

OneOnOne



# Debbie Stothard on Identity, Citizenship and Media

Isis International-Manila

by Raijeli Nicole

*Debbie Stothard, coordinator of Southeast Asia-based Altsean Burma – the Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma, talks about how media hinders as well as facilitates participation of citizens in democracy. As she put it, “media can be quite ambiguous...”*

*Raijeli Nicole [RN]: As an activist living outside Burma, what does citizenship really mean and what does it mean to push for democracy within Burma itself?*

**Debbie Stothard [DS]:** Well, there is a very narrow view of citizenship, which consists essentially in what your legal entitlements are, e.g., do you have a passport? Do you have an identity card? That's the narrowest definition of citizenship – the official one. It connotes control and being governed by the state.

For example, I'm a Malaysian based in Thailand working on the topic of Burma and ASEAN. Besides growing up in Malaysia and living my adult life there, I lived for 10 years in Australia and 10 years in Thailand. So I see citizenship in terms of the mobility one can exercise.

As a citizen of the region, as a citizen of the world, I should be able to assume that my rights would be protected and acknowledged. Even indigenous peoples, not just in Philippines and ASEAN but in other countries in the world, have these rights. Yet, their experience is that they are not actually considered citizens of their own country in the strictest sense. In terms of owning an identity card, in Thailand, for example, there are significant numbers of indigenous people who still have not been able to get their citizenship documents!

Citizenship is also linked to access – to basic services, to health, to education, and to mobility from one town to the next. That is the paradox – that people who had been there long enough, who by virtue of their location and of what they are doing at the time should feel that they are reasonably connected to the community they are in, that they should not feel like outsiders.

*RN: In terms of looking at the articulation of one's sense of belonging, of being able to say "this is my community," let's talk about the ways in which media can create that space of belonging.*

**DS:** Sometimes I view the media as being ambiguous. Being a former journalist myself and currently doing a lot of media work, I think the media have a way – a significant way – of influencing people and their idea of citizenship.

To qualify what I said about citizenship, it does not mean that because I find myself working and living in a mainly indigenous community that somehow my identity changes. We're talking in terms of one's relationship with the community not in terms of being able to swap identities. I think it depends on how narrow or how broad the thinking in the individual media institution is. Even within media structures, things depend on the personal values of people who have a say over editorial content. I think it's important to see where you find progressive media. Not just progressive media in terms of newsletters or magazines or websites, but also in terms of progressive individuals within mainstream media. I think what has really been useful is saying how cultural products like film, music, books, or magazines, promote what kind of values. It's fair to say that we are all to some extent influenced by American culture, which actually also draws on some cultures from Latin America, Africa, and Asia. So it's quite cyclical, this whole melting pot of cultural values.

Even as people seek to assert individual identities or the identities of particular subcultures into the broader spectrum, they also resonate with us. I think what



*Debbie Stothard talks about identity, citizenship and media with Isis executive director Rajjeli Nicole.*

we are trying to arrive at is a way in which we can relate to each other in the same language. I'm not speaking strictly in terms of whether it's English or French or Chinese, but in terms of concepts, in terms of perspectives. So I think that fundamental communication is so important. That's why it's actually quite encouraging to see how world culture is evolving and becoming more inclusive, even as the structures that perpetuate it and broadcast it become more exclusive.

***RN:** Exclusive, yes – given the way media, like any other sector, are subjected to being privatised and increasingly owned by a few companies, the space for addressing content that ordinary people can relate to becomes more difficult. So, how do we address this?*

**DS:** Let's go on a mainstream media offensive!

***RN:** Yes, but how practical is that?*

**DS:** It has happened. That is why I think media can be quite ambiguous. MTV for example has been criticised for being highly commercialised, for promoting corporate interest and also broadcasting cultural material that's actually anti-women, which objectify women. Yet, it is also the station that has been promoting human rights and similar messages.

So we look at some of the editorials – let's say the Wall Street Journal – there had been a lot of media opinions or editorials there in the past year and a half that have strongly promoted human rights and democracy in Burma. Sometimes the issue is not so much about selling out on the principles we work for, but of trying to translate these principles into a language that resonates

with the audience, that resonates with the editorial powers within that particular media. So we have this very strange situation of mainstream TV giving space to progressive ideas.

If you watch the BBC, World Service TV and CNN, for example, they have this feature called "Have Your Say." You can actually ring into a toll free number and say what you want to say about the current topic and even email your view. If it's topical, brief, concise, and conveys a very strong message – it gets used! Even at a time when some national papers will not carry that type of commentary in the letters to the editor section, you have all these alternative outlets, which are actually very mainstream and reach a far broader audience.

