

Media Vital For Greater ASEAN Integration

AMIC organised the 1st ASEAN Media Forum (AMF) at the Ambassador Hotel in Bangkok on 26th February 2009, under the theme of “Harnessing The Media For ASEAN Integration”.

The AMF was made possible due to the financial assistance from Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) from Germany and it was supported by the ASEAN Secretariat and the Asia Europe Foundation. The media partner for the event was the Thai Public Broadcasting Service (TPBS) television and radio network, which provided the crew to film the three panel discussions.

In the welcoming speech on behalf of AMIC, Dr Kalinga Seneviratne explained that the Forum was a result of a consultancy AMIC did for the ASEAN Secretariat 2 years ago under a Special Services Agreement to review the ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information (COCI) information exchange programmes across ASEAN. He expressed AMIC’s hope that this Forum should not be a mere ‘talkfest’ and we should look at developing real networking structures in the coming months and years as part of this Forum process.

Dr Anish Kumar Roy, Director, Bureau for Resource Development of ASEAN Secretariat speaking on the behalf of the Secretariat emphasised the great role the media has to play in building bridges for greater ASEAN integrations, especially among the people.

This was a theme pursued by the keynote speaker Mr Bambang Harymurti, Editor-in-Chief of Tempo who argued passionately that ASEAN people need to interact more if a true community is to be forged and the media needs to play a crucial role in it.

“It’s time not only to make ASEAN a grouping of governments, but also a real community who enjoys its diversity and sub-cultures. A caring community” he noted. “The question is how to do it?”

Mr Harymurti argued that ASEAN is basically an Association of South East Asian Governments and not Nations. “We have to think that, well maybe, government to government relation that it should not interfere with each other’s internal affairs. At least they should give that as a regulation to only the governments, but not for the media” he said, adding, “so ASEAN people should be allowed to interfere with each other’s affairs because we can’t be a part of a community if we are not allowed to interfere”.

“If we consider ourselves as ASEAN community, then we should be able to criticise our ASEAN brothers and sisters. This is of course the new paradigm which we all have to work soon. There’s a lot of ways we can do it” he noted and went on to give some

suggestions such as media strategies to fight common enemies like forest fires and poverty.

The Forum included three television talkshow style panel discussions, which were filmed for later broadcast by Bangkok's TPBS.

First Panel Discussion

The first panel discussion session moderated by Dr Nattha Komolvadhin, Senior Reporter and Anchorwoman at TPBS focused on the theme of *“An ASEAN Voice In The Global Media”*.

The discussion started with Dr Nattha commenting on the ASEAN Summit coverage and pondering on the role that needs to be played by ASEAN countries to stand out as a voice in the global media. She directed her first question to Ms Maria Ressa, Managing Director of ABS-CBN news channel in Philippines on her view on how media look at ASEAN.

Ms Maria who was previously working at CNN mentioned that ASEAN has to fight for space to be in the global media. It must be in the heat to grab the attention of all other media and it needs to be interesting and relevant.

In response Mr Ahmad Zukiman Zain, Deputy Editor in Chief of Bernama, Malaysia said that ASEAN needs to have a news exchange where they can exchange each others news that are of the interest of the community. He also mentioned that it has to expand throughout the region in order to have a better understanding about each other.

However, Mr Kyaw Min Swe, Chief Editor in Living Colour Magazine in Myanmar argued that regional and global media coverage about ASEAN depends on respective countries and their interest on such news. Hence, it is crucial to have a good understanding about each other.

Opposing his viewpoint, Ms Yuli Ismartano, Editor of Asianviews in Indonesia questioned Mr Kyaw Min by inquiring how to have a mutual understanding with each other when Indonesian journalists are not allowed to enter Myanmar. However, she further explained it by saying that ASEAN lack mutual understanding about each other and hence it is difficult to move forward to the global media.

Coming from a western media point of view, Mr Philip Bowring from International Herald Tribune in Hong Kong, said that ASEAN doesn't deserve its space in the global media coverage as of now because it doesn't have an impact on the world or the people in the member countries. He further explained saying that each country is only interested in their local news hence it doesn't move across other countries in the region. He said that until they have an interest within the region about individual countries, it's pointless expecting any interest of ASEAN as a one community.

