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Holding the press

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Holding the press

The media are free to earn profits, but not popular support.

Singapore's news media industry underwent a shake-out in 2017, with smaller newspaper titles succumbing to financial pressures. This shouldn't have come as a surprise. Other advanced industrial economies had suffered more crippling closures many years earlier. What was noteworthy about Singapore, though, was the absence of public mourning when the newspapers' deaths were announced.

It was different in 1971. The troubled *Singapore Herald* carried front-page news of a "Save the Herald" bid led by public intellectuals such as Tay Kheng Soon and Tommy Koh. It didn't succeed: that was the paper's final issue. But it tells us that there was once a more affective connection between the people and the press in Singapore.

A key reason for the change in public attitudes is of course the internet (Chapter 21). People feel much less dependent now on big news organisations. But that's not the whole story. The shift in Singaporeans' attitudes to the press predates the world wide web and social media. It started when Lee Kuan Yew restructured the newspaper industry in the 1970s, turning it away from championing public opinion and community identities, and toward boosting

shareholder value and the government's agenda. Lee's intervention was designed to allow the press to survive financially while also making it incapable of satisfying the public emotionally. The system, which has lasted more than four decades, gave the media enough autonomy to perform a generally solid professional service, but never to side with the people against the government.

At its core is a unique piece of legislation enacted in 1974, the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act. Singapore Press Holdings, the publishing behemoth that owns *The Straits Times* and all of the country's other daily newspapers and their online vehicles, operates under this law. The other half of Singapore's duopolistic news media scene is more straightforwardly government-controlled. Mediacorp, which monopolises local television news and is a major online news provider, is wholly owned by Temasek.

The NPPA ended the local tradition of cause-driven journalism, turning newspapers into profit-oriented and non-adversarial establishment institutions. The law requires newspaper companies to be listed on the stock exchange, with no shareholder controlling 12 per cent or more of its stock. This rule was ingeniously counter-intuitive. Through most of the 20th century, conventional wisdom held that a government that wanted to control a newspaper would have to own it. Lee was a couple of decades ahead of other rulers in understanding that the profit motive needn't be incompatible with political control, as businessman-publishers might be quite happy to cooperate with a pro-market government like the PAP. He had learnt from his battle with the Chinese-language media that the truly bothersome owners were headstrong publishers like *Nanyang Siang Pau's* Lee Eu Seng, who put his ideals ahead of profit and even personal safety—he ended up detained for five years under the Internal Security Act.

The way to pre-empt such trouble, Lee Kuan Yew realised, was to ban individual- and family-controlled newspapers, and spread ownership thinly across many shareholders to dilute the influence of any single one of them. It's no coincidence that many of the world's most fiercely independent newspapers are or were family-

owned: *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* in the United States, and *The Hindu* and *The Indian Express* in India, for example. When faceless conglomerates take over newspapers, they often install tamer editors.

The NPPA also introduced a management share system to guarantee that newspapers wouldn't stray. Shares must be divided into two classes, ordinary shares and management shares, with management shares pumped with 200 times the voting power of ordinary shares. The government dictates who gets to be classed as management shareholders. Non-government companies Great Eastern Life Assurance and its parent, OCBC Bank, are the two largest holders of SPH management shares. Others entrusted with super-voting stock include NTUC Income, Singapore Telecom, DBS Bank and United Overseas Bank. Their common trait is that they are corporations deeply invested in Singapore's political stability.

The NPPA allows the government to stack the SPH board with loyalists. Since the 1980s, the company's chairman has never come from the media industry; the post has always been handed to a former senior public servant or minister. Since the 1990s, even the SPH chief executive position has been reserved for trusted former civil servants. As for who should run the newsrooms day to day, Lee and his successors reluctantly acknowledged that the group editor and chief editor positions were best left in the hands of experienced journalists. However, nobody is given a top job unless the prime minister is convinced of his political reliability. Since the late 1980s, newspaper editorships have been professional-cum-political appointments. The editor serves the audience only to the extent that this does not conflict with cabinet's wishes.

It's not the case that the government intervenes in every news story that relates to its work. I've met many civil servants who are mystified by the notion that the press is government-controlled, because this does not tally with their experience. Every day, the mainstream media contain news and views that officials wish they didn't. Unlike China's *Xinhua* and *People's Daily*, say, Singapore's Channel NewsAsia and *The Straits Times* have enough autonomy to

pursue angles that don't make the government look great. But only up to a point. The moment government leaders sense that they may lose control of the agenda, phone calls are made to editors to suppress unwelcome lines of journalistic inquiry or commentary.

When queried about Singapore's limited press freedom, the government's stock answer is that we can't afford to take risks with the extremely sensitive topics of race, language and religion. But the government's pressure tactics are used more often to police out-of-bounds markers that have nothing to do with such sensitive topics. They are about making the executive branch's job easier, by guiding public opinion on matters that are politically controversial. This is in line with the PAP's belief—first articulated by Lee Kuan Yew in 1971—that press freedom must be “subordinated” to the “primacy of purpose of an elected government”.



Despite these controls, the media are trusted by most Singaporeans most of the time. According to government surveys, around three-quarters of respondents are satisfied with the quality of newspapers. The communications marketing firm Edelman conducts annual global surveys of trust in institutions. These show Singaporeans' trust in media to be as high as in the Netherlands, which ranks among the world's freest media environments. It's tricky interpreting such data, because high trust could be a function of either the media's objective trustworthiness, or successful indoctrination of the audience—the same Edelman study puts China's population among the very top in trust in media. Such caveats aside, the Singapore press has met the market test more successfully than liberal critics assume. Circulation falls are in line with global trends. On the whole, Singapore's mainstream media have not performed worse financially than most of their counterparts in liberal democracies.

