

ASIA INSIGHT

MD **Debra Soon** is responsible for the entire business operations of Singapore-based **Channel NewsAsia**, part of MediaCorp Pte Ltd. The channel, seen in 25 territories across Asia, is aiming for a global presence and is clearly passionate about telling the world Asia's story. What were CNA's major milestones since launch in 1999?

In the aftermath of what was then called the Asian financial crisis we created a channel that would represent what was really happening in Asia. Today you take it for granted that you have France 24, CCTV, Al Jazeera but in 1999 there was really only CNN and BBC.

We thought that we needed to give a more nuanced view of what was going on. The first milestone was going up on satellite in 2000, we were carried in only five or six countries then with a 12m viewership.

In 2004 we secured landing rights in China which was a big step, and the decision to open 10 overseas news bureaux was another milestone – a big learning curve for us as a business, as a channel.

Having that presence in South East Asia still gives us the edge today because we understand South East Asia and can present the region with more insight than some of the other international broadcasters.

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What are your editorial priorities?

We are focused on Asia but it is a two-way process. We'd like to provide Asian perspectives and insight for the rest of the world, but it is also about bridging and telling Asia what is going on in the world. We are on satellites which span Asia up to the Middle East and Australia, we also have a website which reaches out to everybody round the world. Editorially that means you have to be really on top of things in Asia, that's what drives the content.

We have a plethora of news sources today and instant information about anything. I think our job is to find information which is relevant to our audiences, wherever they are, whenever they need it. We are not saying anymore 'We are the broadcaster, this is the news'. We need to help people make sense of the world and what's going on around them, add different perspectives and insights which they might not be able to find if they just cull information from the internet.

How do you use online?

The website can reach the entire world, the on-air product currently doesn't. So the website needs to have its own strong business case, it complements the on-air but it also has its own presence. The aim is for this to be the best website about Asian news for everybody and this year we are embarking on a big revamp of the website.

Who are your audiences?

We have one international feed. Realistically, international news channels feed a higher end, more educated, more elite viewer base. I think that applies all around the world. We want to target opinion formers, influential people who can make things happen.

Which markets are key to you?

We are currently on Asiasat 3S which means our footprint is in 25 territories across the Asia Pacific region with over 30m households and hotel rooms. Our Pan Asia Cross Media Survey which is run by Synovate shows that in Asia we

are growing steadily in terms of distribution.

We are currently third after CNN and BBC in seven markets – Singapore, Manila, Bangkok, Jakarta, Hong Kong, India and Taipei. Currently we are limited in our distribution because we are not on satellites in the Middle East. That's what I would like to do if the plan comes through, and hopefully as technology advances we can find a cheaper and more accessible way to get into the US and to Europe.

Do you have data on the use of your mobile apps?

We have some data on who uses us online, and usage of apps we can measure by the number of downloads. We have existing apps for the iPhone and the BlackBerry, our new app will be ready in April. Our viewers have at least one if not two devices in their pocket, so not getting onto the devices is not an option today. Many of us are very commercially minded in Singapore so we don't have a problem with getting our content on mobile.

People today communicate with each other with their apps and via Facebook, especially in the region. We have now started using Facebook more for our on-air product, it helps to feed the online product and vice-versa. It's really a priority for us to be 360 degrees with our products. I am currently looking at how we organize workflow in the TV newsroom so that we can be much more 360 in the way we work.

How are you funded?

We are a commercially operated news channel. We have several sources of funding, including revenue generated from advertising and sponsorship. There are some public service broadcasting funds we can use for some of our content.

Who are your main competitors?

Broadcasters around the world face competition from everything. In terms of news channels in the region, our main competitors are CNN and BBC, I also look at CNBC



▲ Clockwise from above
Documentary filming in Nepal; Flagship programme Primetime Asia; CNA presenter Suzanne Jung reporting

as a possible competitor. If you are talking about eyeballs or in terms of revenue, then I include other companies in the domestic market in Singapore. Because my revenue base now still is very much Singapore based, the regional market is the one that I am going after right now.

How is the media landscape changing in your region?

One major thing that's happening is that there are more countries setting up international news channels in the region. China is an example, a giant in terms of funding capabilities who has the money to grow their product and broadcast not only throughout Asia but in the world, and there are other players also. But putting up a credible news channel is not easy to do, it really requires a lot of resources and I don't think that many other countries in South East Asia are rushing to do it.

People in Asia are very media-savvy, with prolific use of social media and multiple devices to get their news and entertainment. So as you go more and more into the future, you have to look at your audience first, where they consume content, how they consume content, what they want to see. If I produce a programme today I have to look at the online platform, the mobile platform, the on-air platform – how does this content work on different platforms, how can I customise the base product.



It's challenging but also exciting because change happens very quickly. You need to find your consumer, and satisfy him as a viewer and consumer.

What's on your wish list?

Our plan is to be global. We are a regional channel right now with global ambitions – there is a timeline, there is a plan. We have to make it commercial, we might get some help here and there in terms of PSB but ultimately we have to stand on our own two feet.

The move into our new building is really going to be a game-changer for us. At present our infrastructure cannot support what we need to do as a 24-hour operation. The move will fundamentally affect the way we operate and make everything much easier and seamless – workflows, producing content in a 360 manner. Public engagement is going to be a big part of it so that people can come and watch what we do, can engage and feel as passionate as we do about our product and our content. The way I envisage it, we will be producing content by genres – business content, sport content, local news, international news – and then the teams all sit together and produce the content for any platform. Who knows what a platform will be in five years? Is it just radio, TV, mobile, online and print? There could be other things.

Debra Soon, thank you.

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