

# **Regional Journalism in Southeast Asia and ASEAN Identity in Making: Asia News Network as a Case for International and Intercultural Communication**

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## **Abstract**

Somehow in analogy with the European Union, 10 Southeast Asian countries are in the process of forming a political and economic union which is (ASEAN) Association of Southeast Asian Nations for decades. This process of regional integration goes in tandem with the regional media associations such as Asia News Network (ANN) which is an Asian-German initiative that consists of daily newspapers from various Asian countries. As a regional association covering not only all ASEAN countries, but also ASEAN neighbors; ANN may serve a significant role for regional collaboration and integration. The network is instrumental to the promotion of freedom of speech which is not always easy to propound in some of these countries. This article analyzes news coverage and publication policy of ANN and discusses challenges and opportunities of regional journalism in SEA as a case for international and intercultural communication.

**Key Words:** Intercultural communication, international communication, Asian studies, journalism in Asia, and regional journalism.

**Güneydoğu Asya'da Bölgesel Gazetecilik ve Oluşum Aşamasındaki ASEAN Kimliği: Asian News Network (Bir Uluslararası ve Kültürlerarası İletişim Örneği Olarak Asian News Network)**

## **Öz**

Avrupa Birliği'yle bir ölçüde benzer bir biçimde, 10 Güneydoğu Asya ülkesi, onyıllardır, ASEAN (Güneydoğu Asya Ulusları Birliği) adı altında bir siyasal ve ekonomik birlik oluşturma sürecindedir. Bu bölgesel bütünleşme süreci, çeşitli ülkelerde çıkan günlük gazetelerden oluşan bir Asyalı-Alman girişimi olan Asya Haber Ağı (ANN) gibi bölgesel medya birlikleriyle birarada gelişiyor. Yalnızca tüm

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ASEAN ülkelerini değil; ASEAN'ın komşularını da kapsayan bölgesel bir birlik olarak ANN, bölgesel işbirliği ve bütünleşme için önemli bir rol oynayabilir. Ağ, bu ülkelerin kimilerinde her zaman kolay olmayan ifade özgürlüğünün savunulması çabası için araçsal bir işlev görüyor. Bu makale, ANN'nin haber kapsamı ve yayın politikasını çözümlenmekte ve bir uluslararası ve kültürlerarası iletişim örneği olarak Güneydoğu Asya'da bölgesel gazeteciliğin zorluklarını ve olumluluklarını tartışmaktadır.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Kültürlerarası iletişim, uluslararası iletişim, Asya çalışmaları, Asya'da gazetecilik ve bölgesel gazetecilik.

## Introduction

### The Past and the Present of Asian News Network (ANN)

The idea of initiating Asian News Network (ANN) came up at a Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung meeting in Bangkok in the middle of the Asian Financial Crisis (1998). It was established to improve Asian news reporting and inter-Asian dialogue in 1999. Each country had sent an ANN coordinator chosen among the journalists to form ANN Governing Board. The board has operated by an annually rotating chairmanship which strengthened governance. Furthermore, ANN which is headquartered in Bangkok asks each member to send journalists to Bangkok for collaboration for 6-12 months periods which fosters a common framework for ANN journalists. Currently, ANN consists of 20 members from 17 countries.<sup>1,2</sup> The top selling newspaper of the world, The Yomiuri Shimbun which sells over 14 million copies daily is among ANN members.

Busch & Rentzow-Vasu (2008) explains that due to devaluation in Asian Financial Crisis 1997, foreign news wire became too expensive to buy by Asian newspapers, and it became less feasible to send journalists abroad, while the lay-offs due to the crisis meant shortage of staff. As a result, non-Asian journalist reported frequently about Asian developments; and they were far from being experts in the field. Furthermore, their news stories had returned to Asian newspapers as the truth, although they are full of misinformation and distortion. ANN provided an opportunity for

<sup>1</sup> Busch, Werner: "Foreword", In Werner Busch & Susanne Rentzow-Vasu (ed.), **Asia News Network: 10 years**, Singapore: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2008, p. vii-viii.

<sup>2</sup> Werner Busch & Susanne Rentzow-Vasu, **Asia News Network: 10 years**, Singapore: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2008, p. 45.

