1995

Reporting Asia series: satellite television and state power in Southeast Asia: new issues in discourse and control

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Satellite Television and State Power in Southeast Asia: New Issues in Discourse and Control

William Atkins
Reporting Asia Series

Satellite Television and State Power in Southeast Asia: New Issues in Discourse and Control

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Centre for Asian Communication, Media and Cultural Studies
Director and Series Editor - Dr. Brian Shoesmith

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Western Australia
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Acknowledgments

In addition to those who agreed to be interviewed for this thesis, I wish to thank: the staff at the Asian Mass Communications Research and Information Centre, Singapore; the Thai Development Support Committee, Bangkok; the news library of The Nation, Bangkok; the library of Universitas Kristen Satya Wacana, Salatiga, Indonesia; and the BBC Television News Library, London, for dealing with my numerous research requests with patience and professionalism. To my supervisor at the University of Sydney, Associate Professor Rod Tiffen, my sincere thanks for the unwavering support, encouragement and guidance.

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and import information and ideas through any media, regardless of frontiers.

Introduction

This series of Occasional Papers is designed to bring to the attention of the reader work that focuses on Asian communication and culture. Compared to most areas of Asian Studies, communication and media have been largely ignored, a fact the recent Australian 'push into Asia' reveals. These Occasional Papers redress this absence and deal with a comprehensive range of issues that inform our understanding of the importance of communication in forging links between Australia and Asia. Consequently their scope is far-reaching, covering cultural, political, economic, and increasingly, technological topics and their relationship to the communication process that lies at the heart of Australian/Asian relations. In short, they will chart a new emerging mediascape in the Asia Pacific region. As such they must be viewed as work in progress. The authors published in this series include academics, journalists and post-graduate students from Australia and throughout Asia.
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Chapter 1

Introduction: New Channels of Communication

In May 1992 soldiers from the Thai army turned their guns on middle class and student demonstrators who were on the streets of Bangkok pressing for the resignation of the military-backed prime minister - General Suchinda Kraprayoon. A BBC camera crew was there. Among the burning cars and barricades, the crew filmed an anonymous young Thai man. The close-up image of his face filled the camera operator's viewfinder. He shouted in clear English: "We want the rest of the world to see and hear what the military dictators do to our people, the Thai people, the innocent people. We want the rest of the world to know."¹ Then the BBC crew filmed soldiers walking across the prostrate bodies of people they had arrested and placed in the lobby of the Royal Hotel, occasionally hitting them with the butts of rifles. Outside, in the hotel forecourt, other demonstrators were placed face down, "trussed like chickens, hands bound by the shirts off their backs".²

Within hours, these images had been sent via satellite in a report to the BBC World Service Television (BBCWST) newsroom in London. Shortly afterwards, the report was beamed via the AsiaSat 1 satellite directly into millions of homes across Asia on a BBCWST news bulletin... a free service that had been operating to Asia for less than a year. Among the viewers were thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of Bangkok residents.

At the same time, Thailand's long-established state-run television stations were telling viewers that the 'madness'³ on the streets was being fermented by 'rioters' and 'troublemakers'⁴ from the Communist Party of Thailand with support from foreign communist groups.⁵ Although Thai television camera crews had recorded the violence, the government stations did not use the pictures.

For weeks afterwards videotaped copies of the BBC reports, contradicting the regime's line, were selling on the streets of Bangkok for 200 baht (A$12). The Far Eastern Economic Review reported: "[C]rowds gather in homes, university campuses, and video rental shops to witness what the discredited government of prime minister Suchinda Kraprayoon would not permit to be broadcast locally."⁶
Clearly, at this time of national crisis, the loss of the state’s monopoly on televised information was brought sharply into focus.

This episode neatly illustrates the central issue in this paper: the relationship between state power and the new international satellite news services. Do the economic and technological movements behind these services - which do not respect frontiers - spell the end of state sovereignty in the regulation of televisual information? What do the changes mean for politics in the region - a region whose development has been premised on authoritarian media policies? These questions cross many sectors of political science: theories of communication, of the state, of democratic transition and of international political economy.

At the heart of this changed broadcasting landscape is a technological development known as Direct Broadcasting by Satellite - or DBS. DBS allows television signals to be relayed via satellite directly to a home, hotel or business from a distant location, possibly another country. The signal is received by a satellite dish, otherwise known as a parabolic antenna. The most common, and affordable, parabolic antennae are one to three metres in diameter and cost between US$400 and US$1,200. The DBS system bypasses all terrestrial relay equipment, which has traditionally been under state control. In parts of Southeast Asia, such as Indonesia, parabolic antennae are now common features in both urban and rural areas. With this technology, many established broadcasting regulations are largely irrelevant.

In Southeast Asia, two key satellite systems have been central to the delivery of DBS news services - Palapa and AsiaSat 1. By the end of the century there will be many more systems. Palapa is the oldest of the existing systems. It is owned and controlled by the Indonesian government and is currently used by a range of domestic and international broadcasters. Palapa’s primary footprint covers an area from northern Australia to southern China and Bangladesh. From the perspective of this paper, Palapa’s most important customer is the Cable News Network (CNN), which began a free-to-air service in 1991. Australia Television the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s external television service - became another broadcaster to use Palapa in 1993. The other satellite system is Asia Sat 1 which has two footprints covering an area from the eastern Mediterranean, to the Horn of Africa, to India, Sumatra then north to eastern Russia then across southern China to the Crimean states. AsiaSat 1 delivers Star TV - since October 1993 controlled by Rupert Murdoch’s News Corporation. Star TV is a network of five channels.
Originally, both AsiaSat1 footprints carried BBCWST on the Star network. However, the BBC service was dropped on the northern footprint in April 1994 to placate the Chinese government, with whose blessing Murdoch was hoping to tap into the Chinese market. Beijing authorities had been unsettled by Murdoch’s proclamation after his purchase last year of Star TV that satellite technology meant ‘totalitarian regimes’ could no longer halt the free-flow of information. Shortly after Murdoch’s pronouncement, Beijing introduced sweeping restrictions against private ownership of parabolic antennae. Perhaps the Chinese Government was mindful what had occurred on the streets of Bangkok in 1992. Murdoch’s subsequent decision to prevent BBCWST from being beamed into China via the Star network shows that there are forms of state power that can influence outcomes in the DBS industry.