Dr Nattha brought the censorship factor and the freedom of expression factor into the discussion by questioning what could be done to help sharing news among ASEAN members to increase awareness.

The Indonesian perspective of freedom of expression was that, it is a positive thing to have freedom of expression in the media. Ms Yuli stated that in ASEAN it lacks hence it has become a major problem for the press in ASEAN.

While accepting the fact that ASEAN is very diverse with various ethnics, regions and cultures, Mr Ahmad pointed out that having a common voice to represent ASEAN is impossible. Agreeing with this, Ms Yuli mentioned that we should celebrate diversity. Her view was that there should be lots of voices but one identity so that people can easily identify it.

Second Panel Discussion

Following up with the forum theme “Harnessing The Media For ASEAN Integration”, the second panel discussion took place on the theme “*Media Policy – Help or Hindrance to ASEAN Media Integration?*” The moderator of the session was Prof Chi Chi Robles from the Department of Communications, Ateneo de Manila University. The session discussed about various challenges faced by ASEAN member countries and whether media policies are a hindrance to ASEAN integration.

Prof Chi Chi gave a brief introduction to the session by saying that there have been dramatic changes in South East Asia, which are making an impact on organizations and professionals on affecting how they view themselves and how they do their work. Some of these changes occur in the leadership, challenges in the economic front, commercialization in the media structures and technology. Today’s advancements have given new modes, new platforms, and new channels. She also mentioned that the work for media practitioners becomes more difficult when the society they live in becomes more complex.

The discussion started on by elaborating more on these challenges faced by the media in the ASEAN countries. Mr Has Samath, Advisor to Ministry of Information, Deputy Director-General for ASEAN Affairs in Cambodia mentioned the two challenges they face are human resources problem and the financial problem. He stated that Cambodia doesn’t have enough qualified journalists who are able to report news in a professional manner. In addition to that, he also stated that most of the media are supported by funds and when the funds run out they are unable to produce qualitative news and other programmes for the public.

Mr Lee Kin Mun, also known as Mr Brown, a blogger who became famous in Singapore for his regular columns in the ‘Today’ newspaper, mentioned that the biggest challenge faced by the government in Singapore lies with people who don’t abide to the same rules that they used to do earlier. With the advance of new technology most of the people from the current generation and younger generation turns into new media, such as the Internet.

Young population are becoming very tech savvy and very comfortable in new media than mainstream traditional media such as newspapers and television. Hence, the government needs to use new tools to acquire new media because it has a very big potential of making a difference in the society.

Adding the Filipino perspective to the discussion, Ms Melinda Quintos Jesus, Executive Director at Centre for Media Freedom and Responsibility in the Philippines mentioned that with the evolving new media and new technology the challenge for the press is to build up citizens in the society.

Through out the discussion it was clear that ASEAN countries do face common challenges in addition to some unique challenges to respective countries. In addition to all these, journalists and media practitioners have been asked to forge an ASEAN integration, which gives them a huge role to play along with a lot of responsibilities.

Giving comments on ASEAN integration Melinda Jesus mentioned that ASEAN has a long way to go before integrating. Even though ASEAN has been there for many years, they have not managed to translate their identity in a manner that could be understood. Most of the time ASEAN journalists depend on Western news agencies to get the coverage on ASEAN. For example, most of the coverage of ASEAN Summits are taken from CNN or other wire agencies. Hence her stand is that ASEAN should take a more pro-active role on it and media should play a role in ASEAN integration.

Agreeing to her point, Mr Bunn Nagara, Associate Editor from Star, Malaysia said that only after 42 years we are even holding the 1st ASEAN Media Forum, which could have been held long back. He agreed with Melinda on the point that media has a duty to fulfill to ensure ASEAN integration.

According to Dr Somkiat Onwimon, Former Senator and member of the Thailand Broadcast Commission, the situation is quite positive in Thailand media. They have produced some radio programmes and aired those that are of ASEAN interests to locals. However, these programmes have been aired on non-peak hours.