Asian journalists to freely exchange news from each country which reduced costs of hiring foreign correspondents in the region and promoted mutual regional understanding.<sup>3</sup>

In 1999, ANN started to issue a monthly (later on, fortnightly) publication; and next year, opened up ANN website that has served as an Asian news portal. This served a significant function in online news-making on Asia, as other pan-Asian websites such as 'Asian Times Online' and 'Asiaweek' were a product of mostly non-Asian contributors. In an era in which Far Eastern Economic Review and Asiaweek no longer exist, ANN is more indispensable. In contrast to a single perspective elaborated by non-Asian press, ANN provides multiple perspectives within Asia and by Asian journalists. Another advantage of ANN over foreign press is the local flavor omnipresent in ANN news. Those news are not localized after they are produced. They are local from the very beginning.

As a negative note, it can be pointed out that the distribution network of ANN magazine is limited. It is sold in Bangkok newsstands and is provided for Business Class passengers of Star Alliance which is one of the main partners of ANN. The magazine is freely available online which matches a high number of online ANN readers. The sponsors of ANN are currently Konrad Adenauer and Star Alliance. ANN needs more advertising to extend its distribution network. That Star Alliance undertakes the freight costs is an advantage, but this situation may not necessarily be sustainable. ANN with 50 million readers in print form attracts international advertisers who would like to explore Asian markets.

Most of the ANN members are non-vernacular (English) newspapers which might be considered as a limitation of ANN. That is because of language barriers and translation costs. It is easier to connect with Asian newspapers in English language and easier to use their news texts.

On the other hand, it should be reminded that English newspapers are usually more liberal about national issues compared to vernacular newspapers, as their audiences are not identical.

Heterogeneity of Asia in cultural and other terms can potentially appear as an obstacle against such a pan-Asian initiative.<sup>4</sup> National newspapers hold different views for various events. However, this is

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Werner Busch & Susanne Rentzow-Vasu, **Asia News Network: 10 years**, p. 1.

considered as pluralism rather than a matter of debate in ANN. This pluralism has been maintained by editorial policies to publish chosen appropriate news from the ANN pool, rather than all news available in the pool. This is especially reasonable considering bilateral problems among countries such as Pakistan and India that are often reflected in national news-making.

On the other hand, in some other cases, ANN has promoted bilateral ties between newspapers (e.g. the Singaporean newspaper signed agreements with Indonesian and Chinese newspapers). Physical distance among ANN members stands as a problem when time-sensitive (urgent) news are needed. Thus, news exchange mechanism of ANN needs to be developed.

ANN fills a big gap as international news publishers usually rely on European/American agencies which means Asians themselves are rarely in a position to report about themselves. The emergence of ANN provided the opportunity to balance this Euro-/Americo-centric situation and to allow Europe and North America to receive direct news from Asia about Asia.<sup>5</sup> ANN also allowed better relations among Asian countries by connecting them in a single news network.<sup>6</sup> Following the lines of ASEAN, consensus and tolerance are proposed as the guiding principles of ANN. Newspaper editors from each country are not expected to lose their national identities to compromise in ANN meetings. This loose structure has been conducive for ANN's survival. When an ANN member visited another Asian country, ANN member of the host country helped them by offering their physical facilities and social networks of journalism. The Nation (Thai newspaper) spared a weekly page for ANN news which sparked similar efforts in other ANN members.

Asian journalism practice is deeply engaged with the idea of Asian values and Asian exceptionalism which serves as a tool to sustain Asian authoritarian regimes according to one side of the debate; while it is usually linked with Confucian heritage as well.<sup>7</sup> The idea is that press freedom is contingent and conditional, and not absolute. In such a characterization, press is not considered to be an essential right of the citizens. In that sense, press freedom might be seen or preferred to be seen

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 80.

as a Western export reminding the colonial past.<sup>8</sup> So, part of this debate is about building a distinctive identity for Asian journalism. But authoritarianism enveloped as 'Asian values' or 'Asian exceptionalism' is only one of the options for building such an identity. In other words, it is not the only way.

