

**Dr. Marwah Daud Ibrahim**  
**Member of Commission VI of the House of Representatives,**  
**Republic of Indonesia**

***The Changing Role of the Media in Asia***

Distinguished guests, fellow speakers, ladies and gentlemen: Good Morning.

It is indeed a great pleasure and honor for me to be here to share my thoughts with you, especially to our 24 selected young leaders from the six countries of Asia. May this presentation assist you in your contemplation and interaction at this important, strategic and inspiring avenue. May this help you draw out Asia's roadmap in forging regional cohesion for global advancement as the theme stated.

Allow me to also express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to Hitachi for inviting me here and more importantly, for initiating and investing in this noble program. Hitachi, you are really "inspiring the next", not only in your corporate motto as I see up there but also in your deed. Congratulations!

The topic of my presentation is "The Changing Role of Media in Asia", which I titled "Technology Continues to Redefine the Media".

Modern technology is truly miraculous. But has it enabled human kind to communicate, to understand, to cooperate or even live together in a safer and more just world? If we are honest, the answer is probably not or at least not yet.

True, technology has given us the potential to communicate with other people regardless of their race, religion, socio-economic, and geo-political background. But our ability to respond adequately to the potential and challenges of new forms of communication has simply not kept pace with the social changes now taking place within a shrinking global village.

Most, if not all, of the world population is now linked by the Internet, the Short Message Services (SMS) and Global Positioning System (GPS) that brings instant accessibility. Other advances in information technology enable sounds and images to be seen and heard as far as the deep blue sea and space. However, changes of the same magnitude have also taken place within the global printing, telephone, film, television, computer, satellite and Internet industries, bringing challenges for the world's media.

Indonesia is no exception. Modern newsgathering techniques have allowed and even condoned every shred of human drama to be popularized. Whether it is an earthquake in Turkey, a train crash, a victorious World Cup match, the tag on the toe of a mutilated corpse, the face of a tearful Dr Mahathir or a landslide in West Java, they are all there for us to see with or without their permission.

Once upon a time, many photos of this world would have violated press council regulations in many countries. During the recent war in Afghanistan, for example, images of fire and bombing were transmitted via cellular phone to the rest of the world. Supported by the latest technology, the media has unwittingly intruded into the dignity of man or women kind.

In Indonesia, acceptance of the new forms of communication has occurred almost imperceptibly. While the older generation can recall life without any television at all, their children certainly remember the advent of private television.

In the case of an even younger generation, the launch of the Palapa Satellite, also saw the birth of MTV in this country. Satellite technology has proved a powerful influence. As recently as the mid-1990's, most well off families had access to satellite television via large dish parabolas. But by the end of the 20th century, those same parabolas soon become obsolete with the introduction of even more sophisticated satellite and receiving equipment.

The satellites and their steadily expanding terrestrial footprints brought instant access to any part of the world and Indonesian newsrooms found themselves under increasing pressure to provide comparable product.

Anyone who doubts the impact of these technology-driven changes only has to look at the way the news was reported until 1998, the end of the New Order Regimes. Both *SCTV* and *Metro TV*, 2 of 9 TV stations right now in Indonesia, owe much of their popularity to the CNN-style reporting of current affairs in the post-Soeharto period. Internet news portal like *detik.com* is another example. The rise of homegrown soap operas or *sinetron* and the revival of Indonesian film industry are also due in part to technological change and an altered government agenda.

Distinguished guests, fellow speakers and ladies and gentlemen: Change indeed brings challenges. The new media's ability to metamorphose life and societal norms were surely unthinkable even 10 years ago. Although the effects and consequences of this shift may not be known for generations, they will undoubtedly be profound, especially in a traditional culture like Indonesia's. Or will our media evolve like the major fast food franchises and develop their own distinctive "menus"?

Nevertheless, certain trends are already clear. If we are to retain our identity, rather than bow to the global fashion currently on offer, we should be re-thinking, or re-defining the role of our media well ahead of time.