This is more broadly reflected by the many agreements between the DBS networks and terrestrial broadcasters in Southeast Asia for the relaying or replaying of the international news services. The terrestrial broadcasters, some of them state-controlled stations, receive the DBS service via a parabolic antenna then play out the material using ground-based systems such as microwave or cable. These are known as hybrid systems. Under these arrangements, an element of control remains with the terrestrial broadcaster to cut off or censor news, an option that has been used already in Thailand. In this way, the state maintains its status as ‘gatekeeper’ over television information. Clearly, in Southeast Asia there exists an environment for dynamic political and commercial interaction in the satellite television industry.

This monograph will analyse the politics associated with the arrival of these international news services in the Southeast Asian region. Four countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) will be studied. They are Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. The paper considers the impact of DBS news and information on the conduct of politics in those countries. As well, it investigates - and seeks to explain - why there has been such a diversity of policy between the four governments, with the more economically advanced being the most resistant to international DBS television.

The arrival in Southeast Asia of these DBS news services has been something of a shock for a region accustomed to state-controlled television news and high levels of government control of media in general. CNN and BBCWST are 24 hour news and information channels. While much of the programming is rooted
in the affairs of Europe and America, and quite detached from the news agenda of the region, crucial international and regional events are, for the first time, being delivered with Western-liberal journalistic style and methods. As well as the Thai uprising, there has been extensive coverage of events such as the Gulf War, communal violence in India and national elections in the United States, the Philippines and Japan.

Some commentators record that this type of satellite service "defies the tradition that national sovereignty includes state control over television within a nation’s borders." Arthur C. Clarke comments in the *Far Eastern Economic Review* that "there'll soon be an enormous amount of free news broadcasts which will cross all borders". Prima Facie, the technological and commercial structures behind DBS news do undermine the tradition of sovereign control of the electronic mass media. However, the popular image of continuous Western-style news being on offer to the peoples of Southeast Asia - challenging governments' version of events - needs to be put into context.

In the short time since free-to-air DBS news has become available, its level of penetration into countries of ASEAN has varied widely. In the most economically developed nation, Singapore, parabolic antennae are illegal - and virtually non-existent. The Malaysian government has banned parabolic antennae and is threatening to fine or imprison those who do not comply, but their use remains widespread. On the other hand, Indonesia has an increasingly liberal policy under which more than half a million parabolic antennae dot the country. Thailand has a laissez-faire policy, having dropped a licensing system in 1992. The number of hotels and English-speaking households with a parabolic antenna capable of taking in services from the Palapa satellite system is put at 417,000 in Indonesia, 56,000 in Thailand and, despite the bans, 18,000 in Malaysia.

From the perspective of both theory and empirical data, published research on the topic of DBS in Southeast Asia has been sparse. Several explanations can be offered for the scarcity of material: for example, the lack of resources and encouragement for critical indigenous inquiry into the politics of information; the dynamic nature of the medium and the constantly changing nature of the political process relating to the industry; or the apparent preference among Western researchers to focus on case studies in the developed world.
Transnational DBS news services have been operating for almost a decade in parts of Europe and North America. Consequently, the analyses of the impact on the Euro-American scene are more numerous, although they vary widely in their conceptual, theoretical and methodological perspectives. This paper needs to be analytically sensitive to the cultural and political differences that exist between the cases in ASEAN countries and those in the Euro-American context. Refining a framework pertinent to Southeast Asia is a formidable challenge.

There are four broad categories of relevant literature. They are considered here in order of theoretical complexity, beginning with the least sophisticated.

A vigorous, but highly descriptive, body of material emerges from the Asian press. About 200 articles are used to piece together recent developments in the DBS news industry in Southeast Asia. They contain relevant and useful technical data. In the case of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, the items tend to reinforce or defend government broadcasting policy. Ironically, owing to the sensitivity towards media analysis among ASEAN governments, the most comprehensive press coverage of a country’s DBS policy is often found in the newspapers of neighbouring countries. For instance, the Malaysian press is quite willing to canvass issues relating to Singapore - and vice versa - but press reporting about one’s own country is largely confined to official statements. Thailand is the exception. The Bangkok press has been a platform for open debate on Thai satellite television policy, due both to the liberal traditions in the industry and the commercial interests in television sought by the large newspaper organisations in Bangkok. Press articles are central to the task of analysing the events surrounding the May 1992 Thai civil uprising in Chapter 5. In addition, the Hong-Kong business press - notably the Far Eastern Economic Review and the Asian Wall Street Journal - provides key source material. The fact that these journals tend to editorially reflect economic rationalist and deregulatory policies needs to be kept in mind, as do their frequent clashes with authorities in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia.

Second, there is a relative abundance of literature outlining the official broadcasting policies of the ASEAN governments. This is in the form of articles and conference papers presented to forums linked to organisations such as the Asia Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU) and the Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre (AMIC). Sometimes, these are polemical works, whose authors seek to explain media policy in terms of the imperatives of nation building and national cohesion. It is not unusual in these works for the
Western-liberal media ethos to be criticised as being impractical and culturally insensitive. This literature appears to be rekindling the ‘media imperialism’ debate.

This brings us to the third category of literature: that concerning international news flow. It is an important precursor to the topic at hand and has commanded considerable attention from governments, international organisations, academics and journalists - reaching a crescendo in the early 1980s after the publication of the MacBride Commission report to UNESCO. Primarily, media imperialism refers to the perceived imbalance in the international flow of information - including news - that has emerged within the global network of cultural and economic relations. Within this structure the transnational European and US-based news organisations report some 90 per cent of the world’s news.

In the eyes of representatives of developing countries, this ‘cartel’ of agencies represents the cultural, political and economic interests of the West. The flow of information is “uni-directional and vertical, from North to South for the most part”. The MacBride report argues that: “[T]he one-way flow in communications is basically a reflection of the world’s dominant political and economic structures, which tend to maintain or reinforce the dependence of poorer countries on the richer”. With these themes in mind, a useful working definition of media imperialism can be stated thus: “[T]he process whereby the ownership, structure, distribution or content of the media in any one country are singly or together subject to substantial pressure from the media interests of any other country or countries without proportionate reciprocation of influence by the country so affected”.