Unlike the critical role served or expected to be served by European/American media, Asian media has generally been observed to support economic growth and development initiatives of the governments.<sup>9</sup> This explains why Asian newspapers assign a disproportionate number of pages for business and economics news. Of course, this does not mean that investigative journalism practices do not exist in Asia. They do exist, but they are weak. Furthermore, government monopoly over media hinders investigative journalism as well as the media bourgeoisie strongly associated with the state in the mock multi-party countries. This so-called 'development journalism' moves the critical role of media to an unknown destination that does not exist.

In Asian news-making, a classical critical stance that parallels the political climate is that local governors can be criticized but not the central governors.<sup>10</sup> Thus, most of the social problems that appear on news are attributed to the misdeeds of the local governors as if central governors have not acted as accomplices. In that sense, newspapers serve as a platform to voice local complaints and accordingly fill the gap of NGOs that are not free of government. In that sense, it can be observed that ANN has a light, but not negligible leverage for the freedom of the press in the region, as explained in the following excerpt:

*Nevertheless, ANN is observed to hold an influence over the Asian public opinion to promote freedom of press, as seen by Busch's response to an interview question: It has happened that one of our colleagues went behind bars for laughable reasons and suddenly all over Asia appeared an article that a journalist was put in prison for no legal reason. Like a flash of lightning he was out again because no government likes that. And of course, our goal is to have a free and responsible press. This is, of course, what we try*

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 143.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Ulaş Başar Gezgin, "Çin ve Vietnam'da Yeni-serbestçilik ve direniş", In, Barış Çoban (ed.) **Küreselleşme, direniş, ütopya-Yeni toplumsal hareketler: Küreselleşme çağında toplumsal muhalefet**, İstanbul: Kalkedon Yayınları, 2009, p. 255-271.

*to achieve but it would be megalomaniac if we would say we can achieve this. We achieve it together with ANN and other organisations. We are not the only ones who are fighting for freedom of the press. It is a team effort that might lead to this goal.*<sup>11</sup>

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### ANN and ASEAN

Regionalism as contrasted to regionalization (cooperation in loose terms) matches different understandings across Asia. Various national points of view exist, along with different levels of analysis (e.g. states, elites, nations, classes, peoples etc.). Regionalism usually involves the states and governments, while regionalization is more diverse in terms of the social agents (e.g. NGOs). In that sense, ANN fares well with regionalization rather than regionalism, as ANN is not an intergovernmental initiative. On the other hand, ANN exceeds the boundaries of ASEAN; it includes non-ASEAN countries as well.

ASEAN was originally established by 5 Southeast Asian countries (Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) in anti-communist lines in the Cold War (1967). Since then, the region has transformed a lot, together with the global world. Cold War politics were outdated; and the new era welcomed other Southeast Asian countries in the meantime.<sup>12</sup> The so-called 'ASEAN way' which refers to the principles of non-interference and non-confrontation is considered to decelerate regionalism and regional integration and instead promote regionalization.<sup>13</sup> ASEAN avoids consideration of critical issues such as armed conflicts and human rights violations, and focuses on issues that are more comfortable to tackle with. For example, the union didn't serve as an active agent in cases of Thailand-Cambodia conflict and other violent confrontations. ASEAN, as such stands as a loose organization with no essence to build a regional identity.<sup>14</sup> With the new developments such as ASEAN Charter, it is hoped that this will change. Nevertheless, enforcement and compliance are problematic. The recognition of states as constituents of ASEAN in a way to exclude citizens, NGOs and other likely social agents has always been criticized. ASEAN is not people-centered, but state-

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 167.

<sup>12</sup> Pavin Chachavalpongpun, "Infrastructure versus Superstructure: Evaluating ASEAN-style Regionalism", In Narayanan Ganesan, & Colin Dürkop, (Ed.), **East Asia regionalism**. Japan: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2011, p. 21-48.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p. 23.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

centered.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, ASEAN is not a union of people or citizens of each SEA country, but a union of governments.<sup>16</sup>

It can be stated that the ASEAN framework is behind ANN's operating principles. For example, as a response to the question

*You have worked in Europe and other parts of the world. Do you think that the ANN mechanism can be applied to other parts of the world?*", Werner vom Busch states that

