

Speech by Matthew Saltmarsh, freelance journalist, to the Asia-Europe Consultative Seminar with Civil Society, Brussels, 18 November 2003.

Thanks to the Commission, Tom Roe and the organizers for giving us a chance to share the platform and speak to so many distinguished representatives of civil society from the two regions. It's not often that we journalists are allowed to sit on these panels – and after our presentations today you might better understand why that's the case.

To introduce myself, I am British born but have spent nine years living and working in East Asia and have written for a number of newspapers and news agencies on EU and Asian affairs, including the Singapore Straits Times, the SCMP and the Japan Times.

What I hope to do in this short presentation is to raise some of the issues surrounding why EU-Asian relations are not better covered by the media. And here I feel there are some general issues but also factors specific to each region.

In Asia, it is of course quite hard to understand what is going on in the EU when looked at in the context of EU institutions and enlargement. The **issues tend to be quite technical** and hard to digest in 600-1000 words. For example I was asked to write articles about the draft EU constitution and the IGC for an Asian audience. My editor wanted 600 words. I tried and tried and the minimum I could offer was 1200 words. But the point is these are technical issues – QMV, rotating presidencies, complex fiscal rules, euro opt outs/Maastricht and so on. They are often hard enough for many experts to understand. Asian governments, like many others around the world, still seem a bit perplexed about power sharing arrangements and that will probably continue well after the IGC is implemented.

As a result **EU affairs** -- even major stories like enlargement -- will often be **relegated or glossed over in Asia** at the expense of national stories like the UK royal family, French cultural issues, the quirkiness of Italy's political system and so on. For Japan, China and Korea, relations with Europe and the EU are still seen through a rather bilateral prism, I suspect, and that means there is very little sense of a relationship with Brussels. For example the Japanese love to know how they are perceived as a nation-state by the British, French, Germans, but not by Europeans. The one recent exception was of course the Iraq war. And the reason Asia was so interested was precisely because it highlighted divisions and the national nature of much of EU policymaking rather than being a 'good news' Brussels story.

From the other side, **Asian integration doesn't excite editors** here because it is so slow and patchy. Usually there really is very little new to say about it and it's almost impossible to compare with what has happened in the EU.

A specific problem for Asia-based reporters -- which runs far deeper than the narrow issue of EU-Asian coverage -- is that the **flow of information is so tightly controlled**. When I moved from Asia to Brussels in 2000 I was struck by the access that I was afforded to policy-makers. Often in Asia even obtaining the blandest information like schedules for meetings and draft agendas is really problematic. That makes it very hard to get a good sense of what's going on, or to add colour.

I've also heard criticism from a number of Asian officials of the fact that EU journalists are obsessed by the issue of **human rights** at the expense of other issues. And it's true that the press coverage of a number of the recent summits -- not least the last two EU-Asian foreign affairs ministers' meetings -- have been dominated by the issue of human rights concerns among Europeans about Asia, the most topical now is Myanmar. The pressure for this is certainly not coming from EU officials it is genuinely coming from the journalists -- many of whom feel that the EU is increasingly relegating the issue of human rights below economic and trade concerns -- and that is a genuine concern for many of our readers.

This brings us on to the interesting issue of **China**. The EU-China summit is becoming an increasingly high profile event (certainly compared to the EU-Japan and EU-India summits) perhaps now only lagging the EU-US summits in column inches. Witness the summit in Beijing last month. The issues that dominate now are economic (WTO, exchange rates, technological cooperation). That's important of course. But again there is a particular sense among many journalists that human rights abuses in China have been downgraded by EU officials in their rush to secure a foothold in the lucrative Chinese market.

An overarching problem for both sides in '**selling the message**' to the media is that we need something **tangible and 'newsworthy'** -- dare I say it interesting -- to hinge our stories on. And even the most cynical observers know bad news sells better than good news. So let's be positive and say on one level, the fact that the ASEM and other EU-Asia dialogue meetings don't attract great coverage means the relationship is incrementally improving and developing and that's a good news story. But I would also caution that the lack of real progress at the meetings is another reason why there is a paucity of coverage. We have a number of mutually important issues (immigration, drugs, terrorism, financial regulation) and all these meetings -- the ASEM the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), bilateral troika meetings with China, India, Japan and (soon) Korea, Ministerial dialogue with ASEAN (foreign and economic), and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). That's a lot of meetings and if we look back there haven't really been that many major stories or political or economic developments to come out of these. And that's the bottom line. The relationship is developing slowly.

Now I want to turn to a few issues that might bring the relationship into focus for the media:

**ASEAN** could beef up its presence in the EU. There is no real ASEAN representative in EU . There is a Brussels Committee but it is not visible and is chaired by the Lao ambassador. So that begs the question how much does ASEAN want to sell the South East Asia integration story to Europeans? I don't see any real motivation there.

Perhaps we need to beef up the **ASEM business forum** (a body which has met seven times and produced rather bland statements). The ABEF website has been taken over by a Danish digital music company The ASEAN-EU business network is also low key and only picks up when there is a summit.

**Sell the story.** If you really want to sell improving EU-Asia relations as a good story then cultivate journalists (you don't have to give us a brown paper bag full of cash) just give us good interviews and access, and here I look more to the Asians than the Europeans, use PR, and encourage websites such as the ASEM research platform at the University of Leiden, which seems to be about the best source of information out there for us.

**Keep helping journalists.** In the last few years there has been quite a lot of downsizing and consolidation in the European media (at least the English language side). In the UK for example coverage of Asia in the last few years has been relegated even below that of Zimbabwe – a small former colony in southern Africa. Scarce resources are hence not going to Asia and there is a reliance on often bland and superficial news agency coverage. Most UK newspapers retain maybe three staff journalists in East Asia, one in Beijing and Singapore and/or Tokyo.

It's interesting that in particular in recent years the **Japan** story has become far less appealing to European editors. There's only so much that readers wanted to hear about the recession in Japan. On the other hand, I also feel that with Japan's economy now apparently on the mend and its automakers ready to re-conquer global markets, we may be about to hear more about Japan again.

Keep funding **ASEF (Asia Europe foundation)**. I've only been to a few of its events but I think this has been doing a good job in bringing together journalists, academics and policy-makers to further understanding in the two regions. Perhaps they need a higher profile here.

Finally, on the policy level major new initiatives are always newsworthy. Co-operation between the EU and ASEAN is based on a 1980 Co-operation Agreement (1980) between the EC and the original member countries of ASEAN. Upgrading that agreement seems overdue and might create fresh interest.

Also, creating proper mechanisms in ASEM which could be used for an urgent and quick exchange of views on significant events like the Bali attack last year also seems to be an area lagging.

How about an EU-Asian initiative to try and unblock the stalled Doha trade round?

Anyway, now I'm stepping into the realm of policy-making so it's time for me to end.

Thank you very much