***RN:** But wouldn't you say that that's the way in which the globalisation project confines us to specific spaces?*

**DS:** Yes it is. One can be justified in feeling cynical about these things. But these media also provide opportunities to push a certain perspective. Inevitably if there's enough expression of a point of view, and it reaches a critical point, there's a tipping point where media actually change their position! Look at CNN. It has modified its position on the Iraq war. At one stage, there was a conscious decision that they have to go with the market. Their market thinks this way, but their audience didn't think that way, their paying audience thought another way. By accident and spontaneously, the shift is the result of a very committed and concerted advocacy.

It is important to have a certain degree of healthy cynicism but also to be very clear about what our principles and

motives are. It's a good thing to actually use mainstream media – to use the tools of corporate globalisation to globalise some of our values to be able to reach people who otherwise would not be reached.

**RN:** *I want to go back to your one-worder on regionalism, which is “fraught.” Please explain that. What do you think of regionalism and the strategies of addressing it?*

**DS:** I think a lot of people feel worried about regionalism simply because they see it as another extension of globalisation. Globalisation of capital, government and corporations working more closely on a regional basis, to oppress people and suppress rights and freedoms.

I think back to when I started working on Burma and on ASEAN. When we formed an Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma 10 years ago, I had

There are groups, people and movements in ASEAN who do not support human rights violations in Burma.” That’s why we decided to use the name Alternative ASEAN Network on Burma, even though we are not an officially accredited organisation to ASEAN. I think that is very important because when you target a regional bloc like ASEAN, you make them accountable for the violations of their individual members. So rather than cooperating to suppress rights in one country, they have to be accountable for that collusion, and even if they haven’t colluded, they have to be held accountable as a bloc for the actions of one member because they derive benefits from the members and they have to divide the responsibilities. That’s why it is interesting to see the growth of regional awareness among human rights activists and civil societies.

It is sometimes a bit exhausting because we have been working on other international fora on the UN [United Nations] level, on the broader regional level, and on the Asia-Pacific level. Sometimes it’s a case of, “Okay, there’s an opportunity here.” Not all groups can participate in that opportunity. But we also have an inherent responsibility to make sure we are effective, on behalf of organisations who don’t have the resources to do so. And hopefully, open some channel of communication and cooperation that would allow that level of presentation. But the thing is this: there are 600 meetings with the ASEAN each year. Some are very diverse and on disparate topics and interest groups. It is true that very often the political leadership is not really in touch or closely coordinated with the decision-making bodies and the bureaucracy. Sometimes that little disjuncture created actually

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come from an experience where ASEAN governments had actually cooperated with each other to suppress people’s rights in the face of the international activism. Information had been shared by intelligence agencies in different ASEAN countries to cause more problems and more human rights violations. Not many human rights groups have actually targeted ASEAN as a bloc. Burma’s impending membership to ASEAN provided an opportunity for us to say “Hey, ASEAN.



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leaves a lot of openings; there is no such thing as a monolithic organisation.

Organisations are only as strong as their people. Even a bureaucracy is made up of people. People don't like to be disliked. People don't like to be reviled even when they are in some of the worst military regimes. Sometimes that provides an opportunity to get intelligence. To have an understanding of their inner world, how things operate, the real dynamics of power within an organisation and how do you actually use that.

*RN: Looking at media, citizenship, and democracy – can you give the last word on the inter-linkages among the three?*

**DS:** Citizenship, democracy, and media. Everything looks complicated, but apparently it takes several hundred muscles just to get out of bed in the morning! Life is fraught with complications. I think the moment we start thinking of it as an issue of will, an issue of energy and commitment, we simply bring it back down to the basics. We are so used to WiFi now. We are so used to texting, to all these very complicated machinery and technology. The idea is not to think too closely about how complicated the technology is, but how to use it to demystify and develop

some confidence within ourselves. It is not impossible. What was impossible yesterday is possible today and what is impossible today is possible tomorrow. It's just feeling enough optimism and energy, being alert enough to be able to take advantage of opportunities when they happen. These opportunities are never isolated. If you miss one there's going to be another. It's like catching a bus.

We talk about the media, about democracy, about human rights. You just think, "Well, what do I want to do?" It's nice visualising the outcomes. It's sometimes just as powerful thinking about how you are going to do it. To inspire yourself and use it to inspire other people. Sometimes that's the hardest part. I worked for seven years on the UN Human Rights Commission (They used to call it the Unhuman Rights Commission). I had the luxury of helping train women who could replace me so that I can go and do other things. Sometimes we have to really think about how we build our own obsolescence, not just in terms of supporting the next round of people to succeed us, but being able to be released from this sort of work, to do something more interesting or something different just to refresh us. ■

*When asked for a one-word descriptor for regionalism, media, democracy and citizenship, Debbie Stothard came up with the following: she described regionalism as "fraught," media as "ambiguous," democracy as "desired," and citizenship as "paradox."*