Newspapers in Singapore: a mass ceremony in the imagining of the nation

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Introduction

This discussion examines the ideology and practices of the mass daily press in Singapore within the socio-political context of ‘imagining’ the nation (Anderson, 1991). Most discussions see Singapore’s press as synonymous with the strict controls under which it operates; however, even this is rarely examined within the context of its interaction with the larger agenda of nation-building. Yet, when Brigadier General (BG) Lee Hsien Loong (then Trade and Industry Minister; Second Minister for Defence) outlined his mandate for the national press before members of the Singapore Press Club (Lee, 1988), he made it very clear that their primary purpose was to ‘contribute to nation building. Anyone endeavouring to do this and working towards these goals can hold his head high in the full confidence that his is an honourable profession’.

There are three main parts to this discussion. In the first, I will establish the presence of the mass press in the daily lives of Singaporeans, and its position within the imagining of the nation. I will then unpack how specifically that position within the national agenda has been defined and practised. The last section focuses on the various forms of control on the press, and how the government’s intervention is conditioned by the socio-political and ideological climate of the nation.

The mass press in the everyday life of Singaporeans and the nation

Surveys conducted a few decades ago suggested Singaporeans regarded the print media as the most useful and most reliable source of information compared with other forms of mass media (Chen and Kuo, 1978), particularly with respect to information about government policies and actions. In 1997, there were eight daily newspapers in Singapore available in the nation’s four official languages, although
the English language Straits Times was clearly the most popular. There were three Chinese newspapers (total circulation 442,257), three English (516,531), one Malay (56,907), and one Tamil (8,837). In 2000, Singapore Press Holdings launched two new English language papers: Project Eyeball, an internet tabloid aimed at young people, with a print version available Monday–Friday (circulation about 20,000); and STREATS, a free commuter tabloid (circulation about 200,000). Also in 2000, MediaCorp published a commuter tabloid called Today (circulation about 200,000). According to the 1980 census, more than 80 percent of the adult population (age 15+) read a newspaper every day (Khoo, 1981).

This shared reading of newspapers – usually read at particular times of the day – can be seen as an ‘extraordinary mass ceremony’ within which the Singaporean nation is imagined (Anderson, 1991). It is a ceremony in which the government is a dominant voice.

The mass ceremony: imagining Singapore

Singapore is a highly and centrally planned society. All social institutions, including the press and mass media, are expected to define their role within the context of the national agenda. There is thus considerable symmetry found between policy and institutional discourses (Bokhorst-Heng, 1996; Foucault, 1979). A planetary analogy is useful in highlighting the way the various institutions are together implicated in and implicate the imagining of the nation in Singapore.

Similar to an orbiting planetary system, nation building (the anchor ‘sun’) pulls all planets (social institutions such as education, mass media, urban planning and national defence) in orbit around itself, directing their paths, defining their relationship to it and to each other, and mandating their agendas. The ‘planets’ orbiting paths, as institutions of discourse, give visibility and definition to the path and agenda of the nation as an imagined community. And the centripetal forces of the orbiting planets ensure their cohesion with each other and with the ‘sun’. Any one member failing to participate or to follow its orbiting path puts the very existence of the nation at risk.

The centrality of the national agenda to the role of the press in Singapore is unambiguous in the many speeches government leaders have given on the topic. It is made clear both by framing the role of the press against what it is not and by defining what it is. The Western model, wherein the press is seen as a ‘fourth estate’ and watchdog of the government, is strongly rejected in favour of a ‘responsible’ press that works together with the government for the ‘national good’ (usually defined by the government). In Prime Minister (PM) Goh Chok Tong’s recent speech to members of the Chinese press, he praised the newspapers for their supportive editorials of the government’s policies and leadership, and stressed that the ‘media has an important role in nation building’ and in contributing to social cohesion (Goh, 1998). The slight liberalization of the press seen recently (which has really been most evident in the tabloids) has thus left intact former PM Lee Kuan Yew’s mandate that freedom of the news media must be ‘subordinated to the definition and integrity of the nation’ and to the ‘purposes of the elected government’ (Lee, 1971).

The nation’s leaders typically draw upon examples from the UK and Japan to demonstrate their vision of a press model appropriate for Singapore. For example, BG Lee Hsien Loong sees the BBC as the closest model – ‘fair, impartial reporting of events, but interpreted from a definite point of view.’ However, he goes on to say, the difference between the BBC and the Singapore press is the latter’s ‘far
In this respect, the Japanese model is more fitting. It reflects the Asian values of consensus as opposed to confrontation, co-operation rather than conflict, and responsibility to the community and nation rather than individualism.