While the force of these sentiments remains pertinent, technological and political developments have changed key institutional arrangements for the transmission and exchange of news. Firstly, the increased access to satellite services has seen a growth in the past ten years of television news exchange. On the global level - and perhaps reflecting the ‘media imperialism’ structure detected in the print news agencies - the industry is dominated by Reuters Television (formerly Visnews) and Worldwide Television News (WTN, formerly UPITN). These agencies provide material to the four ASEAN countries in this study.

However, on a regional level, there has been increased cooperation in news exchange. The Asian Pacific Broadcasting Union (ABU) is the most relevant to this study. Elsewhere in the world there are similar regional groupings such as
the European Broadcasting Union (EBU) and the Arab States Broadcasting
Union. The ABU has in place arrangements for Asian broadcasters to exchange
news material and embark on collaborative projects.

Until very recently, Reuters Television, WTN and ABU exchange structures
were the only mechanisms to bring material to international television news
audiences in ASEAN countries on a daily basis. The material was, however,
subject to editorial control by the rules of each country. The gatekeeper role of
the state was maintained. Clearly, the direct broadcasting into homes by satellite
of uncensored material from Western news companies represents a huge leap
from the news exchange arrangements.

There has been a failure to detect the significance of that leap in some literature.
For instance, Gurevitch considers the international news agencies, the regional
news agencies and the direct satellite broadcasters such as BBC and CNN as
three ‘arms’ of “a complex international system of international distribution and
exchange.”24 I would argue that, in the Southeast Asian context, the DBS players
represent an entirely new variable in regional politics because of their ability to
largely avoid laws and control of states. They need to be considered as a factor
further along the evolutionary continuum of international communications.

In an effort to clarify the significance of the global DBS news arrangements, we
turn to a fourth category of literature, which rarely mentions issues in Asia, but
is central to this paper. It is concerned with communications as a component of
changing international economic and political structures, especially the global
movement of capital and search for economies of scale gained by reaching the
audiences of the developing world. The rise of the ‘new media’ - cable and
satellite television - stems from a cross cutting of technological, economic and
political variables.

The vast bulk of this literature focuses on Western Europe. The region was, after
all, one of the first to have to deal with satellite television services cutting across
borders and diverse language groups. There are strong grounds for applying
elements of communications theory developed in the Western European arena to
cases in this paper. Notions of national sovereignty are broadly the same in a
Western European and Southeast Asian context. Equally, each region has a
highly developed international grouping: the European Union (EU) and ASEAN.
Since the 1970s the ASEAN states have also become increasingly intertwined
within global economic networks. The universality of the commercial
imperatives of satellite television means both Europe and Asia will feel its effects.

The driving forces behind these imperatives are the economies of scale gained by the transnational media conglomerates from the larger international audiences.

_Powerful international economic influences are helping to design the future of the media. 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. In years to come it may become even more detached from its cultural roots as a new category of television - an international category - takes on greater significance._

In light of these developments, concerns about sovereignty have emerged. The EU report - _TV Broadcasting in Europe and the New Technologies_ posits:

_The geopolitical boundaries of Europe are destroyed by the new technologies for distributing electronic messages and the twelve member states become, with the throwing of one switch, a single market and viewing audience._

Sovereignty in the European context appears to be more concerned with the politics of culture rather than the politics of domestic administration.

[Because the various forms of broadcasting by satellite straddle national frontiers, there are implications for those nations which desire to retain and encourage their own cultures in the face of foreign broadcasting._

This emphasis is understandable. The strength of socio-political institutions and relative stability of political ideology across Western Europe does not elevate questions of political information to the level found in Southeast Asian countries. The European studies tend to concentrate on concerns about cultural integrity, rather than overt domestic political tensions stemming from news and information services.

Without doubt, ‘cultural integrity’ is also an important issue in Southeast Asia. Governments, particularly Malaysia and Singapore, frequently oppose satellite broadcasting on the basis of the violence or perceived immorality of Western drama and pop culture such as music. Non-news programming is not, however, the focus of attention in this paper. The political implications of satellite services such as MTV, Home Box Office or US sports channels will not be specifically
canvassed. News and information services are the central focus of this monograph. It should be noted though that the same economic forces lie behind the proliferation of drama and pop culture DBS services in Southeast Asia. Like news, pop culture is a valuable commodity. Television programming is now no different from other goods and services. It can be traded freely. Although, as the media imperialism model suggests, the dominant global political and economic systems mean the trade is likely to flow in greater volume from the West to the developing regions. As will be shown in this paper, the genesis of international satellite television is rooted in economic opportunities.

The sharp differences in concerns over ‘sovereignty’ of televisusal information between Western European and Southeast Asian states perhaps reflects different stages of political development. While the ASEAN governments are still engaged in ‘nation building’, the Western Europeans are tentatively becoming more politically integrated under arrangements such as the treaties of Rome and Maastricht. The notion of satellite television ‘destroying’ political boundaries, as outlined in the EU report, is anathema to the Southeast Asian government leaderships.

These differences are reflected by the extent to which each has moved towards regional cooperation. While satellite communications policy in Europe has been steered towards regulatory harmonisation across the economic community, the Southeast Asian governments have, until this year, been stridently unilateral in their policy development. In 1993 Khushu noted: “At the regional level there has been no concerted move to harmonise telecommunications policies, including those which concern satellite delivery. The first, tentative moves have been made this year with a proposal by the ABU for a code of ethics for satellite broadcasters beaming services into the region. As yet, only the Philippines government has expressed an interest in making the code legislatively enforceable.”

Developments in Southeast Asia are in sharp contrast to those in Europe where there has been a move towards the adoption of an ‘Open Skies’ policy. Europe’s policy has evolved from the coincidence of broad EU policy harmonisation and terrestrial broadcasting deregulation. The commercial opportunities driving satellite television have been given political backing by the EU’s constituent governments. The EU’s White Paper on the internal market argues that “an extended market in broadcasting will bring economies of scale and improve the international trading position of member states”. These widely
differing policy directions highlight the need for caution when drawing on European experiences for theoretical guidance on Southeast Asia. Nonetheless, the factor of economic opportunity in the arrival and development of satellite television is clearly central in both cases.

