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Book review: Handbook of the Media in Asia

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GUNARATNE, Shelton (ed) (2000)

Handbook of the Media in Asia, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 722 pp. ISBN 0-7619-9427-0. Hard cover

Reviewed by Kevin Engels

World Association for Christian Communication

To describe this book as a 'Handbook' is an understatement. It is a comprehensive survey and outline of the media throughout 25 countries of Asia, from Pakistan in the West to Mongolia in the Northeast and the Philippines in the Southeast. Not only are the major nations and economies covered but countries such as Maldives and Macau are included.

Gunaratne has written an introductory overview, which should be compulsory reading for everyone involved with the media in Asia. Using the media profiles of the 25 Asian countries and economies, he questions the suggestion that "Western yardsticks" should be applied to the media in these societies. At the same time, he does not see "Asian values", ('another highly abstract term', to use his words), as a viable substitute for "Western yardsticks".

I found it interesting that Gunaratne commented on the religious background in Asia in reference to the media. The great political and economic variations cut right across Asia's major religions. 'Buddhist-Confucian countries range from the freest to the most authoritarian'.

Gunaratne argues that, 'what is more important is to make the media system of a country more consistent with universal human values'. He takes the position that, 'the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the NWICO version of the MacBride Commission provide the framework for promoting a socially responsible press in Asia and elsewhere'.

While this 29 page concise overview together with its statistical charts and tables is extremely valuable, I liked the individual national studies that contain the basic material and local commentary. Gunaratne introduces each of the three parts, South Asia, Southeast Asia and East Asia, with a useful summary.

How can one Handbook that covers an area in which 3.3 billion people, or 55 percent of the world's population lives, give an objective and balanced presentation? The 36 contributors and Gunaratne have tried to tackle this question by following the same format for each country. Every country, whether as large as India

or China or as small as Bhutan or Macau is dealt with in ten sections: National Profile; Development of Press and Broadcasting; The Press; Broadcasting; New Electronic Media; Policy Trends for Press and Broadcasting; Main Issues; Statistics; Useful addresses; References.

Sub-sections cover the critical issues under points 1 to 7. This gets a little complicated in some countries such as India, where section 3, the Press, eventually has '3.1.3.3 Registrar of Newspapers' before proceeding to '3.2 Financial Aspects'.

The end of the colonial era is seen as the starting point for all the modern media developments, although the 'early history' sections trace the colonial press and in some countries radio. Television and the new electronic media have developed in later years within the newly independent nations. China can lay claim to the first newspaper anywhere, published during the Tang Dynasty (A.D.618-907).

Indonesia can look back to the Dutch press in the 18th century and even the first Indonesian-language newspaper in 1855. The British started both the press (1780) and early broadcasting (1927) in the Indian sub continent. By contrast Cambodia's first Khmer-language newspaper was not published until 1936 and radio broadcasting began in 1946.

The history of the press and broadcasting in Asia and the developments since 1945 are important, as they are closely linked to political changes in every country and economic developments. Political developments and freedom, or regulation, of the media are common issues in each of these countries.

As other readers will do, I looked in the book for information on media freedom. I was not disappointed. The Handbook has constant references to control, either explicit or implied in many Asian countries. All of the contributors are either nationals of these countries about which they have written, or are people who have worked there, so the matter of media regulation has a prominent position in the profiles.

A majority of the countries have some comment, such as that on Laos, 'like the press, radio and broadcasting in Laos is controlled by the Ministry of Information and Culture,' (Morgan and Loo, p.306). The reference to Malaysia reads, 'the legal framework is more complex ... no fewer than 42 pieces of legislation and ordinances regulating the media', (p.325). Chadha and Kavoori writing of Myanmar comment, 'although the Burmese media were once free and vibrant, now they are among the most repressed in the world', (p.365). 'The Singapore press operates within a strict legal framework. Singapore does not subscribe to the libertarian or US model of the press system...' (Kuo & Ang, p.406).

There is another side to the story. Daradirek Ekachai writes, 'In Southeast Asia, Thailand has matched the level of press freedom in the Philippines', (p.437). 'The contemporary Korean media have been freer than ever to criticize the government and to cover issues they previously avoided', (p.615).

Japan probably has the freest press and certainly the world's only daily newspaper, the Yomiuri Shimbun, with a circulation exceeding 10 million copies. This is closely followed by the Asahi Shimbun with 8.3 million copies, (p.567). A total circulation of 54 million daily newspapers means a penetration of 58 percent of the population (p.568).

Poverty, adult literacy and population sizes produce other contrasts. The multiplicity of choices in India contrasts greatly with its much smaller neighbour, Bhutan. Bhutan only has one weekly newspaper, *Kuensel*, with an estimated circulation of 15,000 copies.

Although it is already a large volume, I would have liked more information on professional training, professional associations and available academic facilities.

As each country faces globalization, the new electronic media with the extension of telephone, satellite and Internet links is creating different political tensions in some countries and rapid changes in others. I felt that Gunaratne is more comfortable with press and broadcasting issues than with the emerging media.

However, this might only be a reflection of the emphases given to each country by the contributing writers. A very helpful section, (pp.683-692), gives a brief background on each of these contributors and the editor.

I hope that the Handbook will be up-dated as political changes take place. China's possible entry into the World Trade Organisation and North Korea's talks, not only with South Korea but also Western nations, should mean new media policies.

Other changes in South East Asia must be reflected in media changes. Maybe another volume will cover Oceania, Melanesia and Australasia. The rapid developments in new media will also call for up dates. Perhaps a separate text is needed, as the electronic media cannot be contained within national boundaries.

The individual contributors and Gunaratne have provided us with a very useful reference tool in the *Handbook of the Media in Asia*. ■