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News of the people, by the people, for the people

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CHINA, which is set to join the World Trade Organisation (WTO) after 14 long years of negotiations, has opened up and is reaching out to the outside world in more ways than one. On September 25 this year, China Central Television (CCTV) launched its all-English channel - CCTV 9 - to broadcast to the world.

The new channel is on air 24 hours a day with newscasts every hour on the hour. These include World Wide Watch, News Asia and Financial Report. Nothing new, one might add, as there are numerous other channels offering 24-hour news and reports.

But CCTV, with its CCTV 9, aims to present China's views to the world which it believes are not adequately or correctly presented. It has employed native English speakers to help with the programmes and editing. One of them, from a Western country, was quoted as saying that a lot of people back home do not understand China. How could they? When they do not know the real China or its people, their culture and their beliefs from what they see and hear.

Now China is telling its own story to the world in its own words and from its own perspective, mindful of its history, culture and traditions. This picture is vastly different from the one painted of China by the Western news agencies, television and radio stations. Now there is an alternative - local Chinese news presented by the people, of the people, for the world's peoples.

The move by China is understandable as like many developing countries, Malaysia included, it does not get fair coverage of developments in the country. Malaysians abroad, for example, reading foreign reports and listening and watching news would not be able to identify or recognise their own country. The picture painted is vastly different.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told British captains of industry that "If you believe what you read in the press, you are likely to make wrong decisions". Because of biased and inaccurate reporting, he has stressed the need for developing countries to work together in presenting their own news, in their own words and from their own perspectives.

A Tanzanian journalist, Muskawala, said that if there are no reports from Reuters, AFP or AP then there is "a news blackout. There is no news". An extreme situation, perhaps, but it illustrates the overdependence of many developing countries on Western and developed countries' news agencies and sources of news.

Currently, news on Africa by Asians is sourced from agencies of the developed countries; similarly, African countries hear about Malaysia and Asia from Western news agencies and television stations based in the developed countries. The international media is dominated by the Western nations and media barons in developed countries.

It is time for developing countries to do something about it. They must get their side of the story out there in their own words and written by their own people.

Leaders meeting in Maputo, Mozambique, for the Southern African International Dialogue (SAID 2000) stressed the need for Asian and African countries to work on exchanging news directly instead of depending on third countries and sources.

For a start, 10 Asian news organisations have joined up to form the Asia

News Network (ANN). It is a "group of leading Asian newspapers working towards improving coverage of Asian affairs". They exchange news and features written by their own journalists and these are made available on the Internet for use by the participating organisations.

Leaders meeting in Maputo agreed that this formula could and should be extended to Africa. A hub in each region could be created to enable the exchange of news from the two continents, written by local experts in their own words and with an intimate understanding of the local conditions and sensitivities.

It will be an alternative to the reports of wire agencies such as Reuters and AFP, which nevertheless employ locals but the editorial policy is not decided by the locals. Their stories still have a "foreign" or Western bias. And this has been a constant and repeated complaint of many in developing and Third World countries.

Instead of just sitting back and throwing hands up in the air, it is time developing countries do something about it.

According to Professor Tom DeGregori, developing countries have the opportunity to get their own story told in their own words with IT (information technology) and especially the Internet. While there are real concerns of the digital divide, IT and the Internet offer an avenue and a means to reach more people which otherwise would not be possible.

In many developing countries, circulation of newspapers is limited. Uganda's President Museveni told participants of SAID 2000 in Maputo that in his country with a population of 22 million, there were some 500,000 television sets while newspaper circulation was in the region of 40,000. He said currently the most effective medium which reaches a wider audience and remains a powerful tool is the radio and remains so even in the digital, WAP and i-mode technological era.

But whatever the medium used to disseminate news and information - newspapers, magazines, television, radio or the Internet - content is important. It is the message and how it is packaged that is essential.

China has set out on its own. But such a move requires massive investments and funds which individually developing countries do not have. But with the Internet and the pooling of resources in a smart way, it can be done. ANN is leading the way and it should be emulated, expanded and further strengthened with links to Africa and other South and developing countries.

However, for the effort to work, to be useful, to be effective and to achieve the goals set out, it requires commitment on the part of participating organisations. It calls for leadership. Half-hearted efforts and lip service will not work.

Organisations such as Third World Network have been in existence for sometime and offer analysis on development issues and trade negotiations from a Third World perspective. The South Magazine has been relaunched and focuses on Third World issues from a Third World perspective.

But few organisations use their pieces, preferring to opt for copies generated by the international news agencies.

It is also important for media practitioners in developing countries themselves to shed the "colonial mentality" and view news and stories written by citizens of developing countries as worthwhile, instead of looking only to Western wire copy for news and developments in their own countries and in other developing countries.