious - given that it is the fifth most populous country, and occupies a very strategic area. One might predict however that if those governments are ever confronted with a massive influx of American TV journalists, they are likely to become quickly nostalgic for the culturally sensitive Australian journalists they used to have to deal with.

My final proposition derives from the media's active influence in the development of events they are reporting. It is that media associated conflicts are likely to keep on occurring.

Many of these conflicts will not be caused by the Australian media in any simple or direct sense. Often they will be but a secondary exacerbating factor in conflicts whose roots lie elsewhere.

The controversies between Australia and Malaysia over the last several years illustrate the various means by which the media may become implicated. The execution of Barlow and Chambers for drug offences in 1986 provoked many stories reporting statements by Australian politicians and others protesting against the punishments. There were also many television stories which concentrated upon the human aspects surrounding the capital punishment of these two individuals. In the process the strongest story line was often to portray the Malaysian governmental and legal processes as unfair or barbaric, displaying the tendency, especially among commercial media, towards moral polarisation. It is likely there will be future incidents involving drug crimes and their punishment, and equally likely they will lead to intense emotions on all sides.

A few years later, the fictional TV drama series *Embassy* provoked official outrage in Malaysia. Whether any or all of the complaints were justified, certainly no-one anticipated that the program would create such a response from the Malaysian Prime Minister. However as Australian popular culture increasingly embraces Asian themes, it is more than likely other such offence may be given.



Similarly, it is not likely that we will have an exact repetition of the Gillespie children controversy, which is ongoing, and concerns the abduction by a Malaysian prince of the children from his broken marriage with an Australian woman. However, one could expect as the number of mixed marriages increase, somewhat similar incidents could explode, with media coverage again seen as an exacerbating element.

Reciting these incidents shows that it is sometimes, but not always, possible to predict what will cause offence. However, predicting what will give offence is not the same as predicting what the response will be. There is very considerable latitude for regional governments to decide whether or not to escalate media irritants. Even if a Malaysian Prime Minister is mortified by something on Australian TV, it does not automatically follow that he will build it into a major diplomatic controversy. Even if it is predictable that the Indonesian Government will not like an article by David Jenkins about the Suharto billions, it certainly does not logically follow that the upshot will include returning a plane load of Australian tourists to Bali. Whether or not regional governments want to engage in such escalations will have more to do with their international and domestic political agendas than with the Australian media as such.

The second conclusion which is apparent is that the occurrence of media associated conflicts follows from the increased intensity of interactions, which create more scope for frictions to develop. One prediction I will make is that some time in the next five years there will be a major controversy over the content of satellite TV coming into the region, although its exact shape and timing remain unpredictable.

A third conclusion is that the occurrence of such conflicts has zero relation to the quality of Australian coverage. In some cases, the media betrayed prejudice and sensationalism. In others they performed their role admirably, and conflict still ensued.

Finally, I would like to muse on some of the policy implications of this state of affairs for the Australian government. It is clear that these types of incidents are going to keep on happening, that they cannot be easily anticipated, and that there are no simple measures by which they can be contained, or

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resolved to everyone's satisfaction. The discomfort of Australian policy-makers is not likely to disappear.

I make but two suggestions: The first is the need for an enlarged calculus of pragmatism based upon a stronger sense of what the government can't control. I have long argued for example that a consistently principled approach to the issue of East Timor would have been more pragmatic than the waverings and contradictions which did in fact occur.

Secondly, the worst response for the government, if seriously intended, is the 'Harare posture'. After the *Embassy* imbroglio, the film *Turtle Beach* based upon a novel by the Prime Minister's biographer came out, and also offended the Malaysians. Prime Minister Hawke, at a Commonwealth meeting in Harare, assured Prime Minister Mahatir that he would personally vet Australian productions, and denounce those which he judged unfair to Malaysia. This is a rational response, only if it were meant as a conciliatory but substantially empty gesture. No Australian government can really pretend that it is able to turn on or turn off the outpourings of Australian media, either cultural or journalistic. And to set itself up as referee over their contents, when it lacks impartiality or any means of enforcing its judgements, is surely only to ask to be attacked by both sides.

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