Media in Singapore

By Chee Soon Juan

In a media conference in Los Angeles in 1998, Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore's Senior Minister said: "Singapore has managed this relentless flood of information not by blocking the flow but by stating its point of view in competition...We defend our position in open argument and let our case stand on its own merits." Not only does the Singapore Government not block information, but actually encourages this free-flow of information. "Singapore probably has the greatest concentration of international media in the region," Lee continued, "Singaporeans are educated in English and have immediate access to the international media." (Straits Times, Oct 31 & Nov 2, 1998).

What other conclusion can you come to when news agencies such as Reuters, Bloomberg, AP, AFP and Nikkei and cable channels like CNBC, ESPN, HBO, Disney, Discovery, National Geographic all based in Singapore.

Pardon me if I don't jump up and start hooting and howling with delight over our newly announced press freedom. You see, I know something which many of you don't, and that is the story of the crushing of the media in Singapore and how information is still tightly controlled in this make-believe information hub.

Local media

One of the ruling People's Action Party's(PAP) first victims was the Straits Times. Hardly had the cheers died down from the 1959 elections when the PAP was voted into power, that Lesley Hoffman, then editor, made a beeline for Malaysia. He knew his options were limited when Lee Kuan Yew threatened that any journalist who did not give their unmitigated support to Singapore-Malaya relations then would be put behind bars. "We shall put him in and keep him in," was how it was not-quite-so-delicately announced.

Following Hoffman's departure, a hitherto independent Straits Times was reconstituted where its main function today seems to be to gorge itself silly with daily Government pronouncements and then regurgitate them for public consumption.

Shortly thereafter a Malay-language daily, Utusan Melayu, also took flight from Singapore after signs of Government threats became too ominous to ignore. Those which were less skittish continued to publish only long enough to wish that they had been more so. In 1971, four of the most senior staff members of the Nanyang Siang Pau, went straight to prison for "glamorizing Communism" and being involved in a "black operation". In one year, the wrecking ball swung from the communist left to the American right. This time, the Singapore Herald, a vivacious tabloid, was also accused of being involved in a "black operation", this time with the U.S. intelligence. It was closed down. In between, another independent daily, the Eastern Sun, was just as unceremoniously and brutally shutdown - again because someone, somewhere had some information that the newspaper was mired in some "black operation."

And so the crusade continued relentlessly. Today the local print media is triumphantly unified under the Singapore Press Holdings which controls every major
publication that the country produces. Its chairman is a former cabinet minister and president the former chief of the Internal Security Department, Singapore's dreaded secret police.

The broadcast media's history was pock-marked. It was firmly under government control from the outset. The only changes that occurred was its name: from the dour-sounding Radio and Television Singapore to the more savvy Singapore Broadcasting Corporation to the present and more authoritatively-pitched Television (or Radio) Corporation of Singapore. A government-controlled station by any other name, dulls the mind just as effectively.

**Foreign media**

Having successfully dragged the local media through obedience school, the Singapore Government started work on the foreign press. One by one, regional and international publications which commented unfavourably of the PAP and its politics, and which did not publish every dot of the "i" in the Government's reply had their circulation curtailed. In 1986 *Time* magazine published an article rather supportive of opposition leader J. B. Jeyaretnam. The then prime minister Mr Lee Kuan Yew duly replied through his press secretary. *Time* committed the sin of publishing only the edited version of the letter citing "editorial rights" and "space constraints" as reasons. The wages for this transgression was a cut of the magazine's distribution from 18,000 copies an issue to 2,000. The reason given was that *Time* was engaging in Singapore's domestic politics. Other newspapers and magazines met with similar fates when they published pieces that chafed the PAP. The *Asian Wall Street Journal* had its circulation restricted from 5,100 to 400 per issue; *Asiaweek*: 10,000 to 500; the *Far Eastern Economic Review*: 9,000 to 500; the *Economist* although not reduced, had its number capped at 7,500.

The *International Herald Tribune* which was dragged to court twice for publishing articles that the Singapore Government took offence. One was written by Philip Bowring, former editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, whom Mr Lee Kuan Yew, his son and Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, and Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, sued for libel and were awarded damages and costs amounting to hundreds of thousands of dollars. This was in spite of the apology the *International Herald Tribune* proffered prior to the court hearing. A couple of months later, the newspaper's Asian Editor, Michael Richardson who is based in (of all places) Singapore, presumably thought that a commentary written by Professor Christopher Lingle, an economist from the U.S. teaching at the National University of Singapore at that time, was safe to publish especially when it did not even mention the dreaded word "Singapore". Lightning may never strike twice on the same spot. But as IHT found out, the red flash of thunder that is the centrepiece of the PAP's party emblem does not quite follow the pattern of its celestial cousins. And so the IHT again found itself the subject of the Singapore Government's wrath. Again it grovelled in apology, again Lee and son and Goh sued, and again the newspaper was found guilty and made to pay dearly. I later found out that there was a suggestion that I had written the piece and had asked Dr Lingle to publish it under his name. The insult to the American
academic notwithstanding, I found myself rather bemused by the conspiracy theory. But I digress.

