Rupert Murdoch’s recent purchase of a controlling interest in Star Television from Hutchison Whampoa has placed the issue of satellite broadcasting in Asia securely back on the critical agenda. Various interpretations of this commercial move may be made. Murdoch’s experiences with direct broadcasting by satellite in Europe nearly made his company bankrupt. Consequently, questions have been asked about the commercial probity of investing in what is an unproven field given past experiences. However, Murdoch is still perceived as an extraordinarily sharp entrepreneur. As The Economist says, where Murdoch ventures “others will surely follow” (31 July 1993:14). Murdoch’s actions are perceived as confirming the view that Asia is becoming the “world’s greatest emerging market for media and consumer goods” (ibid.).

This action, then, is characterized in purely commercial terms. But what does it mean in political, cultural and social terms for those Asian countries suddenly confronted by commercially driven media that operate within parameters quite different to national media systems; especially in countries where the modern mass media have been developed within carefully articulated systems of national values? There is a degree of incommensurability between the two that is recognized but little acted upon at the moment because satellite broadcasting presents the modernizing states of Asia with a set of problems in an acute form. These problems arise out of desire to be modern and consumerist while at the same time remaining distinctly Asian, and they manifest themselves in the social, political and cultural domains around issues of identity and control. While there is no uniform response within Asia to these problems there is certainly a shared awareness of the problems. The different responses to them may be regarded as indices of modernism; how deeply the ideology of the market place has penetrated the national psyche.

Asia is currently spanned by three satellites whose footprints transcend all political and geographical boundaries of the region from the mid-Pacific to Israel and from Siberia to northern Australia (See FEER, 28 November 1991:32). By 1995 these three will be augmented by at least another ten telecommunications satellites (Fell, 1992:52) which will serve two-thirds of the world’s total population (it will rise to 75 per cent by 2001), over forty nation states, ranging in size from China to Fiji, and provide a full range of services from television broadcasting to the electronic transfer of funds. They will cover what is generally considered to be the future economic engine of the world.

There is a perception that the application of satellite technology to Asian communications heralds a fundamental realignment within international relations. As yet the conditions of this realignment have yet to be specified. In this essay I will
begin this task, albeit briefly, by looking at the intersection of the political, economic and cultural factors associated with satellite communication. In order to avoid over-generalization I will take Indonesia and Vietnam as case studies. My basic argument will be that the emerging communication environment in Asia is paradoxical in so far as the claims made for satellite communications rarely match the promises involved in their introduction.

The implications of the radical restructuring of the Asian communication environment have yet to be fully comprehended. The neo-Malthusian American historian, Paul Kennedy views their widespread introduction into Asia as being an integral part of the region’s economic success (Kennedy, 1993:223–224). Moreover, the nation states that fall within the footprints have begun to formulate responses to the satellites which, in part, reflect already existing social and political conditions. In short, their presence is welcomed by some regimes and rejected by others.

The variety of responses towards satellites by governments within the region challenges a number of widely expressed views on the significance of satellites for the process of 'globalization'. Marjorie Ferguson identifies these views as 'Big is Better', 'More is Better', 'Time and Space Have Disappeared', 'Global Cultural Homogeneity', 'Saving Planet Earth', 'Democracy for Export via American Television' and 'The New World Order' which she characterizes as myths, or ways of classifying ideas, that are deployed principally for ideological ends (Ferguson, 1992:69–73). A cursory look at any of the major current affairs or business journals that focus on Asia will reveal any one, or a combination of these myths at work. There can be no doubt that it is the commercial sector, and its apologists, who are the greatest advocates for the widespread introduction of telecommunications services in Asia. The response of the governments is, however, more cautious and varied as I will show below. And despite claims to the contrary, we still have little idea of how the different subject audiences view the new services offered by satellites, although the advertisements shown on AsiaSat suggest that the advertisers have a clear view of the audiences they would like to view the services: they are middle-class, modern and tertiary educated.

While I think Ferguson is essentially correct in adopting a sceptical position in regard to the strong claims made in favour of the new communication technologies, at another level there are clearly aspects of their introduction that will have consequences for Asia as a whole. The Canadian political economist, Harold Innis, observed in the 1950s that communication technologies were a paramount feature of all civilizations throughout history. Moreover, all communication technologies have an inherent temporal or spatial bias (Innis, 1992:33–60). Thus, with the invention of paper, communication became portable and reproducible, which encouraged the creation of the institutions of empire. The introduction of telegraphy extended this trend and all subsequent means of electronic technology have expanded the capacity to communicate through increasingly larger spatial units. In Innisian terms, the overwhelming spatial bias of electronic communications creates a disequilibrium that foreshadows shifting political power and new configurations in culture and society (Havelock, 1981:32). The global reach of satellite-based communication would seem to have taken this tendency within technology to its logical conclusion.

In recognizing this tendency, Innis never argued that the new means of communication "annihilated space" (although these arguments were common in the