Freedom from the Press: Journalism and State Power in Singapore

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In the opening pages of this book Cherian George, a former journalist and until recently an associate professor at the School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University Singapore wrote: 'The impulse of the powerful few to shape the minds of the many is timeless and universal. What is remarkable about Singapore is the manner in which such power has been exercised'. Statistically, Singapore is one of the countries ranked consistently low on press freedom. In 2012 it was 149 and just above Iraq and Myanmar. However, what is revealed in this book is a form of media control that is more sophisticated and more resilient than most critics assume.

Aware of the power of the media, the Peoples Action Party (PAP) government instituted laws and regulations such as the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act 1974 (NPPA) to exert considerable influence over the mainstream media (Tey 2008). The NPPA gives the government the power to issue or revoke licenses for publications, and to appoint management shareholders to newspaper companies. For radio and television, the Broadcasting Act requires licenses to be issued. This was recently amended to extend to popular online news websites, requiring a S$50,000 bond and a commitment to take down any material deemed objectionable within 24 hours (Lim 2013). Most of Singapore's mainstream media outlets are at least indirectly owned by government-linked corporations (Ortmann 2009).

George writes that measures adopted by the government to control the media has "distort[ed] the relationship between the media and public, making accountability to government more salient than accountability to people in editorial decision-making." In his memoirs, a former editor, Cheong Yip Seng

(2012) writes about the government's expectation of the paper to fulfil an "educational role" to help Singaporeans understand government policies, and the appointing of a civil servant as executive chairman of the newspaper to help with "Istana-Times House relations" (the Istana being the working office of the Prime Minister, while Times House was the previous headquarters of the newspaper). In Chapter 2 George addresses how the PAP has harnessed the dominant global trend of media commerialisation to control what he calls 'journalism's democratic purpose'. Chapter 3 looks at the inner workings of the newsrooms in Singapore and the political pressure that has been internalised by 'out of bounds' (OB) markers. These markers involve the routines in selecting stories through the filter of 'news judgments', and the ritualistic application of 'objectivity'. Clearly, there is a danger here as we have recently observed, that the 'ritualistic' dimension can outweigh the 'objectivity' as documented in Murdoch's media empire.

Such markers have been the reality of Singapore's media throughout much of the country's independent history, but the advent of the Internet has allowed for the establishing of alternative platforms, "challenging the consensus" by practising what George describes as "contentious journalism". Like many other alternative media platforms around the world, alternative websites allow those who may have been excluded or marginalised by the mainstream to champion their own viewpoints (George 2006).

The mainstream media system according to George is sustained through hegemonic processes, that is political domination in which coercion is masked by consent that has been manufactured through certain ideologies. In Chapter 4, George analyses the PAP ideology, which has justified state control of the media as an integral part of Singapore's success formula. The Singapore governement has been particularly skilled at applying the right doses of force to contain competition, but not enough to provoke widespread moral outrage. George describes in some detail what he calls this 'calibrated coercion' in Chapter 5.

However, the PAP's hegemony has not been total, especially with the obvious challenge coming from more liberal values see as being promoted in Western Media. For the PAP media control is proposed as more in line with 'Asian values' of harmony and consensus. Yet, as pointed out in Chapter 6, the PAP in the past had to face opposition from a radical Asian language press as well. Indeed George argues that the media system in Singapore today has been partly

shaped by the PAP's confrontations with the Singapore Chinese Press, in particular.

Chapter 7 examines ithe intervention of artists, filmmakers and internet producers in censorship debates. This is contrasted with the professional journalists and the factors that keep the press conservative.