In the run-ins with the Singapore Government, the foreign press was repeatedly the one to capitulate. In some cases the battle was protracted while in others the resolve to stand up for their rights was as firm as warm butter. The end result is that even the foreign media seems to have compromised its integrity. A prominent foreign journalist reporting from Southeast Asia recently told me that because his magazine was hoping to increase its circulation in Singapore, it fights shy of reporting unfavourably about the island-state. A few years ago, Mike Carey, of the Special Broadcasting Services in Australia, told me that *Newsweek* wanted to do a piece to follow up on his story about the Singapore Government's business links with Burmese druglords, it particular a Mr Lo Hsing-han, and the Burmese military regime, but changed its mind after the Singapore side threatened to sue. I had earlier written a piece about the subject and sent it to a regional publication. At first I was told that the piece would be used but was later informed that its head office said no because, apparently, "some people might read too much into it." I have openly questioned the PAP about this relationship between the Singapore Government and drug-barons in Burma. Yet, the foreign press seems to be going out of its way to censor itself on the issue. More recently I wrote another piece about transparency, or the lack of it, in the Singapore system. I sent it to the *International Herald Tribune*. When I didn't get a reply I called up the editor, who told me he would get back to me. Several days later when I didn't get the return call, I called again, and again was told that I would be kept informed. Its been a few months now and I am still waiting.

I suppose the most apt, albeit intensely disheartening, summary of the situation of the foreign press in Singapore, is noted by Mr Derek Davies, former editor of the *Far Eastern Economic Review*. He wrote:

Lee [Kuan Yew], having failed to stop the foreign media from "meddling in Singapore's domestic affairs," told me that instead of attempting to control editors and journalists, he would target the pockets of owners and publishers. "I will hit you where it hurts. Then we will see your commitment to a free press." Anyway, he enjoyed a confrontation with the media. "Don't forget, I can hurt you more than you can hurt me." A bill was then being prepared with the aim of giving the government powers to limit the sales of foreign publications in Singapore, thereby reducing their revenues from circulation and advertisements. That would bring direct and more effective pressure to bear on editors. Privately, I felt that foreign publications would hardly submit to such pressure, but I was wholly wrong and Lee was largely right. (*The Singapore Puzzle*, p. 78)

The international media having kowtowed to the Singapore Government must also realise the sort of regime that they are kowtowing to. Even as the PAP insists the that it must have not only the right of reply but also have its replies published unedited however unreasonable, unreadable and even libellous they may be, it does not accord its political opponents that same right in the local media.

Last year when I gave a public speech without a permit and was subsequently imprisoned, a few letters were published in the *Straits Times* critical of my actions. I
duly responded but the newspaper refused to publish it. Later, a PAP member of parliament wrote another letter also lambasting me for my speaking in public. His letter was read out over the nightly news and reported in the *Straits Times*. And just in case some people missed it the first time, the newspaper printed the letter again the following day, this time in its entirety. Again I wrote in my reply and, again, the *Straits Times* refused to publish it.

Days later, CNBC aired an interview it did with me and a minister, Mr George Yeo. The following day, the *Straits Times* reported only what the minister said and didn't even mention that I was on the programme.

Just about the same time, the *Asian Wall Street Journal* ran an editorial entitled "Free Speech and Mr Chee." More predictable than a knee-jerk, the PAP sent in its reply. By now, who would even think of not publishing every dot and cross in the letter. Subsequently the *Straits Times* ran a story on the editorial but reported only on the reply given by the Government.

In 1998 CNN did an extensive interview with Mr Lee Kuan Yew on its programme *Q & A* during which Mr Lee Kuan Yew challenged anyone to name a law which the Singapore Government should change or abolish. The interview was unsurprisingly given much coverage in the *Straits Times*. A few months later, I went on the programme and before Riz Khan started the interview, the programme ran the part where Lee Kuan Yew talked about dropping any legislature. I came on and unambiguously named the Internal Security Act. Not a word of it appeared in the local press.

Shortly after these interviews, the Government issued a warning that foreign TV stations that broadcast from Singapore had to abide by the same rules and standards that governed the Singapore station. Mr George Yeo, the minister for Information and the Arts announced in Parliament: "Just look at the way foreign channels have become part of the domestic politics in the Malaysia and Indonesia. We should worry for ourselves." A backbencher then stood up and railed: "Indeed, we have witnessed many interviews on CNBC and BBC with some populist politicians in Singapore of late for frivolous causes." ( *Straits Times*, 13 March 1999). This was, of course, a reference to my speaking in public without government approval.

