

Asia Media Summit Focus On Changing Media Power

Equations

By Kalinga Seneviratne

“I believe traditional media can remain at the leading edge of providing content even as it loses its monopoly on the peoples’ attention. Although some Netizens come quite close, quality journalism is still by far the domain of old media” noted Prime Minister Dato’ Seri Abdullah Badawi, in the opening address to the Asia Media Summit 2008 delivered on his behalf by his deputy Dato’ Seri Najib Razak.

The annual gathering of media professionals from around the world held in Malaysian capital from 27-28th May focused this year on the changing nature of media technology and its impact on power equations within and between media platforms and the community. It was organised by the Kuala Lumpur based Asia-Pacific Institute of Broadcast Development (AIBD).

“Democracies still need the traditional press to hire the professionals whose job it is to discover and disseminate the truth. It is with this in mind that I urge you not to be too taken in by the bells and whistles of technology but to hold fast to your established virtues of accuracy, intelligence, fairness and grit. These are the values that set you apart from in the excess of information now upon us” he added.

The theme of this year’s summit was very appropriate to the host nation as there is a widespread view here that the Internet and bloggers in particular played an important role in the surprise general election outcome in which the government lost its two-thirds majority in parliament for the first time in over two decades, and also lost five state governments to the opposition.

Five leading political bloggers also won seats in parliaments under the opposition banner.

Thus, it was no surprise when Dato’ Najib Razak agreed to take a few questions from the floor, one delegate asked him about the impact of new media on the election results.

He acknowledged that it has introduced new dimensions in winning public opinion. “We overlooked how to manage the new media. We were not too savvy in how we engaged and utilised this new technology, such as blogs and news websites, to the extent losing out in cyberspace in the political context. That led to the outcome which was unexpected” Dato Razak said.

He added that this management will include more participation of the government in cyberspace, not by censoring it, but by putting up their own views (on blogs and news websites), and “oppose lies and wild allegations” whenever it appears.

Business development Director of Singapore's Mediacorp TV, Ku Kay Mok argued that in the past whoever owned the contents dominated the media platform and contents did not really matter. But today, the power equation has changed to the gateways and in turn the consumer.

For example Apple computers (with its control of the gateway with Ipod) has taken business away from music companies and is now beginning to take away business from TV companies. "We need to focus on working with gateway devices if we don't control it to reach the audiences we need" noted Mok.

To compete with so-called citizens journalism Al-Jazeera's Director General Wadah Khanfar argued that they need to revisit the concept of the newsroom and let go some of the controls and authoritarianism of the news directors, to give more power to the reporter to report news the way he or she sees it.

"We started (a trend in news reporting) to give allegiance to the people, to empower them. This is what we're there for. We can become disassociated elites from our audiences if we do not let go our authoritarian power" he argued, adding, "we have three newsroom meetings a day, not to find out who is doing what, but, to brainstorm ideas".

Khanfar also spoke about the importance of different perspectives in news reporting and how their news service was able to introduce an Arab or an alternative perspective to international news compared to that of the CNN or the BBC.

But, when he was asked if this reference was to their Arabic news service rather than the English service, whose news directors are mainly westerners and former employees of CNN and BBC, and how can these gatekeepers provide an alternative to these very services he claims they are providing an alternative, he argued that the Al Jazeera English service reflect the perspective of the Global South.

"Al Jazeera is a professional channel not an Arabic channel" he said, perhaps contradicting what he said earlier. "It does not act as a translation of the Arabic channel. We are trying to give a voice to the cultural and global South, which also exists in the West. It is a school of thought we're trying to develop" added Khanfar.

Speaking on the same panel, Saed Jamal Abu-Hijleh, Director of the Centre for Global Consciousness in Nablus, Palestine argued that a new 'Mediagogy of the Oppressed' needs to be developed to give a voice in the international arena for the marginalised communities of the world. The idea of a Mediagogy is based on a comprehensive understanding of the new media landscapes and the intricate mesh of interconnected platforms that can be accessible.

“This will help marginalised communities to take control of how they are portrayed in the media; move away from negative imagery of helplessness or victimisation into the positive image of people who are struggling to take mastery of their lives and who are endeavouring to change the oppressive structures that marginalise them in the first place” explained Abu-Hijleh.

“For Palestinians living under the Israeli military occupation the issue of instituting an effective Mediagogy is not a luxury endeavour but is part and parcel of a popular movement to end injustice in Palestine” he added, and went on to explain how they are doing it.

Most Palestinian radio and television stations in West Bank and Gaza which has survived Israeli attacks, have news websites and many also broadcast live to international audiences on the Internet. Several local TV stations have also created channels on YouTube and are making their news reports available for thousands of people across the globe.

Outside, Palestine expatriate groups are taking these broadcast and creating their own news websites as well, among them the famous ElectronicIntifada.net.

“During Israeli military invasions of Palestinian cities, Palestinian residents become reporters within their localities calling local radio and TV stations with eyewitness accounts. Some take digital photos or videos and upload them onto YouTube channels or send them to main Palestinian news sites on the web” said Abu-Hijleh.

Toshiyuki Sato of Japan’s public service broadcaster NHK pointed out that broadcasting used to be a domestic business directed at your own people within your national borders. But, all these started to change with the advent of satellite broadcasting in early 1990s, when major Western countries got involved in international TV services.

The Europeans started broadcasting in their own language – such as French and German – to international audiences and so was Japan’s NHK in Japanese. But by the mid-1990s they realised that the successful channels were the English ones such as the CNN and BBC.

Now the trend is for those language specific channels to broadcast internationally in English.

“No international news channels make profit, the members of the second wave (those who changed from native language to English) have government or public funding” noted Sato. “(Japan’s) concern seem to be that Japanese visibility in the international society has been lowering”. Thus, NHK is planning to launch their own later this year with 80% of the funding coming from NHK budget and 20% directly from the government

For Wongibe Emmanuel of Cameroon Radio Television the challenge Africa is facing is a different one – in fact, completely the opposite. He said the African Union of Broadcasting (AUB) has been alerting governments and the African Union about the rapid transformation of the continent into a battle ground for frequencies by international broadcasters – such as the BBC, RFI (France), Deutsche Welle (Germany), Voice of America and the latest kid on the bloc – Radio China International.

In September 2007 at the end of the General Assembly of the AUB, they have issued a communique appealing to the African Union to adopt a continental position on the attribution of frequencies, alerting them to the potential of unregulated frequencies in colonising the minds of the Africans.

The AUB has suggested that the African Union must insist that reciprocity should be the guiding principle.

Emmanuel warned: “Without the readiness to articulate your own problems and issues as you see and feel them, other people will speak for you and you can be rest assured, no one can tell your story better than you, no matter how well intentioned”.

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