There are a few reasons why Singaporeans haven't turned their backs on the media in larger numbers. The simplest explanation is

that there is much more to life than politics. On most non-political fronts, Singaporeans can count on the national media for relevant and reliable accounts of what's going on. Furthermore, the government has a huge impact on people's lives from cradle (baby bonuses) to beyond the grave (exhumations for cemetery clearances). Regardless of their political orientation, people in Singapore need to keep up with what the government is thinking and doing in multiple arenas—its latest procedures for primary school admissions; land releases that will affect property prices; adjustments in rules for using Medisave; new financial incentives to promote business activity. If you're looking for timely and accurate information about any of this, you need news organisations that are close to the government.

Of course, beyond providing basic information, most people would also like media to speak up for them. A lot of the time, Singapore's press is able to fulfil that role within its available political space. After all, the PAP is usually on the same page as the people—it wouldn't have survived as long as it has if it weren't—so there's often no contradiction between journalism that serves the public and journalism that serves the government. However, there will always be some issues where public opinion deviates from the views of those in power. This is usually when a free press shows its value; when an independent newspaper stands up to powerful interests, becomes the people's champion and earns their loyalty. But this is precisely when Singapore's media controls kick in. On politically controversial issues, instead of pressuring the government to listen to the people, the press has to persuade the people that the government is right.

Hence, the media's chronic inability to meet the aspirations of a large proportion of Singaporeans. This has gone on for so long that many members of the intelligentsia have given up hope. They used to get angry. Now, they just laugh. Most have low-to-zero expectations. Some intellectuals go so far as to say that press freedom has become a non-issue, since Singaporeans now have access to the workaround solution of the internet. That's like saying

that Wikipedia, TED Talks and free e-learning courses mean academic freedom doesn't matter. It does, because universities and their professors still perform a role that the internet can't replace. Similarly, large, formal news organisations are still needed to produce regular, sustained and comprehensive journalism for a city state as busy and complex as Singapore. It's vital that we push our media—and more importantly their political masters—to improve their quality.



We journalists used to comfort ourselves with the observation that the situation was gradually improving. After all, journalists haven't been locked up under the ISA since the 1970s. The government's media relations have also become more professionalised. But, especially since the 2011 general election, things have gone into reverse gear. Based on what insiders say and what we see published, the government micromanages the media more now than 20 years ago. Practices that used to be absolute no-no's in the past are beginning to creep in, like journalists letting officials approve angles or even check entire stories before publication. When I worked at *The Straits Times* in the 1990s, we got the sense that the Goh Chok Tong government understood it was not in its own interests to crush the national media's credibility underfoot. Today's PAP appears no longer to care. For government-related stories that are even mildly controversial, the media switch into news-avoidance mode. Negative facts are buried deep in the story. Uncomfortable questions are not asked.

The public is not fooled, but that doesn't seem to bother government officials who handle the media. They appear to consider it a good day's work if headlines and story angles match the government press releases and talking points. Goh Chok Tong once stated that he did not want a "subservient" press or "government mouthpiece". Today's officials evidently do.

There have also been cultural changes in the newsrooms. In the

1990s, my top editors were pro-PAP, but they had been socialised into the profession before Lee Kuan Yew restructured and transformed the media in the 1980s. As a result, they had a deep sense of what would be lost if they gave in too easily to every government request. They made it clear to us that it was their job, not ours, to negotiate with the government and to decide how to balance the professional with the political. At our level, we were instructed to think only of our readers; we were scolded and shamed when we got slow or lazy, or wrote stories that sounded like government releases. That generation of editors has left, and the newsrooms are now under journalists who've only known the PAP system. Some seem to have decided to take the path of least resistance.

My former big boss, group editor-in-chief Cheong Yip Seng—a true believer in the Singapore system and whose conservatism used to frustrate me when I worked under him—spotted the warning signs. His 2012 post-retirement book, *OB Markers: My Straits Times Story*, was a stout defence of the symbiotic relationship between *The Straits Times* and the PAP. But he also counselled a new generation of politicians to give editors the respect and space to carry out their jobs professionally. The establishment didn't get the message, choosing to react as if Cheong had broken the magician's code, betraying too many secrets about the inner workings of government–press relations.

When Lee Kuan Yew suppressed the authoritarian instinct to nationalise the press outright, it was probably because he saw the value of professional editors who could independently decide how to act in the nation's interests, rather than mindlessly await instructions from government. By those standards, there are already signs that the system is failing. When Lee Hsien Loong collapsed during his 2016 National Day Rally speech, the mainstream media showed itself incapable of thinking on its feet. The national broadcaster appeared shell-shocked. Seized by the fear of saying anything that would get them in trouble, they said nothing, unable even to recount what everyone in the auditorium

had seen with their own eyes. Textbook advice on crisis communication says you must never create an information vacuum, because this will be filled by irresponsible rumour and speculation. The mainstream media's live coverage on television and online did just that.

If Singapore journalism underperforms, it is not for want of talent. There are still skilled individuals within Singapore newsrooms. There's also a reserve army of young and extremely able journalists who could be drawn into service. Many have left the profession they love out of frustration. Others are flying high in some of the world's best news organisations, including *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, BBC, Reuters, Bloomberg, and other agencies. I sometimes fantasise about all these talented Singaporeans coming together to produce the kind of news media that will earn their society's respect and loyalty. It won't happen within my productive life. But perhaps one day.