



Asia Media Summit 2007

Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia:
29 - 31 May 2007

Plenary Session on 30 May 2007:
Mobilizing Airwaves Against Poverty

Let's make Poverty a 'copyright free zone'!

Text of panel remarks

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It's a privilege and pleasure to be part of Asia Media Summit again -- and to be among its co-sponsors!

Eighteen months ago, I spoke on a panel at the World Summit on the Information Society in Tunis organised by Canada's IDRC. I was the only speaker from South Asia, which has more people living in poverty than in the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. So I was asked to address the role of ICTs in reducing poverty.

On that occasion, I said there were different kinds of poverty. The most degrading one is, of course, income poverty.

But there are other kinds of poverty, less visible but damaging all the same:

- Poverty of vision;
- Poverty of analysis; and
- Poverty of courage.

So when we talk about poverty, we have to be very careful that we ourselves don't fall into these 'poverty traps' by peddling mere platitudes.

In other words, friends:

- we need total sincerity of purpose;
- we need to be smart and strategic in our response; AND
- we need to put our money where our mouth is.

I stand here today as the Director of Television for Education – Asia Pacific, better known as TVE Asia Pacific. We are a small non-profit media foundation that works across our large and diverse region. We use television, video and new media to tell authentic, powerful stories on people living and working at the ‘ground zero’ of survival.

Income poverty and human deprivation are part of the complex and nuanced Asia Pacific reality that we cover using moving images.

And not being a broadcaster ourselves, we ‘hitch a ride’ on the region’s existing TV channels and networks. I am delighted to see many of our regular broadcast partners represented at this Summit. They already know our slogan, which sums up our mission: *Moving images, moving people*.

But moving people is not easy! Many individuals, communities and even governments are hesitant or reluctant to change.

That’s why communicating for social change is both an art and a science. And only a few of us have mastered it well -- there is much that we can learn from each other.

Best outreach with broadcast media

As UNESCO data confirm, we have many more radio and television sets on the planet than newer ICTs like computers and mobile phones.

And it is radio and TV that still give us the best returns by allowing quick and easy access to hundreds of millions of people. That is why I sometimes fondly refer to our broadcast partners as Asia’s ‘Emperors of Eyeballs’.

That can give you the impression of awesome power, but it is quite transient. Real power lies with our audiences -- men and women who wield a little gadget called the remote control...

So a big part of our challenge is how to cover and present poverty and development issues in ways that engage our all-powerful viewers (and in radio, our listeners).

And this is an area where the development community has largely failed. They have tried to crowd the airwaves with information, education and messages.

No argument that these messages are necessary and worthwhile. But most are also very dense, often pontificating and -- dare I say it? -- extremely boring!

That's why 'development' has become the 'dreaded D word' for many broadcasters. The typical packaging of development-related content puts off many average viewers.

Of course, there are notable and commendable exceptions. But unless the exceptions become the norm, we cannot succeed in truly mobilising airwaves against poverty and under-development.

Copyrights blocking development

Then there are other hurdles to clear. An important one among them is copyright!

I raise this subject with some trepidation, because I know this is a bed rock of the broadcast industry.

Let me assure you that I am not an activist who wants to dismantle the broadcast industry.

But extraordinary situations call for extraordinary responses.

If we all agree that halving poverty by 2015 is desirable and feasible, we must then consider how copyright restrictions are a roadblock on that already difficult road.

We all know the power of moving images. Used strategically, moving images can move people to change lifestyles, attitudes and behaviour.

Indeed, the right kind of information -- whether about microcredit, contraception, home gardening or immunisation -- can vastly improve the quality of life, and even save lives that are needlessly lost.

But this is not something that one-off or even repeat broadcasts alone can accomplish. We need a mix of broadcast and narrowcast approaches.

Communicating for social change is a slow, incremental process that involves learning, understanding, participation and sharing.

At TVE Asia Pacific, we work equally with broadcast, educational and civil society users of moving images. Our experience for over a decade shows that narrowcast work can reinforce and build on the initial broadcast outreach.

But that's where we often run into a problem.

Every year, excellent TV programmes are made on different development topics. Public and private funds are spent in making these programmes, which draw in the creativity and hard work of committed professionals.

