

Tech talk: freedom from the press
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It's pretty hard to imagine a Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras parade, be it from Sydney, Rio or New Orleans, being telecast live across South-east Asian television. I mean, "Dykes on Bikes," the convoy of Harley-Davidson-mounted lesbians that traditionally open the Sydney pageant would require too much explanation for the blissful burghers of tightly controlled countries like Singapore and Malaysia. ("Does it have something to do with Holland?")

And how would the "Family Values" theme of this year's parade, which was held last Saturday night, square with the same message emanating from Messrs. Lee and Mahathir? No, the theme from Sydney wasn't expressed in irony -- in all their Carmen Miranda-like glory were gays and lesbians, their parents, grandparents and, yes, their children, happily celebrating their belief that a gay family was no less a family as one might find in places like, well, like heartland Singapore.

You might scoff that Mardi Gras and gay life is just what wacky Australians and gays do. Not so. If Malaysians had tuned in, they would've seen several of their countrymen (or was it women?) mincing down the parade route and protesting the imprisonment of opposition figure Anwar Ibrahim on sodomy charges. You won't see that on the six o'clock news in KL.

Indeed, there would've been a strong case for advertising the parade across Asia; there were drag queens, bears, dykes and gays represented from Thailand, Japan, Hong Kong and Singapore. It was a celebration of tolerance and openness - - broadcast on national television in Australia as well as on the Net -- and in a country that Malaysia vetoed from attending an anti-racism conference in Iran last week.

I know all this because I spent three hours watching the Mardi Gras parade wind its way down Sydney's trendy Oxford Street. No, I didn't fly down for an expensive weekend in Australia; I watched it from the comfort of my office chair in Singapore, streamed to my computer live via the Internet. Thanks to my broadband connection and a Windows Media Player, I kicked back in my chair and enjoyed the parade. I'm not sure Premier Goh Chok Tong would've approved, but he's helped provide the infrastructure to allow it to happen.

As reliable broadband connections spread across the region, the Internet is starting to get interesting for media-starved info-junkies like me. And I'm not just talking print sites like TIME or other big brand-named foreign media. No longer do I have sit through the government propaganda spouted by the state broadcaster du jour.

The Internet is changing my life; though the fact is it's really only adapting what I have done for years. On any given morning, I get out of bed, turn the radio on, check my e-mails and read the newspapers, and eat breakfast and watch the TV news. Four of those six functions are done online.

And this is where the Internet is throwing up big challenges for regional governments. One reason why much of Asia's local press is so lame is because authorities like it that way. For them the message is not about freedom of the press but from freedom from the press. But what is the control apparatus going to do? Block CNBC and NPR just like they do Playboy.com? I don't think so, not when countries like Singapore openly court operations like CNBC to set up shop in the Wired Island.

True, you are not going to see anything too challenging on CNBC because they play the local game, just like Channel NewsAsia and its local contemporaries. But as the Net and better technologies open up so many more credible news sources -- and even entertaining alternatives like the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras -- streamed straight to your box, why would you bother if you didn't have to?

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