Despite the sharp differences in responses to satellite broadcasting between Western Europe and Southeast Asia, they share the experience of significant policy disarray. Negrine’s *Satellite Broadcasting: The Politics and Implications of the New Media*, was one of the first works to articulate this phenomenon.

The changes currently taking place are at such an advanced stage of development that academic or even policy debates matter little in the rapidly changing world of the new media. The speed of technological change and the inability (or unwillingness) of governments across the world to plan (or place in a strait jacket) the direction of these development, has given the look of an unstoppable force.

This idea that governments have failed to match the policy demands arising from the commercial development of satellite networks will be considered in this paper in the Southeast Asian arena. It is especially curious that while satellite television has seemed “an unstoppable force” in the West, two ASEAN governments in this study have indeed attempted, drawing on Negrine’s phrasing, to place it in a ‘strait jacket’. The results have been mixed.

A subsequent - and important - theoretical development by Negrine and Papathanassopoulos focuses on the relationship between states and transnational broadcasters. Primarily, it explores the ability of states to constrain developments in satellite broadcasting in the highly complex world marketplace of communications and information. Attention is paid to the conceptualisation of state sovereignty, with focus on the ‘realist-sovereign’ paradigm versus the ‘interdependence’ approach.

While the realist model of sovereignty assumes that each nation state makes its own individual calculations of self-interest, the interdependence model emphasises 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. Similarly, whereas in the ‘realist-sovereign’ model, the bargaining between the state and other states is the
focus, in the ‘interdependence’ model the suggestion is that governments counter the loss of autonomous control either by exploiting the network of interdependent relationships in order to extract suitable economic or other rewards for internal consumption, or by identifying the collective policy network with significant policy ends. 34

The interdependence model is clearly more sophisticated and can accommodate the variables that arise from the array of data incorporated in this paper. It avoids the pitfalls of the descriptive analysis in much of the liberal press. Writers from this tradition have failed to pay sufficient attention to the complexity of state power and tended to treat the intrusion of satellite news as a zero-sum game with each state. Evidence introduced in this paper, especially that examining the case of the Indonesian state, attests to the efficacy of Negrine and Papathanassopoulos’ approach to the interdependence theory.

The above overview shows that, like governmental policy, academic analysis is lagging well behind technological and economic developments in the region. The limited work on Europe provides a starting point for analysis of Southeast Asia’s DBS experience. As well, there is an abundance of empirical data relating to the DBS sector in the four ASEAN countries. Obvious key differences between the regions are the system of state organisation and the contemporary roles of state broadcasters.

In addition, the research for this paper has been conducted with a broader theoretical tradition in mind: that developed in the vigorous literature on democratisation in Latin America and East Asia in the 1970s and 1980s. The work of O’Donnell, Schmitter and Whitehead focuses on the episodic roles of elites and leaders within broader economic and political frameworks.

An underlying thread throughout the work [of O’Donnell et al] is the acceptance of the type of behavioralist propositions often associated with Juan Linz, in which individual decisions and ongoing strategic interaction do matter even if generally constrained by objective structural conditions... Structural conditions are important, to be sure, analysis of their impact must be overlapped with conjunctural and other superstructural factors that broaden the range of indeterminacy with regard to possible outcomes.35

This approach will allow for detailed empirical evidence to be introduced and explored within the context of broader economic and socio-political movements.
In this paper, the overarching movement in the case of ASEAN has been the internationalisation of its economies and the corresponding inflow of capital and investment funds. Some of this investment has been directed at the news and information industry. In this environment, attempts by government regimes to quarantine economic liberalism from the political landscape have led to tensions between classes and between elements of the state elite. Analysis is enriched by looking at the strategic decisions and actions by individuals and groups.

Finally, in addition to the written primary and secondary sources, a number of interviews were conducted for this paper. Interviewees include senior managers from the BBC and Australia Television, industry analysts in Indonesia, Thailand and Malaysia and a Western diplomat based in Bangkok. Several have requested anonymity. In these cases a description of their positions will be used when they are quoted.

Summary

The focus of this thesis is how the international DBS services impact upon the state. The paper will analyse and explain the diversity of responses between the four ASEAN states to DBS and consider the sustainability of each policy. Drawing on detailed case studies, it will consider the effect of the satellite news services on political patterns in Southeast Asia.

These issues will be dealt with in four substantive chapters. The historic role of mass media - particularly television - in the context of state power in Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand will be explored in Chapter 2.

The arrival of international satellite television news services in Southeast Asia will be traced in Chapter 3. Driven by the search for new markets and associated economies of scale, the transnational media organisations are able to overcome long-established regulatory frameworks using new technology and economic power. The news traditions and perspectives of the transnational broadcasting organisations - which often lie at odds with state broadcasters - will be canvassed.

Chapter 4 considers the political issues arising from the establishment of the services, by analysing the complex interaction of economic, political and technological change. The responses to satellite television, including attempts by some governments to quarantine direct satellite broadcasts from other areas
of commercial activity, will be explored. A key task here is tracing the tension between economic liberalism and political authoritarianism. Episodes of collaboration and conflict occur between different levels of the state apparatus and transnational economic players. Finally, the impact of international satellite news on patterns of political discourse will be canvassed. Importantly, this includes changes to the structure and content of domestic television policy.

The civil uprising in Thailand in May 1992 will be considered in some detail in Chapter 5 in order to examine the effect of international television in times of national crisis. It is the first such crisis to emerge in Southeast Asia since the arrival of the DBS news services. Much of the political momentum behind the civil unrest is attributed to Bangkok's rising middle class. DBS is shown to be one of the critical factors in the dynamic information environment that developed during the crisis period. Additionally, individuals are shown to affect outcomes, although their options are confined within broad political and economic structures.
Chapter 2

ASEAN’s ‘Nation-Building’ Media

“Tell the journalists not to worsen the situation and cause unrest among the public through their questions to the officials about the real situation ...”

President Suharto to Information Minister Harmoko, June 1989.¹

The overwhelming influences behind the shaping of the contemporary news media in Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia have been the historic struggles against colonialism and the subsequent state led task of ‘nation building’. Sovereignty is a prize of independence - and is jealously guarded by the state apparatus. More recently, the governments of these countries have sought to aid nation-building by exposing their economies to international commerce. In effect, they have become developmentalist regimes which want their economies to change - while the political systems remain stable. Thailand has a unique political tradition, a reflection of its precarious independence - maintained in the era of high colonialism when territories around it were governed by European powers. The Thai press is liberal, while television is heavily state-controlled.