The session involved audience comments as well after a few minutes of discussion. Dr Mustafa Anuar from University Sains Malaya stated that there are two factors ASEAN should be concerned of. Those are, laws and the interest of the media owners and the market forces. Adding to this opinion, Mr Bunn Nagara mentioned that the media needs to work harder to look at alternative sources and funding to have a better ASEAN identity and integration. Melinda Jesus believes that there should be more focused news coverage in different countries that would help readers from around the region identify about ASEAN.

Third Panel Discussion

The final panel discussion was on the theme of “Promoting ASEAN Music and Culture”. The session was moderated by Dr Kalinga Senevirtante, Research Head at AMIC. This

session discussed about ASEAN music and its position on the world music scene and then it moved on with suggestions for harnessing ASEAN music and culture in the region with panellists giving various suggestions for future events.

Dr Kalinga started the discussion by giving a brief introduction about music and cultural heritage in ASEAN. Most of the ASEAN countries have centuries old music and dancing. And today many of their pop music have blended these traditional styles with contemporary trends. Though local pop music is very popular within their own countries most young people in ASEAN countries, hardly know the music of their neighbours. But they quickly grab not only music from Europe and America, but also music like Salsa from Latin America. Music and associated culture could also be a great facilitator of better understanding and collaboration between people of ASEAN.

Talking about ASEAN music in the world map, Dr Kalinga posed his first question to Dr Madanmohan Rao, World Music Editor of Rave music magazine in India. Dr Madan mentioned that World Music term derivated in the mid 1980s by music industry executives in the West who wanted to talk about all of our music. He further elaborated by explaining that in Asia we hear a lot of Western music, which has a very big influence in rock, pop, jazz etc. On the other hand he mentioned that it is not the same when it comes to Western music. They hardly get to hear Asian music in their countries. One reason for this is the language barrier. The ASEAN languages are difficult to most of the English speaking audience and in addition to this, the form, structure and the instruments used are not easy. Hence not many Asian music crosses over into Western format. However, he pointed out that in some occasions it varies. Reggae music from Jamaica is a good cross over example. Also there are some significant events such as Rainforest Music Festival, Penang World Music Festival, where one can find very unique ASEAN music from countries like Malaysia, Philippines etc. But according to Dr Madan it is very niche and one needs to go to find out about these events and know about such music.

Moving on to Malaysia from India, Mustafa Anuar from Universiti Sains Malaya mentioned that Music like Joget and other Malysian music are mostly popular and listend by Malay community but not by many young population. With the emergence of MTV there is a tendency to go for other musical forms apart from Joget. However, Mustafa explained why Siti Noralisa's music is popular. According to him, it is because of the packaging. In fact, Siti has been packaged as the ideal Malaysian woman by the Malaysian government. Hence it helps to promote her not just as an artist but as the so called ideal woman in Malaysia. Opposing to this other forms of music such as of Iban, Sabah and Sarawak background are not very popular because there is not enough exposure for these forms. Primarily he think that is because it is not seen as such that can be modified and sold to be broadcast on a larger scale. And hence within a particular country you do not get this exchanges and you do not enjoy the diversity you have in a particular country.

Agreeing with Dr Mustafa about young generation not being interested about their own country music, Dr. Dinar Boontharm from Thai Studies Centre, Chulalongkorn University, mentioned it is the same with Thailand too. Young Thais knows very little about their

nation and they pay more attention to countries beyond South East Asian region. They tend to pay more attention to music from Europe, America etc, though there is interesting country music in Thailand. According to him contemporary music in Thailand can be divided into 2 types. One is lukkrung, which is pop songs, which are popular mostly in big city areas like Bangkok, Chiang Mai and Phuket. The other type is lukkung, which is country song. These reflect a lot of cultural aspects in it such as the way of living of Thai people. It also adapts a lot of classical type of music in this type of country songs. And they share lot of similarities with classical music styles from other countries like Cambodia, Javanese etc. It's quite interesting in cultural way but it's quite sad young generations in Thailand they pay less interest to the country music, he added.