Because Singapore’s national viability has been defined largely in terms of economic growth, values of social (racial harmony), political stability and a strong government are paramount. It is to this end that the press has been given its mandate, to foster social and political stability and to function as a tutor and advocate of government policy in the daily ‘mass ceremony’ of the press.

Social and political stability

According to government leaders, Singapore’s multilingual, multiracial, and multi-religious population living in a small, urban island presents an on-going threat of social unrest. There have actually been only a few instances of racial (or other) disturbance in Singapore’s history; nonetheless, these have become icons of Singapore’s vulnerability in the justification of numerous policies, including the role of the press. BG Lee Hsien Loong noted to his Helsinki audience that the Singapore government is always keenly aware of how ‘the media may bring in undesirable values, how newspapers can be used to carry out covert subversion, and how inflammatory reporting can lead to racial riots’ (Lee, 1987).

The press takes seriously its role in fostering social stability, and has on more than one occasion articulated its commitment to responsible journalism, and to fostering bridges between the various ethnic communities that make up Singaporean society (e.g. The Straits Times, 1 November 1991). The following question was once presented to former Chief Editor of the Singapore Monitor, Seah Chiang Nee: ‘Is truth and freedom sacrificed in the name of stability in Singapore?’ He replied (based on a true story that did not appear in the press):

Supposing a fight broke out in Geylang between Chinese and Malay youths and some people got killed. How would the different papers treat the story? Repeat the truth on page one and know that tomorrow there would be Malays and Chinese seeking revenge? Do you consider the truth supreme?’


The Singapore press also has a pivotal role in fostering ‘consensus politics’, or amiable relations between the people and the government. In contrast to the US press model, which guarantees free speech and a press free from government subversion, in Singapore, the press model guarantees the effectiveness of the government, and protects it from being undermined and subverted by the press. The argument is made that the press has not been elected, whereas politicians have; thus it cannot act as a watchdog and critic. As Leslie Fong puts it,

a press that locks itself on a course that focuses only on the failures, deficiencies, shortcomings, [and] contradictions of politicians and policies . . . becomes a participant, a player in the contest for power. That degrades the democratic system in which it is allowed to operate. (The Straits Times, 1 November 1991)

In a curious twist, then, it is precisely because of democracy that the press cannot be the fourth estate.
The mass tutorial

In addition to fostering social cohesion and political support, the press has an overt role in educating Singaporeans concerning government ideology, policy and action. So prevalent is the government’s voice in the press that opposition MP Jeyaretnam once complained to parliament that every morning Singaporeans are ‘regaled . . . with news in their newspapers about the various activities of the Government, to be repeated over TV and radio’ (Parliamentary Debates Singapore, 25 March 1982, Vol. 41, Column 1630). It is expected to highlight and explain the government’s policies to the people, and to persuasively argue their merit and necessity for Singapore. In Lee Kuan Yew’s words in Helsinki, the press is ‘to present Singapore’s problems simply and clearly and then explain how if they support certain programmes and policies, these problems can be solved’ (Lee, 1971: 7). In a later speech on the same theme, he approvingly noted that the Japanese press stays ‘out of a partisan role in active politics, but goes beyond plain reporting to shape public opinion to help build up a national consensus on important issues’ (Lee, K.Y., 1988; my emphasis). Ministerial speeches usually appear on the front page, accompanied by complete transcripts, explanatory notes, discussions, highlights, and bullet point summaries that appear throughout the paper. Related articles explaining the policies in greater detail continue for a number of days. Discussions generally focus on the implementation of policies rather than provide a critical evaluation of them. And dissenting voices expressed in public opinion polls or in the ‘Forum page’ are systematically followed by a response from the appropriate government office. In this way, even dissension is used to reinforce the government’s voice and the legitimacy of that voice.

Centripetal forces and press control

The activity of the press and degree of state intervention in any nation’s press operations are intricately tied into the political paradigm of the nation within which it exists (Harvey, 1998). In Singapore, given the central role of the press in the national agenda, it is not surprising that the government also exerts strict control over the press. The logic goes something like this: the People’s Action Party leaders (a) perceive the mass media as powerful instruments that can influence the masses and (b) hold the view that people are persuadable and can hardly resist the influence of the mass media; therefore (c) if the mass media is in the wrong hands, it may be abused to disrupt social harmony and political stability and society, but (d) if in the right hands and with proper guidance, it can perform a constructive role in nation-building; therefore (e) the mass media must be controlled (Kuo and Chen, 1983).