This chapter will develop the links between nation building, mass media and state structure. Theories of the modern state relating to nation building reach the very heart of the media control issue: state power. In the words of Lent, Southeast Asian domestic news providers have been required to “support and cooperate with the authorities by stressing positive news, by ignoring much negative and oppositionist information, and by supporting governmental plans and ideologies”² Television is crucial to this strategy.

State broadcasters are at the centre of the television industry in the four countries. In Singapore the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation remains the sole broadcaster, while in Thailand the five networks are controlled either by the government or the military, which are often the same thing.³ Elsewhere in ASEAN, where commercial networks exist, they are politically and economically linked to the ruling elite. Malaysia’s single commercial network - TV3 - is owned by the Fleet group, which is closely aligned to the ruling party,
United Malays National Organisation (UMNO).\(^4\) Indonesia’s first and biggest commercial channel Rajawali Citra Televisi Indonesia (RCTI) belongs to the Bimantara group whose chairman is Bambang Trihatmodjo - the son of President Suharto.\(^5\)

At the end of this chapter, attention will turn to the broad economic movements that begin to erode state control of mass media. In the case of Indonesia, early involvement in the international communications marketplace is shown to introduce policy contradictions. It is a forerunner of tensions which are to emerge in all states based on attempts to maintain state control of a commodity - news - that is becoming increasingly internationalised due to economic and technological change.

It is only by understanding the contemporary histories of the four states that one can fully appreciate the significance of the arrival of satellite television services such as BBCWST or CNN. The vastly different assumptions underlying the state media systems and the Western-liberal broadcasters suggest their meeting will result in both conflict and change.

Consider Article 1 of the Indonesian Journalists’ Association’s code of ethics, which states: “An Indonesian journalist shall be ... faithful to Pancasila”.\(^6\) Pancasila is the official state ideology of Indonesia and is embodied in the preamble to the country’s 1945 constitution.\(^7\) What this means for media philosophy in Indonesia is neatly summarised by Mehra:

\[Pancasila\text{ society disapproves of individualism and individual rights, the starting point of Western liberal political theory. It consequently rejects the notion of an uninhibited and robust press that undertakes vehement, caustic and unpleasant attacks on government and public officials the sine qua non of Western press theory. Instead, the press is viewed as a partner in national development, within the framework of Pancasila.}\]

Clearly, some Western communications analysts would refute the characteristics ascribed to their media systems by Mehra. However, his summary of the state philosophy underlines the epistemological complexity of analysing the politics of news in Southeast Asia. Issues of social organisation, economics, nationhood, state power and development are raised in Mehra’s formulation, which stand at odds with Western liberal precepts.
In an effort to account for this complexity, it is worth recalling the words of Adams relating to the variety of structural parameters surrounding news. “News production requires debatable decisions about priorities and depiction of events and issues. These decisions are made within the confines of cultural, legal, political, technical and commercial interests.” There is clearly margin for wide differences of opinion and approach to news.

Power and the ‘invention’ of the nation-state in ‘Nation-building’ is a recurring theme in the communications literature of the developing world. Considerable scholarly debate has surrounded theories of the modern state which delve into the concept of ‘nation’. A key question is whether the sentiment of nation is a natural and spontaneous sentiment arising from among the people or an artificial construct imposed by powerful forces from above. More simply, is the national consciousness that underlies the sense of nation ‘primordial’ or ‘invented’? If it is invented, who benefits?

Anderson contends that the modern nation requires strangers to imagine themselves united as part of a large-scale community. Subsequently, “the nation exists as much in people's minds as it does in the world”. But achieving that sense of shared identity, especially among peoples as diverse as those in ASEAN countries, would require mobilisation of mass media and educational institutions to promote symbols of a common heritage. This alludes to Hobsbawm's concept of the ‘invention of tradition’: “[T]he nation, with its associated phenomena: nationalism, the nation-state, national symbols, histories and the rest ... rest on exercises of social engineering which are often deliberate and always innovative.”

Smith perhaps puts it more simply: “Today, in many parts of Africa and Asia, it is the state itself, through its economic policies, its political patronage and mass educations system, that seeks, with varying success, to create and narrate the emergent nation.” There would appear to be little objection to these political methods from the leaderships of countries in this study. The heads of certain ASEAN governments are among the leading proponents of media involvement in nation-building.

For instance, Lee Kuan Yew, when Prime Minister of Singapore, told US newspaper editors: “From ... unpromising beginnings we have had to try to build one nation ... [W]e have to create enough shared values and a single national identity ... [W]e hope ... to bring the press in the different languages closer
together, approximating, however inadequately, one national view.” In a speech on Indonesia’s National Press Day in 1989, President Suharto proclaimed: “One area of activity which needs follow-up by the national press is the wider dissemination of information about progress, the creation of new values and the formation of public opinion, all of which will help us be a strong nation. The press should be a partner in the process of nation building.”

But these proclamations by political leaders take nations as a given mode of political organisation. Difficulties with this assumption are voiced by Gellner:

*Nations as a natural, God-given way of classifying men [sic] as an inherent though long-delayed political destiny, are a myth; nationalism, which sometimes take pre-existing cultures and turns them into nations, sometimes invents them, and often obliterates pre-existing cultures: that is a reality, for better or worse, and in general an inescapable one.*

Analysis of nation-building needs to be taken further, to the very centre of the study of politics - power. A very effective encapsulation of this idea is put by Breuilly: “[N]ationalism is, above and beyond all else, about politics, and politics is about power. Power, in the modern world, is primarily about the control of the state”. Clearly this line of argument is central to explaining the relationships between media and state power in Southeast Asia.

Another key concept that has evolved alongside nation-building is ‘development journalism’. In 1964, Schramm identified the use of media by developing states to “contribute to the feeling of nationhood, to help teach the necessary skills and technology, to extend the effective market, to aid the process of national planning, and to prepare people to play new roles in a modernising society”.