Moving towards Indonesia Dr Ade Armando a Senior Lecturer, University of Indonesia, said that cultural diversity in Indonesia is quite low. People tend to listen to any music that are of their interest. However, in Vietnam the situation is quite different. According to Mr Nguyen Tien Long, Director of International Cooperation Department of Voice of Vietnam, there are different trends of development. Pop music is growing popularity and it is capturing lots of attention especially of young people. and it can be seen through so many singing and song competitions normally held by very big media organizations like National Radio, National TV or very big local television stations like Ho Chi Ming or Hanoi TV . Also the trends of compositions are very obvious. One of the trends is that contemporary songs are now composed with folk melodies. Folk melodies are different, slow and very traditional. This is something quite special. And actually some Vietnamese singers are very special, they make names for themselves by singing the music and many Vietnamese composers are also known for composing such music. He also mentioned the borrowing of hot trend music from the region such as Indian, Thai, Japanese, Korean songs seems to be popular in Vietnam.

Turning the discussion into a more narrow focus, Dr Kalinga brought the attention to dangdut Music, which has been quite popular in Malaysia and Indonesia in the past. He questioned the panelists why it has not become the Lambada of the East. Dr Ade mentioned that in the latest development dangdut popularity is also decreasing in Indonesia. He stated that recording industries are very selective in choosing what kind of music they are going to support. Most high-class people consider dangdut music as 'Kampong Music' (low Class) which is very degraded hence it is not shown in national tv stations in Jakarta. He further explained that you have to attach something related to high culture to be accepted by the middle class.

However, Dr Madan stated that if such music came from the West and back to the region it would have been popular. If it is seen as a commercial success in markets like the West, it is validation for some people. In addition to that he mentioned not all the Asian music can cross over. So there is the question how dangdut can cross over. It depends on artist, and timing as well.

Lastly the discussion went on discussing about harnessing ASEAN music in the region and how this could be done to promote ASEAN music.

Evelyn Agato from Radyo Pilipinas mentioned that few years back there was a cultural exchange programme within ASEAN, where 52 programmes were produced from each country that consists of different music, such as folk, modern music etc. However, in the Philippines, it has not been successful due to copyrights issues. Hence they have promoted it in other countries yet it has not been successful due to language barrier.

Some of the panelists and the audience brought up the idea of having an ASEAN music festival who can represent and present their music and songs and at the same time bring along other cultural performances to show in the festival. In addition to this Dr Madan suggested to have a compilation CD of the top hit ASEAN singers in one CD.

Closing Panel Discussion

This closing session was chaired by Dr Kalinga Seneviratne and brought together a panel drawn from the previous session and was conducted in an interactive format with comments and suggestions invited from the floor and written up on a noteborad by FES's Dr Stephanie. The discussion was geared towards coming up with a set of recommendation (after about an hours discussions) on how to take the ASEAN Media Forum process forward with practical regional projects.

One of the ideas mooted by a panelist was to have an awards scheme for local stories proposed by tv networks in the region which can be aired regionally. An ASEAN panel could choose story ideas from that and commission it for production. They could also give production support in terms of camera crews and post-production. TV broadcasting stations would have to be partners in this project.

Ms Maria Resa managing director of the ABS-CBN news channel from the Philippines said her channel is doing two things that may be of interest. First thing, whatever you do needs to be commercially viable so it is watched by viewers. Thus music and culture is a very important area because entertainment can make a connection to viewers. Recently they have tied up with a Malaysian channel to do a TV drama series, which was very costly but it rated well there. They found that both sides learned a lot from it. News is another area where regional integration could be promoted via the media because you can write stories that are appealing to other countries.

Mr Ahmad Zukiman Zain from Malaysia's Bernama TV argued that the ASEAN media portal (hosted by the ASEAN Secretariat) needs to be better utilised, and not many people in ASEAN know about it. It needs to complement each other's programmes and Forums like this helps to bring people together. He believes private networks need to get into the process to produce programmes and use the ASEAN media portal for sharing programmes with regional networks because there is no money available for such productions from the ASEAN Secretariat. This portal could be a one-stop in connecting networks.