For the purposes of this discussion, then, it is not so much press control per se that is important, but rather how it works as a centripetal force in aligning the press with the government’s imagining of the nation. This may not necessarily exonerate the government’s restrictive control over the press. However, it will take us beyond a limiting list of Orwellian negativisms (Casady, 1975; Lent, 1975, 1982) to a more complex understanding of how the various press laws and the role of the press interact with the principles upon which the nation is based. Loosely, there are three spheres of control: the relationship between the government and the press, forces of centralization, and direct legislation.
Forces of relationship

Over the years, government leaders have actively pursued a close relationship with the press. Ministers and editors frequently meet informally over lunch to discuss various issues of national interest. Since 1982, representatives from each ministry and statutory board have been appointed as ‘press liaison officers’, whose role it is to facilitate the flow of communication from the government to the press.

Various analogies have been given to describe this close relationship between the government and the press. Cultural Minister Dhanabalan used the analogy of a football team to emphasize the co-operation needed from the press in working with the government. Others have referred to tandem cycling and to Siamese twins to capture similar harmony and cohesiveness in goal and purpose. However, as these analogies also suggest, such relationships do not necessarily represent equal partnership. Most often, one team member, one cyclist, one of the twins is dominant. The relationship between the press and the government in Singapore is similarly made up of unequal partners, with the government being dominant and controlling the agenda.

Perhaps the most important evidence of the unequal terms of this relationship comes in who sets the ‘out of bounds’ (OB) markers for debate in the national agenda. ‘OB markers’ refer to the limits within which the press can operate: what it can say about race, religion, government policy, and so forth. Lee Kuan Yew told journalists: ‘You must accept that you are not in a position to set the OB marker. If you want to set the OB marker, you have to come out into politics’ (New Paper, 1 Feb 1995). The problem for the press, however, is that the markers are not always clearly defined. As one Straits Times journalist told me, ‘the lines are shifting all the time’. There is constant debate among journalists and editors concerning where the lines should be (interview, 3 November 1995). Journalists who go too far and provoke the ire of the government will be publicly reprimanded in parliament. Some have even had details of their academic and national service records publicly disclosed as an exercise towards dis-accreditation and humiliation (Straits Times 25 July 1984; 31 March 1988).

In some respects, the lack of explicit boundaries is in fact the genius of the government’s control. For the OB markers are not clearly defined until you cross them. The result has been a rigidly self-imposed censorship by journalists and editors attempting to avoid the invisible line. Even Project Eyeball, which promises to change this reputation of media passivity – noting that readers are tired of hearing only the government’s voice (Webb, 2000) – is limited by its tabloid status to offer little scope for deeply critical and influential reporting on local politics.

Forces of centralization

Over the years, there has been a pattern of mergers and ‘de-mergers’ and closures of various newspaper companies against all apparent logic. A nexus of three factors comes to mind: since independence, increases in (a) population, (b) readership, and (c) sophistication of readership.

From 1979–1994, there was a population increase of 567,500, just under 25 percent (Singapore Department of Statistics, 1991). During that same period, literacy increased from 72 to 91 percent. Newspaper circulation increased for the three largest language press groups, Chinese, Malay and English, and at a much faster rate than population growth. Circulation rates for the Chinese dailyes
increased by 60.5 percent, the Malay dailies by about 92 percent, and the English
to an overwhelming 105 percent between 1979 and 1994.

Data compiled by Survey Research Singapore indicates that readership rates
have also increased. Between 1983 and 1990, readership for the Chinese papers
increased by 43 percent, by 227.2 percent for the Malay papers, and by 144 percent
for the English papers. Part of this increase can be attributed to rising population
and literacy rates. However, there was also an increase in the number of people
reading more than one daily newspaper, reflecting greater sophistication in
readership patterns as people broaden the range of their information sources
(Bokhorst-Heng, 1998).

In the light of these increases, the decrease in the number of dailies in
circulation over the years is most curious. In 1978 there were 11 daily newspapers;
in 1985, there were only seven dailies; and, since the addition of the New Paper in
1988, there have been eight dailies in Singapore. This is due in part to the mergers
and closures during the mid-1980s. The process of centralization began in 1982
with the merger of Sin Chew Jit Poh and Nanyang Siang Pau to become Lianhe
Zaobao under the new holding company Singapore News and Publications Limited
(SNPL). The government also closed down Kuai Bao. Two years later (1984),
SNPL merged with the Times Publishing Berhad and The Straits Times Press to
form Singapore Press Holdings (SPH). With all English, Chinese, Malay, and since
early 1996, Tamil, newspapers under one SPH umbrella, the mergers created a
virtual controlled newspaper monopoly.

