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Empowering readers of foreign media

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IT WAS a bold attempt by the South this week to try and circumvent the entrenched Western media by launching an alternative news network in Kampala.

While the Smart News Network International is not intended to damage the media giants, the collective resolve of the South should prod casual readers to analyse the Western media a little. After all, we get startled all the time with frightful political upheavals, impending collapse of governments and devastating floods. Are they our tormentors, idealistic, driven or are they simply being bad news traders?

It is time we develop some empowerment and squeeze a measure of accountability out of them.

Uppermost, observe the ritualistic sad ending to articles, one that provides a perfect but melancholic finale to the panic-inducing build-up, and over-the-top headlines. The writers happily see these as (distressingly) beautiful prose.

No, there's no malice intended on their part. There shouldn't be.

And they treat everyone equally, though the rich countries absorb the blows better.

Culturally, the writers share the same mould as policymakers in the West. Troubles spawn when they spew comments, views and liberally proffer judgements on and to people, governments from another part of the world. It reeks of condescension at times. Is this unintentional too?

Here's an example picked at random purely for academic reasons.

In an editorial, Asian Wall Street Journal (February 13 2000) said: "... tensions between Malays and Chinese have troubled Malaysia since its independence 44 years ago..." It had a thunderbolt headline: "Malaysia's Racial Divide - Delicate power-sharing arrangements are breaking down and a despairing wrap-up - "There doesn't seem to be any prospect of a quick resolution of the recent tension, at least until Mr Mahathir retires in a few years."

You must have noticed the Western media's penchant for discord and clashes. Said a Financial Times journalist the other day: "It is a fabled paradox that for journalists, bad news is good news; companies doing well are difficult to turn into thrilling stories". Since the Western media thrives on conflicts and crises, and is not about to let conflicts dissipate, their ability to offer solutions and views that are not jaundiced, is questionable.

Browse the contents of the magazines that have become a must read, and you see alarmist tendencies. Take this run down for an edition of the Far Eastern Economic Review - NO WAR TODAY, But China's easing up on Taiwan doesn't mean the risk of confrontation has passed; MALAYSIA: A minister's resignation raises doubts about the Government's stability (in reference to the MCA president who remains in Cabinet); THAILAND: Tension with Burma reaches danger level as drugs flood across border; PAKISTAN: As Musharraf caves in to pressure, fears rise that he will resort to martial law.

It is probably wrong to drape all foreign media in one indignant phrase. We have to admit we grudgingly keep going back for more, never growing tired of them, hence, they must have conjured up the right formula. How did they achieve this? They like their job immensely, so spectacular effort is injected into their work. They carry out thorough research, have an eye for the telling, wonderful details, humanise their stories, write

dramatic phrases and produce majestic pictures.

They tend to see things in a formatted way, however. Praise is often lavished on the "reformers" and "reforms". Boris Yeltsin used to be a leading reformer. Corporate figures promising to reduce staff and invite foreign partners are reformers. Politicians who "engage" the foreign media show a strong reforming zeal. This is oversimplification of complex matters.

Those reporting on another country are possibly influenced by the cynicism embedded in the consciousness of the respective local media. Example: When Bangkok's The Nation butchered the Thaksin Shinawatra's Cabinet line-up at its February announcement, the foreign media too brandished the machete.

Perhaps speed does compromise accuracy or colour the slant since news is sent out at blinding speeds. Perhaps, we have a problem when the writers turn highbrowed and try broad sweeping analyses like the one suggesting that India "is growing out of demagoguery". Perhaps it is alright for the Western newspapers to lampoon their own leaders. Perhaps the Western media is exercising their democratic right as they see it, as it is our right not to unquestionably and uncritically gobble everything they dish out.

It is wrong, however, to expect the media in the rest of the world to be as virulent. In Kampala this week, President Daniel Arap Moi of Kenya made this point: black journalists should not unfairly punish their continent in order to win professional awards. He said Western journalists never undermine their respective countries. Moi's assessment was made by Western journalists themselves in the past.

Most of them are nationalists. They will be happy to report on things that go wrong in another country and lace it with spice but will exercise restraint to do the same back home. After all, no reporter would describe his country as "war-torn" or "lawless". Or call his president a despot.

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