*In Europe, I think, the emphasis is on the individual and here it is on the community. Clearly, this has advantages and disadvantages. But in this particular case I think it works very much in favour of ANN. Working in Asia follows very different rules than in Europe. I cannot imagine twenty European newspapers from such different countries as India and China – or in the European context, Russia and Britain – working together in such an amicable atmosphere of friendship and trust. Why is that? I think in Asia the emphasis is placed on what unites the different partners rather than what divides them. During negotiations they are very goal-oriented and controversial issues are left aside until the whole package has been agreed on. And then the controversial points seem to fall into place. Because once a whole package has been tied up nobody really wants to be the one who unties it again and it falls apart. In ANN, if someone raises a concern, we note it and try to find a general solution before we deal with the concern. Once it is all done, the one or two issues that are of concern can be solved.<sup>17</sup>*

### **Online Journalism, Mobile Journalism and Citizen Journalism**

In Asia, just like in other parts of the world, printed newspapers are under pressure due to the development of online news sources, user generated content and interactivity. On the other hand, financially speaking, they are moving towards developing their own websites as advertising industry discovered specification and personalization opportunities of online advertising. Thus, advertising agencies have been channeling more resources for ads on newspaper websites.<sup>18</sup> This has implications for the notion of public spaces in Asia. Despite all these

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>16</sup> Narayanan Ganesan, "East Asian Regionalism: Policies and priorities", In Narayanan Ganesan & Colin Dürkop, (ed.). **East Asia regionalism**. Japan: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2011, p. 161-180.

<sup>17</sup> Werner Busch & Susanne Rentzow-Vasu, **Asia News Network: 10 years**, p. 166.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

pressures, Asian printed newspapers constitute more than half of the best selling newspapers worldwide due to the demographic advantage, increasing literacy rates, and disposable income.<sup>19</sup>

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A relevant term which is used sometimes interchangeably with citizen journalism is mobile journalism (moJo). MoJo has a device-based definition: It is the journalism by mobile phones only. The user records videos and other contents and makes news on his/her mobile phone. Mobile journalists are very practical and flexible. They can go anywhere without requiring any heavy and expensive equipment. Smart phones are used to transmit news to professional studios or newsrooms. As Quinn (2012) states “[j]ournalists can film in places where camera crews are banned, or use mobile phones to interview people who might be uncomfortable with a full television crew” (p.9). In other words, “[m]obile phones allow journalists to report the news wherever it happens, without depending on computers or a big box of expensive camera equipment” (p.9). As the most populous continent of the world, Asia is a strong market for mobile phones and Internet-related technologies. Although the distribution of mobile, Internet and smart phone penetration is lopsided across Asian countries, the overall rate of penetration is impressive. Thus, mobile journalism turns out to be a given of everyday life in Asia. The younger generation that is usually called as ‘digital natives’ comes out with even higher penetration rates. The process of matching the trade-off of efficiency and speed in news-making that started with the arrival of telegraph accordingly culminates with mobile journalism where major events such as earthquakes or riots are reported a few seconds later.<sup>20</sup>

Quinn (2012) divides moJo into two: Simple or basic moJo which involves recording of videos and/or audio on mobile phones or web-streaming them, while full moJo is preparing a professional news package entirely on mobile phone by the use of news packaging software after the mobile content is gathered. As long as the devices and software will be more user-friendly, it will not only be conducive to the digitalization of the skills of the current journalists, it will also promote citizen journalism.

Citizen journalism challenges the gate keeping function of news editors and promotes gate watching whereby citizens sharing their own

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid, p.11.

<sup>20</sup> Stephen Quinn, **MoJo-Mobile journalism in the Asian Region**, Singapore: Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, 2012, p. 55.

content act as a checks and balance mechanism for mainstream media.<sup>21</sup> Citizen journalists have been a prominent news source for various significant historical events such as London attacks, Iran elections and mass protests all over the world. These citizen-generated contents are sometimes broadcasted by major news channels such as BBC and CNN. As long as ANN would not be receptive to such content, it will be unable to challenge the mainstream Atlantic media that report about Asian affairs. The occidentalist position collapses as Asian citizen-generated content appears on the mainstream Atlantic media, but not on ANN. The ASEAN way of journalism which is based on non-confrontation and non-interference paradoxically strengthens the mainstream Atlantic media accordingly. Paralleling the critique of ASEAN as a union of states and not citizens, ANN needs to reframe itself to build a common community of citizen journalists along with newspapers. Another website serving this function successfully is Global Voices ([globalvoicesonline.org/](http://globalvoicesonline.org/)), and it is remarkable to see that ANN wittingly or unwittingly distances itself from such initiatives.