Mr Has Samath from the Ministry of Information Cambodia argued that to get the media involved in promoting ASEAN integration it needs to be done both at local and regional

level. He believes that the best way to get the media in the ASEAN countries involved in integration is for governments to have some regulation in this direction to provide avenues for private media to broadcast programmes disseminating and promoting ASEAN information. They should look at what activity could promote ASEAN and governments should give support to it.

Ms Evelyn Agato Coordinator of ASEAN in Action radio exchange said that in the Philippines the media is heavily commercially driven and it is expensive to get air-time for ASEAN oriented programmes. So she believes that ASEAN countries need to create some regulations or rules to provide space for ASEAN programmes.

Mr Nguyen Tien Long from Vietnam explained how they got the 'ASEAN Golden Melodies' song contest together last year in Hanoi and the biggest problem in having such an event every year would be sponsorship. If it is going to be a contest it should have set standards on judging and marking. He also mentioned that similar attempts in the 1980s and 1990s in staging an ASEAN Song festival faltered after the first or a few events because of problems with sponsorship. Therefore to take the Vietnamese initiative forward you will need to be very specific about sponsors and standards.

There was also a discussion on how the new media like internet networking sites could be used to promote ASEAN music like using U-Tube productions. But Ms Resa argued that to get the message across to you need to reach mass audiences and the new media would not do it (due to low penetration rates across the region).

A number of suggestions from the floor were put up on the notebord by Dr Stefanie at this stage. These included:

- Eagle Awards: Set up a contest in each country to give awards for locally produced television stories for regional broadcast.
- Curriculum Development: Include Southeast Asian history in curriculum of journalism and communications courses in member countries. It should also be included in basic education at all grades in schools.
- Young Communicators and Journalism Forum: AMIC and ASEAN should organise an annual forum of college students from across ASEAN for them to network and bond with fellow ASEAN students. This can be tied up with the AMIC annual conference or the ASEAN Summit.
- ASEAN Pop Group: A singing group consisting of talented young singers from across ASEAN should be set up to perform in concerts, festivals and in the media across ASEAN and outside. The members for this group may be chosen in each country through a contest similar to the 'American Idol' format.
- Annual ASEAN Music Festival: It could be a 3 day event each year in a different country. This festival will consist of performances by 2-3 bands from each country; exhibition of CDs, DVDs, musical instruments from each country; conference of academics, industry, government and civil society; website in English and ASEAN languages with downloads, streaming, voting; release of annual compilation CD/

DVD with 3 best songs from each country; awards for the best artiste promoting ASEAN values/appeal; and a best campus band competition.

- Media Award: Creating a Media Award for the best ASEAN coverage.
- Asiaviews: Expand the distribution of Asiaviews magazine across ASEAN,
- Music Broadcast Programme: Common arts and cultural broadcast programme like 'ARTE' in Europe.
- ASEAN Film Festival: Hold an annual ASEAN film festival either separately or as part of a wider ASEAN cultural festival.
- Journalist Exchange: Have an ASEAN journalists exchange programme where the participants work for a year in another country's news media as a correspondent for his / her media in that host country. Each journalist will continue to be paid his / her salary by the home employer, but living expenses will be provided by the host media.

Ms Agato pointed out that most of the above suggestions have been tried out at one time or another but lack of resources and lack of funding have contributed to its demise. A number of others also commented that we need to look at funding sources and the idea of doing programmes only when it is funded externally. There needs to be a new approach in management style.

There was also discussion on whether an ASEAN project could be initiated without the participation of all 10 countries. Dr Roy from ASEAN Secretariat confirmed that it is best to have 10 but there is a stipulation that to start an ASEAN project a minimum of 6 countries have to be involved.

Based on the days discussions and especially the final session's ideas and suggestions, most participants were supportive of greater media corporation to enhance ASEAN integration. The biggest barrier seem to be funding, but, as argued a number of times if the partnerships could be created between private and public media with some form of government regulation supporting such networking more sustainable networking structures may be put in place.

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