And what are these rules that foreign stations have to abide by? In Singapore opposition leaders have seldom, if at all, been interviewed on local television. Coverage of the elections is so woefully biased that you would have to be certifiable to want to vote for the opposition just by watching these reports.

I have been told by people working for the station that the name of my book *Dare To Change* which I wrote in 1994 is not allowed to be mentioned on air. Later, I was even told that my photograph was not allowed to be used.

Sometime in 1996 after we found it impossible to get the newspapers to report on our manifesto, we decided to produce a short video explaining our alternative policies. With commendable efficiency the government promptly banned it and thereafter passed a bill to completely outlaw political party videos.

When we publish our party newspaper, the newsvendors are too afraid to sell them. Bookstores in Singapore, including foreign-owned ones such as Borders,
too afraid to sell my book To Be Free, and for that matter several other books critical of the PAP regime and its politics. And when I sell them on the streets, I am prosecuted for hawking without a license and, thereby, contravening the Public Health Act. When I try to apply for a licence, they tell me they’re not issuing any.

"We defend our position in open argument," Lee Kuan Yew tells the world, "and let our case stand on its own merits." You be the judge.

And yet, some commentators are saying that Singapore is opening up because nowadays the ISD is less handcuff-happy. I don't understand. Should I thank my government for only breaking down my door and not burning down my house?

Internet

As far as the Internet is concerned, the PAP doesn't need to block sites. Indeed, the Government has an illusion to upkeep and using crude blocking techniques will only ruin the perception that Singapore is this open and advanced society.

Last year, the government-run ISP, SingNet, sent out a message to subscribers telling them that the Ministry of Home Affairs had hacked into their accounts to check for a virus. Questions about the legality of the Government's action notwithstanding, the company apologised for the invasion adding: "On hindsight, we should have considered the impact of this exercise on you and been more sensitive to your needs."

What a sweet and considerate ISP. In the mean time, Internet users in Singapore were busily going through their messages and files to check if they've been engaging in any communication less than politically correct.

Globalisation

But what does it matter to you here in Australia, or for that matter, anyone else in Asia and the world what happens in Singapore. After all, isn't Singapore a designer economy, custom-made for multinational companies? With globalisation on an unstoppable march, why make democracy when you can make money?

Lest memories fade - and they are fading with alarming alacrity as the Asian markets experience this bewildering return of capital - weren't foreign investors and international financial institutions blowing kisses at Suharto for bringing stability to the country and spreading economic cheer all around? But when the party was over and the dollars took their leave, who was left to clean up the mess? Not antagonising Suharto with all that talk about democracy seemed the right thing to do at that time.

With the Indonesian media under tight control under Suharto's rule, hardly anyone heard of the problems that were percolating underneath. How could we have known about cases such as the 60 villages in the island of Bintan that were bought by resorts like the Banyan Tree and Club Med for 100 rupiah per square metre. Now the dispossessed locals are throwing stones with one hand and wielding machetes with the other demanding their land rights and that financial justice be done. Hand on heart, how many of us here knew about these problems and those in Ambon, Lombok, Maluku, and so on, during Suharto's reign? Now when the political expediency has come back to haunt the region, we wring our hands and worry about the abyss into which Indonesia may plunge.
Similarly, with under such a closed system, how well does the international community know about the goings-on in Singapore? I still read in foreign publications of the stability in Singapore, and the remarkable lack of labour strife in the country. In a recent article, a foreign publication wrote that Malaysia had a thing or two to learn about the way Singapore was opening up. There must be another island with the same name because that cannot be the Singapore in which that I live and struggle. I have frequent and regular discussions with opposition politicians in Malaysia and they agree that there is more elbow room in Malaysia's politics than Singapore's. I've even had mainland Chinese come up to me and whisper that they look over their shoulders less in Beijing than they do in Singapore. Far from loosening up, the ruling party is up to its scheming again. This time it is thinking of changing the one-man-one-vote system to continue its asphyxiation on politics in Singapore. The idea is to give certain sections of the population greater weightage in their votes.

**Conclusion**

In authoritarian polities the local media is usually the first to be subverted and used by the government to purvey this message. With persecution, it often capitulates. The international media, however, has the wherewithal to stand firm and resist the autocrats. Caving in to financial threats is not an option. If you do democracy is the casualty.

If we are to going to be united - and not only unified - through globalisation, then let us also pay attention to the rights and needs of the indigenous worker, particularly in an authoritarian state, where domestic civil society cannot intervene on his or her behalf. The international civil society, and this includes the media, has a responsibility to ensure that deals don't overwhelm democracy, and riches don't run over rights.