### **Conclusion**

This paper introduced the past and the present of Asian News Network and ASEAN, and proceeded to discuss mobile journalism, online journalism and citizen journalism briefly. The paper identifies the lack of mobile, online and citizen journalism as the main deficiency of ANN, following the lines of ASEAN. However, the picture is not so desperate. By the push of mobile, online and citizen journalism of the major international news channels, ANN is expected to transform into a more citizen-based institution. This will benefit not only the citizens, but the struggle for freedom of press in the region, as well as the future of ASEAN which is hoped to be affiliated with more grassroots institutions.

In future studies, the following topics may be investigated to get a better picture of the regional journalism in Asia:

- 'Envelope journalism' or 'envelopmental journalism' which involves positive news-making as a result of corruption can be explored, if possible.

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<sup>21</sup> Omer Ongun, "Gazeteciligin tarifi deęiřiyor" [cit. 02/02/2014], <http://bianet.org/biamag/ifade-ozgurlugu/144054-gazeteciligin-tarifi-degisiyor>

- A content analysis can be conducted on Channel News Asia, which is a pan-Asian TV channel of Singaporean origin (<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/>).

- News on BBC, CNN, ANN and Global Voices can be compared in terms of the content and news-making style.

- A content analysis can be conducted on the issues of ANN magazine.

- An overview of investigative journalism practices in Asia could be useful.

- An overview of the working conditions of journalists and the market structure and market relations of the media industry in each of the Asian countries would be conducive for a more integrated approach.

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### Özet

*Avrupa Birliği'yle bir ölçüde benzer bir biçimde, 10 Güneydoğu Asya ülkesi (Brunei, Endonezya, Filipinler, Kamboçya, Laos, Malezya, Myanmar, Singapur, Tayland ve Vietnam) on yıllardır, ASEAN (Güneydoğu Asya Ulusları Birliği) adı altında bir siyasal ve ekonomik birlik oluşturma sürecinde. Bu bölgesel bütünleşme süreci, Bangladeş, Butan, Brunei, Çin, Endonezya, Filipinler, Güney Kore, Hindistan, Japonya, Kamboçya, Laos, Malezya, Myanmar, Nepal, Singapur, Sri Lanka, Tayvan, Tayland ve Vietnam gibi ülkelerde çıkan günlük gazetelerden oluşan bir Asyalı-Alman girişimi olan Asya Haber Ağı (ANN) gibi bölgesel medya birlikleriyle birarada gelişiyor. ANN tarafından kullanılan medya, temel olarak, 15 günde bir yayınlanan ve ücretsiz olarak indirilebilen Asianews Dergisi'yle birlikte kapsamlı bir ağ sayfası. Yalnızca tüm ASEAN ülkelerini değil, ASEAN'ın komşularını da kapsayan bölgesel bir birlik olarak ANN, bölgesel işbirliği ve bütünleşme için önemli bir rol oynayabilir. Ancak, yol, düz değil; çünkü katılım gösteren ülkeler, politik iklim, ideoloji, kültür, gelenekler vb. konularda bir hayli farklılar. Sorunun taraflarının taban tabana zıt olduğu sınır ve kara suları anlaşmazlıkları gibi tartışmalı konular, özellikle zorlayıcı. Yine de, ağ, bu heterojen durumda, bu ülkelerin kimilerinde her zaman kolay olmayan ifade özgürlüğünün savunulması çabası için araçsal bir işlev görüyor. Bu makale, ANN'nin haber kapsamı ve yayın politikasını çözümlüyor ve bir uluslararası ve kültürlerarası iletişim örneği olarak Güneydoğu Asya'da bölgesel gazeteciliğin zorluklarını ve olumluluklarını tartışıyor.*