Tabloid Democracy: The Paradox of Press Freedom in Asia and Europe

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ABSTRACT

The 20th anniversary of the People Power revolution in the Philippines, one of many similar civilian led uprisings throughout Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe, is an opportune time to evaluate how freedom of speech and of the press, both long suppressed under decades of authoritarian rule, are shaping the new democracies in the region, and in Europe.

Paradoxically, these freedoms have not always, as initially expected, been able to produce stable democratic institutions and a politically mature and engaged citizenry. Through a comparative study of the media experience in Southeast Asia, this lecture will attempt to show that the deregulated media environments and unbridled commercialisation of the press in these countries threaten to trivialise public discourse on one hand, and sensationalise, if not exacerbate political and ethnic conflict, on the other. The experience of democratic transition in Asia and in the new democracies in Europe, show a similar contradiction of political underdevelopment despite the presence of a newly assertive and free press.

This high impact, but low substance journalism has been coined by media critics as the tabloidisation of the press, a phenomenon that is spilling over and creating the tabloidisation of political culture itself. The problem is not so much the choice of topics covered by the media, but rather the problem lies in the way the media frame such issues. Often, these are presented in ways designed to titillate, rather than inform the public. When market share takes precedence over civic responsibility, the temptation to exaggerate or oversimplify what are mostly complex and nuanced debates involving governance and public policy become hard to resist among owners and executives eager to deliver an audience to the advertisers that sustain their media organisations.

Just as problematic is how politics and politicians are being transformed to suit the requirements of a press increasingly attracted to style rather than substance. As several recent political campaigns in both Asia and Europe illustrate, effective public relations replaces good governance, and democracy is reduced to a talent search show where contenders compete for public approval. In a market driven media environment, populism and jingoism increasingly define politics.

The effect on the body politic, in varying degrees across these countries, has been the public’s loss of trust in public institutions and a growing cynicism in the political leadership. Indeed, even as citizens jealously hold on to their hard earned liberties, many public intellectuals and reformers within the media ask: why is more freedom of the press creating less meaningful political engagement among citizens and less accountability among their leaders? How can we continue to guard our free and independent press while instituting reforms that enable it to credibly assert itself in the public sphere? How can the press serve as a watchdog to the powerful in an environment where the pressures of the market place are compounded by political and economic underdevelopment?
David Celdran is a prominent journalist based in the Philippines. He is currently a senior anchorperson for the ABS-CBN News Channel, a news and public affairs network that broadcasts internationally from the Philippines. He is a pioneer of twenty four hour news programming in the Philippines and has occupied executive positions, such as News Director and Director for Current Affairs for the network since 1995.

Mr. Celdran is also affiliated with the influential Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism where he sits on the board of editors. As a member of the board, he provides editorial advice and direction for stories on media, technology and popular culture. His work in PCIJ also includes campaigning for media freedom and responsibility in the Philippines and in the Southeast Asian region where he regularly provides training to journalists and lectures to students.

David Celdran also writes for various local and international publications and academic journals on topics relating to both traditional and new media. He is also a resource person on Philippine media, politics and culture and is interviewed regularly on these topics by international networks like CNN and BBC as well as local news publications and television programs.

Mr. Celdran holds a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology at the University of the Philippines and has pursued post-graduate studies in Television at the New York University. He has also participated in various courses in Political Economy, Globalisation and Media Studies at academic institutions in Japan and the United States.

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**About the Asia-Europe Foundation**  
Cultures & Civilisations Dialogue Programme

Notions of a **“Clash of Civilisations” and a deep cultural divide** have entered the lexicon of academic and public discourse. One of the most often cited work is Samuel Huntington’s 1993 thesis on how today’s battle lines will be made along “the fault lines of civilisations” and no longer those of economics or ideology.

A counter-movement is developing towards greater understanding, to stem the so-called “rising tide” of intolerance and distrust. The most important argument arising from this examination of cultures and civilisations is that **conflict need not be inevitable**. The Asia Europe Foundation (ASEF) strives to be part of this effort.

At the 4th Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) Summit in Copenhagen (2002), the Chairman’s statement stressed the need to promote “unity in diversity” among the various cultures represented among the 38 ASEM countries. ASEF was asked to accompany this initiative through its own “Civil Society” architecture in Asia and Europe.

In consonance with this enterprise, **the philosophy of ASEF’s Cultures & Civilisations Dialogue programme** emanates from the following as the premise for dialogue: respect for the equal dignity of all civilisations; conviction that cultural diversity is an asset, not a liability; and accountability for the impact of prejudice on present and future generations.

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