The official rationale for the mergers suggests that increased centralization meant
increased business efficiency. The mergers also created a communications group
capitalized at S$1.5 billion (Business Times, 5 October 1984). However, the
sacrifice for this commercial gain was a reduction in alternative voices and venues.
This in itself points to other reasons for these mergers, reasons that are more
closely related with the government’s overall political interests.

In the first place, the timing of the mergers is significant for what it tells us
about the political imperatives. They were propelled by the unexpected election in
1981 of the first opposition member into parliament, J.B. Jeyeretnam – a
development that Lee Kuan blamed on the press. Secondly, the government’s use
of the press as its tutorial platform is paramount in understanding the objectives of
the various mergers. The mergers have only enhanced their ability to keep the press
aligned with their interpretation of national interests. MediaCorp’s arrival on the
scene has done little to change this. The Today paper, along with SPH’s STREATS
and Project Eyeball, are essentially tabloid publications, offering no real alternative
or critical perspective on political issues, especially local politics. Furthermore, the
PAP government still has financial investments in these two media companies
through its government-linked corporations, suggesting nothing but a continuance
of the status quo. J.P. Morgan’s chief economist, Bernhard Eschweiler, put it
colourfully when he said ‘Even though (they’ve) increased the size of the cage, the
bird is still in a cage’ (cited in Koh, 2000). The government’s rhetoric around
MediaCorp and the added newspapers clearly indicates that the competitor is the
Internet, and that they want to ensure younger Singaporeans are still compelled to
read local news from a local perspective, as opposed to foreign sources.

Thus, the recent diversification is not so much about liberalization as it is, in
member of parliament Lee Yock Suan’s words, to ‘ride the wave of media
convergence and globalisation while enabling a Singapore identity to flourish
among Singaporeans’ (Lee, 2000). As with the earlier mergers, diversification is
about managing the global–local intersection, and managing who controls the
imagining of the nation and the minds and attitudes of Singaporeans.
In contrast to this centralizing trend of the local press, the government allows Singaporeans to have wide access to international news. This contrast relates in many ways to the global–local tensions within the imagining of the nation. Singapore seeks to position itself as the information hub of Asia, a ‘gateway to both the East and the West’ (Chen, 2000). Singapore has become a major regional press centre, with about 5,500 foreign publications circulating in the country, including about 190 newspapers (MITA, 1998). BBC World Service is available 24 hours a day at the explicit request of Lee Kuan Yew.

However, at the same time as positioning itself as the information hub of Asia, Singapore also seeks to authenticate itself locally and ‘protect’ itself against foreign influence. Thus, the PAP government is very clear that local news is to be reported by local journalists and newspaper companies. One of the few controls on the foreign press in Singapore relates to their coverage of Singapore, with strict penalties for those seen to interfere in domestic politics (see below). Local newspaper companies must be primarily owned by Singaporeans. And, while the international media can be heterogeneous, the local media – central to the imagining of the nation – must be united and homogeneous.

**Forces of direct legislation**

The most direct control that the government has over the mass daily press is through legislation concerning two main areas: (a) control over voice and (b) control over content. Control over voice in the press comes primarily through press ownership. According to Lee Yock Suan (2000):

Local media have a unique nation-building role in our multiracial and multireligious society. They need to have a deep sense of responsibility and commitment to Singapore. That is why our media must remain in local hands and there should be no foreign influence. It is for this reason that we have rules limiting any individual shareholding [of Ordinary shares, under the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act] to no more than 3%, and requiring board members of media companies to be mainly Singaporeans.

Management shares, which carry 200 times the voting power of ordinary shares, and whose owners can influence editorial policy, can only be issued to Singapore citizens and when approved by the government. The government’s additional control over the appointment of management and editorial staff gives the PAP government powerful control over the voice of the press.