This developmental perspective argues that the Western liberal model of a critical, adversarial media is not appropriate for ASEAN states, even though member countries, such as Singapore, are well beyond the ‘developing’ stage. This lends support to the idea, articulated by Lent, that the persistence of the developmental policy can be attributed to attempts by government regimes to maintain political obedience. Lent argues a key government control mechanism is “the misuse of development communication to uncritically promote governmental policies and national leaderships.”
Malaysia's Media: “An Instrument of Leadership”

Malaysian news providers, like their Indonesian counterparts, are required to follow a national philosophy - Rukunegara. Although there are similarities with Indonesia’s Pancasila, Malaysia’s philosophy appears less pervasive. In general, the state keeps a tight rein on news and information through specific press laws and broader rules relating to perceived sedition, internal security and official secrets. Some forty seven pieces of legislation and ordinances affect mass media operations in the country. Some date to the colonial era, such as the Printing Presses and Periodicals Act (1948), which was revised in 1971. Means says the existing UMNO administration, led by Mahathir Mohamad, assumes “that the mass media must be organised and utilised as an instrument of leadership to achieve national development goals and the ideals of the Rukunegara while avoiding any divisive public controversies or inflaming communal passions over the ‘sensitive issues’.” Communalism appears to be particularly important, as it is a recurring theme in government papers justifying media control.

The multi-racial makeup of Malaysia is reflected in its press. In 1989, there were thirty-five daily newspapers in the country, twenty published in Mandarin, eight in English, three in the national language, Bahasa Malaysia, three in Tamil and one in Malayalam, a language spoken in southwest India. Against this background, racial harmony emerges as a key component of nation-building and national development. The Prime Minister - Mahathir Mohamad - alluded to this theme when outlining media policy in 1985.

For a society precariously balanced on the razor’s edge, where one false or even true word can lead to calamity, it is criminal irresponsibility to allow that one word to be uttered.

Broadly speaking, developmental perspectives remain de rigueur in the Malaysian media. Madzhi Johari asserts that “Ideology is a guide upon which a nation finds direction in and achieves objectives of its national development ... We [Malaysia] perceive and practise freedom of choice and democracy differently. Our perception and practice are not similar to that of the developed countries.”

Malaysia’s television industry has grown with this ethos. The national broadcaster - Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) - was launched in December 1963 with two networks, TV1 and TV2. According to the Director General of
RTM, Jaafar Kamin: “TV1 is considered the national network in the sense that the programs are aimed towards developing a national identity through a common language.” TV2 screens more foreign films and entertainment programmes, as well as those in other Malaysian languages such as English, Tamil and Mandarin.

TV3 is perhaps the most interesting component of the electronic media in Malaysia - particularly its relationship with UMNO. TV3’s major shareholder, Fleet Holdings, has grown to ‘astronomical proportions’ during the years of UMNO rule, having been initially set up in the 1970s to “wrest control of the print media” from Malaysian-Chinese and foreign ownership. Fleet also controls the daily newspapers New Straits Times, Malay Mail, Berita Harian, Shin Min and three Sunday newspapers, as well as extensive book publishing and industrial, transport and banking enterprises. Through this arrangement - which satisfies Malay or Bumiputera aspirations as defined in government policy - UMNO governments exercise considerable control and influence on news. They have “an assurance that the company will toe the government line in terms of politics”.

Relations between the foreign media and the Malaysian government have become increasingly tenuous. In 1985, Far East Economic Review correspondent James Clad was charged under the Official Secrets Act over the publication of details from a leaked document about Malaysia’s relations with China. The following year, a three month ban on the distribution of the The Asian Wall Street Journal was ordered along with the expulsion of the paper’s two reporters. The row was over articles about cronyism in banking and economic mismanagement in government. Such episodes suggest the government’s motivation has less to do with concerns of ethnic harmony and a democratic way of life as defined in Rukunegara than with maintenance of state power.

**Singapore: Prosperity and Paternalism**

In a similar fashion, Singapore’s Peoples’ Action Party (PAP) governments have controlled news on the grounds of nation building and communal harmony. Nair, representing the government viewpoint, argues:

*The first and continued priority is creating one nation, one people out of the different religions and races ... The visceral, emotional pools are strong and*
the social cohesion can easily be stirred if the press is allowed to abet and polarize the racial and religious differences by playing on emotions.\textsuperscript{32}

To entrench this priority a raft of laws and regulations, some dating back to the colonial period, remain in force. However, newer laws covering sedition and racial issues were "written to ensure social cohesion and that the freedom of the media are subordinate to the over-riding integrity of Singapore".\textsuperscript{33}

Despite its status as a hub of regional communications and a convenient location for many regional news bureaux, Singapore has experienced deteriorating relations with the international press since the mid-1980s. Haas attributes this to the uncertainty surrounding the departure of Lee Kuan Yew from the prime ministership. In these circumstances "the government acted as if it preferred to have a Third World policy".\textsuperscript{34}

A spate of circulation restrictions on foreign journals occurred in 1986 and 1987. This was made possible by two amendments to the Newspaper and Printing Press Act which empowered the government to "restrict the sales or distribution of foreign publications which have been declared as having engaged in the domestic politics of Singapore"\textsuperscript{35} In the course of the next two years drastic restrictions were placed on the circulation of \textit{Time}, the \textit{Asian Wall Street Journal}, \textit{Far Eastern Economic Review} and \textit{AsiaWeek} in which the publications could only distribute several hundred copies in Singapore, often stripped of advertising. Afterwards, Lee Kuan Yew told the American Society of Newspaper Editors: "Singapore's domestic debate is a matter for Singaporeans. We allow American journalists in Singapore in order to report Singapore to their fellow countrymen ... But we cannot allow them to assume a role in Singapore that the American media play in America, that of invigilator, adversary, and inquisitor of the administration."\textsuperscript{36}

To an extent, this situation reflects the weakness of the domestic media, both the compliant press and news service of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, which maintains an electronic media broadcast monopoly.\textsuperscript{37} Of all the countries in this study, Singapore has achieved the greatest economic development. As will be argued in the following chapters, its maintenance of authoritarian information structures in a liberal economic environment is increasingly untenable. Haas argues that this policy is socially and politically contradictory, positing: "National unity cannot be perfected by preventing mature political expression."\textsuperscript{38}
Thailand: A Contrast of Styles

Thailand is something of an oddity in this study. Firstly, it has not been colonised in modern times and therefore has less arbitrarily defined borders or the related racial tensions. ‘Nation-building’ rarely appears in Thai media literature. Secondly, despite a string of military governments, the Thai press is relatively liberal. However, its television news does not have the same tradition. Thailand's value in research stems from the fact that it has witnessed a national crisis since the arrival of international satellite television. A case can be made that those services contributed to the political patterns during and after the crisis. This will be canvassed in later chapters.