At heart of the print media revolution, for example, is the need to compete with the electronic media, including the Internet, and its bite-sized chunks of news that often tantalize but do not reveal. Unlike the popular print media of the past, the modern fashion focuses on brevity.

It is not uncommon for people to complain about the lack of "real news" or the fact that articles of significant social worth are easily put aside in favor of unsubstantiated gossip or government propaganda. The immediacy of the electronic media has been both

praised and reviled. In some cases, it also comes packaged in a style that some viewers consider both subjective and offensive.

Take *CNN's* coverage of the Gulf War for example. While scud missiles blazed nightly trails across screens like Leonid meteor showers, talking heads discussed the “game play” in much the same way as the NBL match of the day.

By the time the September 11 World Trade Centre disaster occurred, current affairs reporting had to evolved one step further. Breathless journalists reporting “live from Ground Zero” had perhaps watched too many reruns of *Godzilla*, in which it will be recalled frightened New Yorkers fled from the giant dinosaurs whose tail flayed and toppled most of the Manhattan skyline. The WTC was left standing but not this time. But this time they were accompanied by a welter of B-grade slogans generated by the PR and advertising industry on behalf of President Bush. The end result? A news package complete with commercials and trailers providing the world's politicians with a thousand opportunities to push their own agendas while at the same time engendering much fear and loathing among many people of the world.

Is the Indonesia media any different? Like many other South East Asian countries, the pressures on journalists and editors to produce “politically correct” stories are still there, despite the wide-ranging freedom given in the post-New Order period. Despite the criticisms heaped on Indonesia, our media enjoys considerably more freedom than any other nations in the region.

Stories are written here that would never see the light of day in either Singapore or Malaysia. However, it is also true that some of our public figures are unused to being challenged in the public arena and now claim the media has too much freedom! But the pen has always been mightier than a sword. It can topple presidents (three in the case of Indonesia), just as easily as it can promote positive change in the community.

National media has multiplied over the last four years to include additional television, radio stations, newspapers, magazines and news portals. At the same time, several

historic newspapers have also closed - the result of a fiercely competitive industry. New magazine entrants include local editions of popular international publications published under franchise arrangement.

Are we approaching a turning point where both globalization and technology will overtake our aspiration for an independent media? Indeed, that is one of the reasons why we must communicate the need for the change in the role of media in Asia and where this is possible in the context of the world.

The growth in pornography, pornographic films and Internet sites, for example, is filled with cause for concern especially in Asia. Internet links that transfer children to pornographic sites are common. Female office staffs complain about their porn-happy male colleagues, who in other countries would find themselves charged with sexual harassment. But most of all, the shift in our cultural values is readily apparent when defendants accused of rape claims, as they often do, that they were influenced to do so after viewing pornography.

What hope do anti-drugs crusaders or those who seek to prevent violence against women and children have when the media continuously report the racy details of the lives of celebrity drug addicts and wife bashers? Surely, there are better ways to report these events. And if the national media is to avoid the obvious - government intervention- it will need to redefine itself and those operating in it, including Internet Service Providers.

So what we should be doing is to focus on a more positive and productive life experience, minus the “specially bred for television” super race of brand-happy hedonists. Sure the media depends on advertising, but there are also times when advertising can and does act *pro bono* for the public good. And in any case, is it healthy to cultivate consumerism when many of our brothers and sisters live in abject poverty as just mentioned by our previous speaker? Other suggestions include promoting honesty and work ethics. Creating more edutainment programs rather than entertainment and

moving away from an emphasis on urban elite to encompass other regions. Indonesia is a large country and most of the Asian countries are. Most of all, we need to work away from defining our identity in terms of bad news, be it crime or sex or violence, and move toward a more positive image. Our media needs to balance tragedy with optimism, through the presentation of good, fair and balance news.

This is a challenge I offer to all those participating in this year's Hitachi Young Leaders Initiative - the journalists, media producers, media owners and media consumers of the future.

May God Bless You. Thank you very much.