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SUNDAY BRUNCH

A year of fascinating people

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From a Nobel Prize winner to innovators on the cutting edge of science and technology - the year's best brunches

Globalisation's downside (November 11)

Nobel Prize winner Joseph Stiglitz says that international trade pacts are widening the global rich-poor divide.

The Columbia University professor, who won the 2001 Nobel Prize for economics, was in Bangkok in late October to promote his third title "Making Globalisation Work", which came out a year ago.

Stiglitz, 64, argued that China and India could be said to be among globalisation's success stories. However the forces of globalisation have also widened the divide between the rich and poor around the world.

Inequality or asymmetry is also evident in the United States, where the standard of living has not risen in step with continual expansion of gross domestic product over the past six years.

For Stiglitz, it seems globalisation has mainly benefited only those at the top echelons while the rest do not get a fair share - or are adversely affected. He adds that the world is not "flat" as suggested by Thomas L Friedman in his book "The World Is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century".

Anytime, anywhere (October 28)

For Dominic Scott, 41, the Hong Kong-based director for Cisco's public sector clients in Asia, information and communications technology (ICT) is a boon for the new generation of knowledge workers.

"Yes, you can be more productive," says Scott, who often travels with his Nokia mobile phone and notebook computer, both of which can quickly connect him to the mobile office with ease.

"I can plug in anywhere - at a Starbucks coffee shop or an airport lounge or on the aircraft if I have enough battery power. However, more often I work at my hotel room since I travel almost every week," he says.

With the advent of Web 2.0, or the second generation of Web-based activities, brain power has become more important than before, he notes, adding that many organisations have also shifted from a hierarchical or command/control structure to a collaborative, horizontal or flat structure.

This means that more people have been able to adopt a flexible work style as one can work virtually from anywhere and at any time. At Cisco's regional headquarters in Hong Kong, which employs a total of about 150 workers, for example, people may work from their homes as long as they are able to meet the company's deadlines.

Microbe-management (October 14)

Wanchern Potacharoen, 65, manager of Thailand's Microbe Bank, hopes that more Thai enterprises will turn to her facility for research and commerce.

Set up a decade ago, the bank, which stores over 20,000 strains of micro-organisms, is part of the National Centre for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology.

Dr Somsak Sivichai, 37, a researcher and head of the fungi laboratory, says: "Microbe Bank's inventory includes strains of bacteria, yeast, fungi, viruses and so on. They are mainly the good guys. Over here, we don't have organisms that could kill humans, such as anthrax or Ebola.

"But we do have organisms that cause plant diseases, for instance, so that we can study them to produce bio-active compounds to treat those diseases."

Besides plant medicine for the farming sector, the bank hopes its resources will help researchers develop new products in other sectors, including medicine, food, textiles and energy.

Maintaining momentum (October 7)

Zaw Min, the spokesperson for Burma's Democratic Party for a New Society (DPNS), has lived in exile, mainly in Thailand, since 1990.

"At the time, Aung San Suu Kyi's National League for Democracy (NLD), which included several affiliated parties such as the DPNS, won the general election, but the junta, then led by General Saw Muang, rejected the results and put the NLD leader under house arrest," said Zaw Min, 45.

In the past few weeks, Zaw Min, who earned his first degree in English literature from the University of Mandalay in 1986 and a master's degree from the London School of Economics in 2003, has been closely monitoring the latest developments in Burma from his base in Bangkok.

"According to my sources, the biggest demonstrations took place from September 25 to September 29, during which the number of demonstrators was estimated to be up to 100,000 scattered in several places in Rangoon.

"About 400 monks and laymen were said to have been killed, with up to 3,000 arrested by the junta.

"The trigger was a sharp rise in fuel prices, resulting in much higher food and travel expenses, worsening the plight of most Burmese, who have long suffered from chronic poverty and hyper-inflation."

New media in motion (September 30)

Apinun Tunpan, 35, a researcher at the Asian Institute of Technology (AIT)'s Interlab, believes that at least six major trends will shape the future of new media businesses in Thailand and abroad.

Apinun, who earned his PhD in computer science from the University of Maryland in 2002, says a diverse range of new media, such as the Digital Video Transport System (DVTS) and high-definition TV (HDTV), require very high-speed broadband Internet connections, which are not yet widely available.

In his opinion, hooking up homes and buildings with fibre-optic cables is, therefore, one of the key factors that will facilitate the emergence of these new media.

"Bandwidth and Internet speed are important. For fibre optics, we're talking about a speed at gigabytes per second [gbps]. DVTS, for instance, requires a speed of 30 mbps [megabytes per second] while HDTV over the Internet could need a speed of 1.5 gbps.

"In comparison, many home users in Thailand are still online at a speed of just 56kbps [kilobytes per second] or less. So there's a lot to do about super-high-speed fixed lines as far as bandwidth and speed are concerned before it's really the era of new digital media," he says.

The second major trend shaping new media is the emergence of high-speed wireless networks such as 3G and 4G cellular networks, or WiMax.

"WiMax, for instance, may allow busy businessmen caught in Bangkok's notorious traffic jams to hold video conferences to avoid missing appointments and to better manage their time.

A nuclear age? (December 23)

Kopr Kritayakirana says it is time for the country to make a decision about the controversial energy source.

As head of a government committee laying the groundwork for policy decisions on this crucial issue, Kopr, who holds a PhD in physics from Harvard University, says Thailand will have to decide whether or not it will go nuclear in the next three years.

"I was asked by science minister Dr Yongyuth Yuthavong earlier this year to work for this committee, as the energy and science ministries had been working together on this energy option.

"A nuclear power plant project generally has a very long lead time if we do want to turn to this option. If we said 'yes' today, it means the plant would not be operational until 2020 or about 13 years from now," says Kopr, a former lecturer at Chulalongkorn University.

Online-style buddy (June 17)

Part-time blogger Wasinee Chongmeesuk, 30, better known as "Vinegar Girl" in cyberspace, has spent the past two years building up relationships with thousands of like-minded college girls and working women via her blog.

"Vinegargirl.com came into being accidentally in 2005 as I was helping a friend sell blog-hosting software. I tried it myself and loved it, so I started writing a blog about fashion and beauty.

"One of the first articles was about my home-made formula for skin care, using soy-milk and raw materials left over in my mum's kitchen. The stuff's really good for complexion-cleansing," she says.

"Another popular formula is a yoghurt-based of mixture of carrot, turmeric and tamarind. This is also good for facial skin. You make it yourself at home, so I urged readers to try both formulas."

Today vinegargirl.com attracts on average about 1,000 unique Internet protocol (UIP) hits per day, with 27 per cent of visitors being college students and the rest working women aged 24 to 28.

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