Unlike the paramountcy of Pancasila in Indonesian Journalists’ code of ethics, the code of the Thai Press Association states: “Promotion and maintenance of freedom of the press shall be the most important task of every member”.

In a comprehensive review of Thai media history, Chirasopone asserts that Thai press controls have “fluctuated wildly between complete freedom and virtually complete repression” since the end of the absolute monarchy in 1932. The fortunes of the press have waxed and waned with the various civilian and military governments which have become something of a hallmark of contemporary Thai politics. Several press control acts remain in place, but have not been used extensively since the 1970s.

Television began in Thailand much earlier than in other ASEAN countries. By 1991 ninety three per cent of Thai households had access to television. News on the five national networks, Channels 2, 3, 5, 7 and 9 and the Bangkok station Channel 11 is closely controlled by the Communications Authority of Thailand.

The print media enjoy far greater freedom compared to radio and television, which have been government monopolies. Unlike the print media, the electronic media have not changed much since they were first introduced more than 50 years ago, especially in their relationship with the administration. Radio and television are almost completely controlled by government.

The terrestrial networks have been supplemented in the past few years by two Bangkok based narrowcasting networks - IBC and Thai Sky. In 1990 IBC began relaying CNN live to its viewers, although under the eye of the MCOT.
Indonesia: Pancasila and Palapa

The pervasiveness of Pancasila in Indonesia’s media system has already been alluded to in this chapter. The official role of media is quite unambiguous.

*The press has been a very important element in the process of nation-building, because ideas, policies and suggestions have to be disseminated through the press, including the electronic media ... [T]he press does not participate as an observer, a critic, or a controller of the Indonesian system as is the case in the Western system. No, it takes an active role, and has done so, in preserving and enhancing the national system, based upon the Pancasila philosophy.*

These media requirements have not always existed in Indonesia. Upon independence from the Dutch, Indonesia adopted a multi-party parliamentary system. In this climate a vigorous and competitive press developed. Reflecting the contemporary Indonesian government perspective on this period, Sinaga records that the press “did not contribute much towards the needed stability in the country. Instead, it became an instrument of the various political parties and political groups”. While the Indonesian media of the 1950s was partisan, it was also ideologically diverse. This calls into question the idea that political consensus is somehow a tradition or cultural characteristic. In a study of Indonesian media, Tickell casts doubt on arguments that the 1950s experience was an ‘un-Indonesian aberration’.

“*There have been times where the press in Indonesia has been direct and trenchant in its criticism of political leaders.*”

However, under Sukarno’s guided democracy period and the New Order regime from 1966, media came under the influence of the military as part of its dual function (dwi fungsi) of military and socio-political roles. “[S]ubstantial, direct army involvement in political affairs were to fundamentally change the ‘rules’ under which the Indonesian press worked.”

The rules of the Pancasila press are complex and detailed, but only a brief outline is required here to press the point that they are tools of significant state control and broadly reflect the New Order government’s attitude to news. Amendments in 1982 to the 1966 Press Act require each press enterprise to obtain a publication permit. These licences can be revoked without trial if, for instance, a publication is judged to have endangered political stability that is required for economic development. Publications are obliged to “strengthen national unity” and integrity and to “exercise social control which is constructive”.

The threat of
revocation of licences if these obligations are not met would appear to be a factor pressuring journalists towards self-censorship - "one of the worst types of restraint because of its subtle, insidious and habit-forming possibilities". The threats are numerous, public, and quite specific. For instance, The Jakarta Post of 5 June 1989 reports of three formal government reprimands to newspapers for "misquoting cabinet ministers" and "printing off the record statements". The item was based on a press release from the Ministry of Information and recorded that all editors had apologised "for their errors". The article reported that the ministry "admonished Media Indonesia to be more careful in the future "...so that the government will not be forced to revoke the daily's licence"." A more dramatic example arose earlier this year with the closure of the Indonesian magazines Tempo, Editor and Ditik because of their coverage of tensions within the Indonesian government, television has evolved with a similar journalistic ethos. However Indonesia's television industry has a rather special place in Asia through the country's ownership of the Palapa satellite. The system remains a key conduit of information exchange and delivery in the region.

The early days of Indonesian television were low-key and rather inauspicious. The national television network Television Republik Indonesia (TVRI) commenced broadcasts on 24 August 1962 in preparation for the Asian Games in Jakarta. The next year President Sukarno outlined the basic policy guidelines for programmes, including news. The key point was "the statement of the task and function of television as a tool serving and supporting the development of the Indonesian nation". With Sukarno's downfall in 1966, the New Order Government of Suharto assigned three policy goals to TVRI: "the promotion of national unity and integration; the promotion of national development; the promotion of political stability". Under these guidelines there has been "heavy emphasis on development events, the restraint from controversial and ethnically sensitive issues, the concentration on news in and around the capital - these characteristics can best be understood in the context of the political system, the policy goals, and the plural society". Recent government statements reinforce the state orientation of Television Republik Indonesia (TVRI), labelling its function as promoting national unity and integrity, national development and political stability.

Indonesia's first commercial television network - RCTI - was opened in 1989. Delivered by Palapa satellite, viewers require a decoder to view the service. As mentioned, this channel is closely aligned to the ruling elite of Indonesia. The channel telecasts more popular Western programming than TVRI. At its
inauguration ceremony, the Information Minister, Harmoko, said “RCTI must make sure that its broadcasts don't have negative impact on the national culture and local values”.

Since then two more commercial networks have emerged in Indonesia: SCTV and the former education channel Televisi Pendidikan Indonesia (TPI).