In Chapter 8 George outlines how the internet has enabled the most radical and unpredictable challenge to the PAP system of media control through "challenging the consensus". When researcher Carol Soon (2013) interviewed political bloggers, she found [a] commonality that emerged from the interviews with all 41 political bloggers wanting to fill a void in the public discourse.Singapore political bloggers used their blogs as a platform to communicate and disseminate views that they deemed to be alternative to those perpetuated in mainstream discourse. Over time, various online platforms have risen to prominence in Singapore. One such example is *Sintercom*, which carried articles on political rallies during the 1997 General Election (Portmann 2011). It's founder, Tan Chong Kee, said that the website had been established "to encourage lively debate about Singapore issues" (Siew 2001). The website also featured a section called 'NOT The Straits Times Forum' where letters that had been rejected or edited by The Straits Times were published, allowing readers to "see for themselves the extent of censorship of letters by the national newspaper" (George 2006).

Sintercom has since shut down following stricter government regulations on the Internet (Portmann 2011), but other websites have emerged to continue challenging the mainstream narrative. George identifies *The Online Citizen* as "the most serious contentious journalism effort to date", but lists 11 belonging to other platforms as well, including individual blogs like *Yawning Bread* and *Singapore Rebel* and group blogs like *Temasek Review*. These alternative platforms challenge the authority of the élites and employ different methods such as weaving advocacy and partisanship into their content . All these websites are seen as a counterbalance to the official line promoted by the mainstream media, and are able to contribute a different viewpoint to the public sphere. While the mainstream media is perceived to be representative of the government and its views, alternative media has opened up a space for citizens to talk back, and therefore allow for continuous exchange and negotiation in the public sphere (Hill and Lian 1995, Ortmann 2009).

George points out, the PAP has at least tolerated alteranive media up to a point, but it is unclear whether the PAP can fully resolve the contraditions of being simultaneously open and closed. The 2011 general election results came as something of a shock to the PAP's 'aura of invulnerability'. One could well claim that the 'slingshot' used in the David and Goliath story has become a metaphor for improbable victory. Gladwell (2013), in his book entitled *David and Goliath* describes how the traditional version of the events was probably wrong and what we can learn from this misinterpretation. In fact the rock in David's sling was a much more powerful weapon than the physical might of Goliath. But what does remains unclear in the Singapore context is whether the change in the political landscape (possibly brough about by the 'slingshot' of the internet) after the 2011 elections represents the beginning of the end of the PAP's longstanding formula, or whether it is able to respond to public demands without discarding its fundamentals.

The remaining Chapters 9 and 10 George writes about why critics think that the Singapore system is unsustainable because it is undemocratic but he believes that this is part of the 'Singapore Paradox'. Namely, that market driven economic growth goes hand in hand with democratisation but Singapore still remains undemocratic in so many ways. Singapore is perhaps an archeytype of a large and growing group of nations marked by having ruling élites that promote capitalism precisely by dampending democracy. In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) Harvey treats Singapore as a part of the family of neoliberal regimes, formerly spearheaded by such figures as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan. Neoliberalism speaks the language of freedom but, in reality, is profoundly suspicious of democracy.

The Neoconservative agenda of the Murdoch media corporation, particularly with regard to his newspapers published in Britain, *The News of the World* and *The Sun*, has now tiggered the establishment of The Royal Charter, the first state regulation of the press in the UK since newspaper regulation was abolished in 1695. This has come about because of the medias lack of self regulation in terms of 'objectivity' and its too close association with the government of the time. Freedom from government control does not guarantee as George says, that journalism will always play its role as the guardian of objectivity in society.

Finally to put this book in perspective, according to the United Nations Human Development Index (2010) Singapore ranked 27th in the world and 4th

in Asia. Indeed Singapore topped the Gallup's Potential Net Migration Index in a survey of 148 countries. The indication being that the Singapore emigration rate is in fact lower than some 'domocratic' countries such as Britain, Ireland and New Zealand. George concludes that Singapores does have serious flaws and signifiant among them is that loyal citizens who care enough about society to stand up and criticise have to be prepared to be treated as opponents of the governement, enduring hardship and threats to their livelihood. There is no clearer indication of this in George's own case of having been refused tenure in his university (meaning he must leave within one year) in spite of support from his own faculty and academics in other institutions. Evidently the governement's reach goes well beyond the media in terms of freedom of speech.

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