With respect to the content of the press, the PAP government is in general sensitive of press criticism. In the years just before independence, Lee Yuan Yew’s controlling measures rattled *The Straits Times* to the point that it moved its headquarters to Kuala Lumpur in March 1959. It did not return to Singapore until 1973, leaving a sister company in Kuala Lumpur (Turnbull, 1995). During the 1970s, Lee Kuan Yew continued to place restrictive measures on the press as he tried to purge the country of ‘pro-Communist’ influence. Current forms of legislation concerning content include: the Official Secrets Act (1963), which aims to prevent leaks of official information that might endanger Singapore’s security; and the Undesirable Publications Ordinance (1938, 1969), which prohibits imported publications considered ‘prejudicial to public safety or public interest’ (e.g. *Mao’s Little Red Book, Playboy, Cosmopolitan*).
The last aspect of press laws concerns licensing, which essentially controls both voice and content. The NPP Act requires press licences to be applied for annually and gives the government control over their issue. They are renewed on condition that media owners agree not to print ‘any article which is likely to cause ill will or misunderstanding between the government and people of Singapore (and Malaysia); or which is likely to excite communal or racial emotions; or which glorifies or justifies the use of violence in politics’. The government extended its licensing requirements in 1986 to include the foreign press. MITA is empowered to restrict the sale or distribution of foreign publications seen to be manipulating local public opinion and interfering with the domestic politics of Singapore. The law has been exercised a number of times. For example, in 1986, *Time* had its circulation cut from 18,000 to 2,000, and in 1993, *The Economist* had its circulation frozen at 7,500. Lee Hsien Loong’s Helsinki speech, ‘When the Press Misinforms’ (26 May 1987), and Lee Kuan Yew’s speech at the American Society of Newspaper Editors on 14 April 1988, ‘Why Singapore Disallows Foreign Press to Interfere in Domestic Politics’, defend the Singapore government’s position with respect to the foreign press. They argue that the gazette ruling was motivated by the fact that these publications interfered with Singapore’s imagining of the nation. They sought to be a ‘major political force’ and ‘set the agenda’ of the nation (Lee, 1987). The clash was over the sort of society Singapore should be, and over who has the right to set the agenda for that imagining. As such, Singapore must have the right to reply, and the right to its own imagining.

It is clear, then, that press control in Singapore is conditioned by the socio-political climate of the nation, and by the type of community the government wishes to imagine. It is not so much a war of ‘intimidation, interference, and oppression’ against the press by a ‘virtually totalitarian regime’ as Lent would have us believe (1975: 7–16). Rather, it is a powerful gravitational force aimed to keep the mass daily press orbiting within the imagining of the nation. Press control prevents the press from colliding with or obstructing other national institutions, and from colliding with the national agenda. And it ensures the government has a location within which to enact and communicate to the people its imagining of the nation, and to nationalize its voice.

**Conclusion**

Because of its role in nation-building, some have labelled the Singapore press as following the Third World ‘development journalism’ model (e.g. *The Straits Times*, 27 October 1991; Lee, 1987). Hachten (1981) described the ‘development press model’ as one wherein all aspects of the mass media must ‘aid in the great tasks of nation building . . . building a political consciousness, assisting in economic development’. In this model, he argues, there is no place for dissent or criticism. The flow of power and information works from the top down, and individual rights and freedoms of expression are ‘somewhat irrelevant’ (1981: 73). Ramaprasad and Ong (1990) measured the Singapore press against this model and concluded that the press allows enough expression of critical views to take Singapore outside the development press model (1990: 41–56).

I would take this argument in a different direction. The use of the term ‘development model’ suggests that at some higher stage, the press in Singapore will move to a more advanced press model. Such a connotation is problematic, if for no other reason than it assumes there is some authority that can determine what is the highest ideal model for all nations. I would suggest instead that the only
thing the ‘development model’ really tells us is that the Singapore press is expected to work within a particular framework in the imagining of the nation. In this, it is no different from the press in any other nation, ‘developed’ or otherwise.

The position of the press within the national agenda is thus the central framework of this discussion. Coming back to my analogy from astronomy, the imagining of the nation lies at the centre of this orbiting system. ‘Imagining the nation’ determines the agenda for all other institutions in Singapore, including the mass daily press. As we saw in this discussion, the daily press actively participates in maintaining the conditions necessary for nationhood: social and political stability. It also provides the conditions for a strong government by teaching and advocating government policy. Because of its national importance, the government has placed considerable control on the press. Through forces of centralization, direct legislation and its relationship with the press, the government has established gravitational forces ensuring the orderly orbiting of the press within the national agenda.

Note

1. Today, the Malaysian company is called The New Straits Times, and exists independently from its Singapore counterpart. Like the other Malaysian newspapers, it is not allowed to circulate in Singapore.

References


New Paper (Various).


*The Straits Times (ST)* (Various).


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