This brings us to the development of the Palapa satellite system. Indonesia was the first developing nation to launch its own domestic satellite and the third of all nations, after the US and Canada. The first Palapa satellite was launched in 1976, its role to improve domestic telecommunications and television penetration across the archipelago. Before that time television could only be received around Jakarta and a few large provincial centres. Not surprisingly, themes of nation-building and development were a feature of government statements surrounding Palapa.

Perhaps reflecting the Javanese ethnocentrism often attributed to Jakarta’s ruling state elite, Indonesia's former foreign minister, Mochtar Kusuma-Atmadja said in 1988:

The satellite communications system ... plays an important role in the country's national development. In a country such as Indonesia, whose peoples cover a broad spectrum from the stone-age civilization in Irian Jaya to the computer-age community in the capital ... the building of an entity which can call itself a modern nation is indeed a great challenge. In Indonesia, the nation building role is played mainly by, or through, television.

Evidence from the US-based East-West Centre and the Indonesia Science Institute suggested the Indonesian government’s Palapa strategy was working.

[Television broadcasts using the Palapa have increased the public’s national awareness considerably and improved the rural community’s ability to speak the national language. It has also proven to be an effective agent of innovation in the sectors of agriculture, education, family planning and public health.]

Evidence from the US based East-West Centre and the Indonesia Science Institute suggested that the Indonesian government’s Palapa strategy was working.
Television's penetration in Indonesia is impressive, especially in contrast to the print media, largely due to Palapa. Indonesian television reaches more than 100 million viewers each day - more than two thirds of the population.61

However, at the same time as domestic uses arose for Palapa, there also developed an international perspective. As outlined in the introduction, the primary Palapa footprint covers not only Indonesia, but an area from Bangladesh, across southern China to Taiwan and down to Papua New Guinea and northern Australia. For one thing, this introduced the phenomenon of 'spill-overs' to the region, where owners of parabolic antennae could tune into broadcasts from neighbouring countries.

This international perspective is absolutely critical to this paper when it is seen in the context of the global economy. At the time the New Order government was pressing for nation-building and development, it was also seeking to expand into the international marketplace. A key catalyst was the slump in oil prices of the 1980s. The government had become dependent on oil revenues for the expansion of national infrastructure in the 1970s. Indonesia's television system was among this infrastructural development. “TVRI's activities only began to pick up in the 1970s when the oil boom brought in profits for the nation.”62 In turn, the collapse of oil prices prompted the government to seek non-oil export earnings.

One response was to seek more foreign economic activity in Indonesia. In 1987 Hainsworth noted: “Efforts are being intensified to rekindle the interest and stimulate the participation of foreign firms in Indonesia's economic revival.”63 In a sense, there was a need to use whatever fruits of Indonesian modernisation existed in the international marketplace. One area was telecommunications. In this climate, the Indonesian government rented satellite transponder space to neighbouring countries for the delivery of their domestic services. Malaysia, The Philippines and Thailand had become the initial users of Palapa in 1978 using five transponders, but during the 1980s the number rented to ASEAN governments or organisations climbed to fifteen. By 1990, each of these transponder rentals earned Indonesia US$1 million annually.64 While this policy did bring in valuable export revenue, it meant viewers in each country could watch the material from any other provided they owned a parabolic antenna. During this time a rapid growth occurred in the ownership of the parabolic antennae. Recent figures suggest the number of households and hotel rooms receiving services via Palapa are 564,000 in Indonesia, 140,000 in Thailand and 68,000 in Malaysia.65
In effect, the policy of delivering other countries’ domestic services via the Palapa satellite exposed a chink in the armour of media sovereignty. By becoming involved in the international communications marketplace, the Indonesian government gave television viewers in four ASEAN countries the opportunity to watch each other’s programming. It will be argued in Chapters 3 and 4 that this internationalisation of programming contributed to the deregulation of domestic television several years later in some countries and laid the groundwork for the arrival of European and United States broadcasters. In line with the long-standing media control ethos, an attempt was made by the Indonesian government in 1986 to restrict the use of parabolic antennae for the viewing of foreign services. This was, however, judged three years later by the director of TVRI to be ‘difficult to enforce’. Elements of the government were perhaps sensing that the genie was out of the bottle, but had not yet officially acknowledged Indonesians could watch services from other countries.

Summary

News and information via the mass media have been a cornerstone of Southeast Asian governments’ efforts to entrench state power. Indonesia, Singapore and Malaysia embody the ethnically diverse, post-colonial states, whose leaderships embarked on programmes of nation-building to cement their authority. In the immediate post-independence era in Southeast Asia, pluralist press systems emerged that reflected the class and ethnic divisions in the societies. These systems have been gradually brought under state control in Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore through a combination of educative and punitive measures. There remains persistent tension though as Western-liberal practices endure, among both indigenous and foreign journalists. There is little evidence of such tension in state television, perhaps because it developed only after the authoritarian state systems were well-entrenched. Television policies are a product of those systems. Industry hardware and programme control belongs to the state.

The first signs of erosion of the state monopoly of television news occurred as Indonesia entered the international telecommunications marketplace. While the ASEAN customers of Palapa were careful to respect each other’s sovereignty, economic pressures and international elite collaboration were to pave the way for partnerships with Western companies.

The fact that the hardware (parabolic antennae) for reception was in place across such a large area made the facility highly attractive to international media organisations, which were looking to expand from the developed world.
Indonesian state was becoming a player in an industry from which it derived economic benefits. The offset was that this diluted its hitherto well-entrenched control over media. In a broad economic sense the government was cornered. “The rapidly increasing national debt and reliance on foreign sources of loan and investment capital meant that international business was now in a more favourable position to dictate terms.”

Each of the states in this paper has followed a developmental media policy in one form or another. From the evidence in the chapter, there is a strong case to suggest a lack of dynamism in the concept of development journalism. The increased economic development and industrialisation it encourages mean that, in time, it will be internally challenged as material living standards improve. This gives rise to tension between increasingly affluent sections of the polity - which may demand media liberalisation - and the restrictive environment that, in part, has contributed to that affluence. In a sense, the policy contains a sunset clause.

The policies of economic liberalisation and telecommunications development - while designed to encourage national growth through economic strength - were to spawn sizeable unintended consequences. The scope and pace of change in the region’s electronic media sector over a period of just a few years was to be massive and far reaching.