Many of your channels willingly broadcast these programmes. They are typically aired a few times and then end up in the archives. Few may be exploited for their multimedia potential.

Yet many of these programmes have a longer shelf-life - and outside the broadcast sphere. They can be extremely useful in education, awareness raising, advocacy and training.

Alas, copyrights restrictions are often too tight for that to happen. Even where the film-makers or producers themselves are keen for their creations to be used beyond broadcasts, the copyright policies stand in the way. In large broadcast organisations, it is lawyers and accountants -- not journalists or producers -- who now seem to decide on what kind of content is produced, and how it is distributed under what restrictions.

I personally know a number of award-winning film-makers who are simply not allowed the educational use of their own creations. Leading western broadcasters that co-financed their productions won't release the rights.

Asian broadcasters are not much better. It's more out of habit that many continue copyright regimes that were adopted before the digital revolution. Few have given it further thought. Business practice is to tie up every media product in complex and complicated copyright arrangements, just in case.

But business as usual just won't do when we are confronted with massive global challenges such as reducing poverty at least by half over the next few years.

If the audio-visual media and the broadcast industry are to play a meaningful role against poverty, HIV, corruption and other scourges of our time, we need to break free from this crushing copyright mentality.

On-air & off-air assault on poverty

Broadcasters need to let go of development related TV content after initial broadcasts. They must also allow educational and civil society users greater access to vast visual archives, gathered from all over the world.

In this context, I would like to repeat a proposal I first made last year, which I have since presented at the UN Headquarters and other forums.

It's simple: Let us make poverty a 'copyrights free zone'.

The idea is to have broadcasters and other electronic publishers release copyrights on TV, video and online content relating to poverty and development issues -- at least until (MDG target year of) 2015.

I do realise this is easier said than done, but *extraordinary situations call for extraordinary responses*.

Let us remember that similar 'tectonic shifts' have happened in other sectors in recent years.

For example:

- Confronted with the global HIV pandemic and the very high cost of anti retroviral treatment, a few pharmaceutical companies in India, Brazil and South Africa started manufacturing generic versions of the same drugs but at much lower prices. This helped to achieve drastic reductions in cost of treatment.
- The free and open source software (FOSS) movement is countering the market domination by proprietary software producers. They seem to be finding their own niches.

These changes started with an idea, which was pursued with dogged determination. These were accomplished amidst initial resistance from the industries concerned. But looking back, these breakthroughs have enabled a greater sharing of benefits especially for those who are unable to pay for it.

I'm not suggesting that all copyright controls are suspended. Perhaps AIBD¹ could study the practical aspects of this proposal and come up with recommendations. But let's do it soon!

¹ Asia Pacific Institute for Broadcasting Development, AIBD, www.aibd.org.my - organisers of the annual Asia Media Summit

And I call upon development donors to insist that all development films and other media products they finance -- with tax-payer money - will have no copyright restrictions attached.

I hope the UN agencies will also take note. Perhaps inadvertently, they often get locked into exclusive rights arrangements with single production companies or broadcasters. This should be avoided.

I am proud to announce that all international TV content produced by TVE Asia Pacific is available to broadcast, civil society and educational users anywhere in the world without any license fees or copyright restrictions. We do practise what we preach.

And let us all consider alternative approaches to managing intellectual property -- such as the Creative Commons framework now gaining acceptance.

Reducing poverty in our time cannot be done in the business-as-usual mode.
Extraordinary situations require extraordinary responses.

Let us make it so!

Thank you.

Nalaka Gunawardene is Director and CEO of Television for Education - Asia Pacific (trading as TVE Asia Pacific, www.tveap.org), a non-profit media foundation that works regionally using television, video and new media to promote sustainable development and social justice issues. TVEAP produces and distributes editorially independent audio-visual and online content to broadcast, educational and civil society users in the world's largest region, entirely free of license fees.

Trained as a science writer and journalist, Nalaka counts 20 years of experience in the media, first in the mainstream print and broadcast media and then in the development sector. He writes a blog on media, society and development issues at: <http://movingimages.wordpress.com/>

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