

SINGAPORE GOVERNMENT PRESS STATEMENT

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INCHE SHA'ARI TADIN TO INTERNATIONAL
Y'S MEN'S CLUB AT VIKING ROOM, GOODWOOD
HOTEL, ON SATURDAY 26TH APRIL, 1969,
AT 1.30 P.M.

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First of all, allow me to thank you very much for inviting me as your luncheon speaker today. I would also like to congratulate your organisation on your commendable sustained, civic mindedness and enterprise, that have shown increasing results over the past few years. Such voluntary contribution of dedicated effort from the private sector is complementary and essential to the Government's policies and actions for healthy and accelerated national development.

I was originally asked to speak specifically on "Our Television Service: A Viewpoint" but have now obtained the agreement of your International Director, my friend, Mr. Raymon Huang, to address you in broader and more vein - "Broadcasting Services: Viewpoints", which will, I hope enable a wider treatment of the subject drawing on comparisons of the situation in different countries of the world in relation to our practices in Singapore and seeing what we should do in Singapore in this respect.

If one of you asked me what was the most significant feature of development in the world in the period following World War II, despite the many competing claims to this recognition, I would unhesitatingly say that it is the fantastic advances made in the volume, variety, sophistication and impact of mass communications on people, giving them new fields and horizons of knowledge, thoughts and ideas, values and ways of life. The effect on human conduct, if not cultures, is already being seen all over the world, possibly in changes so fundamental, contributing to new values and patterns of life and behaviour.

If this thesis is accepted, I think we will also agree that in the field of communications, the most spectacular developments, especially in terms of their effect on human beings and values, have been in the mass media, particularly the broadcasting services. Radio and, more importantly, television, have brought the world and knowledge in all their varieties, to living rooms of people and have, thereby, contributed positively, if not totally, to a new situation of mass knowledge and know-how.

Before going further, I would say that the organisation of mass media in a given country reflects its values, philosophies and social conditions. It is said by the Americans that broadcasting is an extremely democratic channel of information, entertainment and communication. This statement is completely true of the mass media in the United States. It is probably acceptable in France, Germany, Japan and Singapore although there is room for disagreement; it is definitely not valid in contemporary totalitarian countries, and as a matter of interest, not the Germany of the Third Reich. During that period of time, broadcasting was rigidly controlled by the authoritarian government, and it functioned essentially as an instrument of dictatorship.

The first country for a bird's-eye view of broadcasting should appropriately be the United States - this is the biggest single country in which most money is spent on the development of T.V. In 1951, it was estimated that television received about US\$332.3 million of the advertising then devoted to major American publicity media. In 1958 in a space of eight years the figure jumped to \$1.36 billion - when television was still very young. Present day figures must indeed be staggering.

In the United States, the value judgement historically and presently involved is that: is broadcasting a public service or is it a business. It could only be one or the other from the American point of view. As a matter of interest, may I point out that in Singapore, we have successfully demonstrated that commercialism could be combined with a public service with complete success.

The result of the acceptance of this view-point, that is, that broadcasting is purely a business, is that broadcasting becomes big business in the United States, a success that has prompted an expert to say "although it is obvious that the public does not have a choice of all types of programmes at all hours, certainly no foreign system of broadcasting can equal the American system in breadth of choice and in popular appeal. Other systems of broadcasting throughout the world have been stunted and dwarfed in their development by rigid government control. But in the hands of private enterprise, the American system has developed in a phenomenal manner."

As I said just now, there is room to dispute with statements like that particularly on the basis of comparison with broadcasting systems elsewhere. When we look at the broadcasting systems of other countries, the first striking feature is the relative lack of the economy of scale. Not having the same advantage of being (in political terms) a super-power and the same standard of living, the structural organisation of the mass media in other countries differs, bearing in3/-

bearing in mind different ideologies, circumstances and traditions.

There are three private-owned national networks of broadcasting in the States, whose stations radiate across the length and breadth of America. In addition, there are several hundred privately-owned independent stations, the term "independent" meaning non-affiliated, and it has little political connotations, such as we in Singapore may expect from the term. There is no State-owned network or station in the United States.

The controversy raging in the American television arena particularly with regard to the meaning of "public interest" points to the desirability of some sort of State-control for mass media. When we examine the structure of the mass media in other countries, we find that they are characterised in common by degrees of State control, censorship if you like but certainly not rigid control except in the totalitarian countries. In short, there appears to be a lot of flexibility in the systems of the countries we shall be examining now, as there should be since broadcasting involves personal, and therefore changing values.

The B.B.C. is entirely a non-profit concern. It gets its revenue from the 15 million T.V. licensed holders amount to £100 million which also includes sales of programme overseas. There are also several privately owned stations, which are no doubt governed by laws and status. As it is constituted, and in the context of an open society, it appears that there is no question of regulating the B.B.C.

Traditionally, despite being State-owned, B.B.C. is autonomous in so far as cultural policy is concerned. B.B.C. enjoys the privilege of cultural freedom. In this, B.B.C. is more or less entrusted with the task of setting the cultural tone of society. In fact, everybody must have heard of the B.B.C. type of pronouncement, which occupies a position of impartiality - often it makes comments on English politics and policies in thorough objectivity, and without favour or fear. This is in fact an indication of the degree of liberalism possible in such a sophisticated society where the ways of life of the people are freer than in development societies.

Of late there have been many public controversies over B.B.C. productions. These range from religion to politics. These floods of public criticism only go to show the man-on-a-tight-rope position of the B.B.C. vis-a-vis public morality - again a question of values. We are again reminded that it is next to impossible to please everybody. This puts B.B.C. in an unenviable if not untenable position, and this is workable only because Britain is a tolerant society. I can imagine that there are and must be times when B.B.C.

sails too close to the wind and in the process errs on the side of permissiveness. By the same token, it can err on the side of puritanism. In earlier case, such acts of commission or omission will only be the case of a storm in the tea-cup. Public criticism is elicited, and people become heated. Then everything is forgotten - this is the very nature and fabric of the democratic process with several hundred years of history behind it.

The same situation is more or less being replicated in Japan. First, there is a State-owned Japanese Broadcasting Corporation, the Japanese equivalent of the B.B.C. Side by side are operated a network of independent stations - independent in the sense of being non-affiliated, and therefore not having the advantage of budgeting on the basis of a co-operative and corporate basis.

Politically, the Japanese Corporation is autonomous in that it is not administratively the extension or part of a government ministry. In fact I am told that politically it resents government control so that it is in the happy position to comment on policies and politics without bias, favour or fear. This, as is the case of the B.B.C., is an effective indicator of the maturity of the democratic process.

Culturally, and there the similarity with B.B.C. stops, I should say that generally there is a lot of cultural puritanism in the orient. I should say that the Japanese Corporation will try to avoid controversies as to what cultural tastes are or are not, or rather should or should not be. Conservative forces will probably continue to exert influence on Asian societies for a long time to come. Whether this is good or bad is a matter of viewpoint. And it will continue to affect culture in general, and broadcasting in particular.

In France, sound and television broadcasting is essentially a State monopoly operated as a public service. As in Britain, Canada and Japan, there are in addition private stations broadcasting in French from areas bordering on France.

By the very nature of the control mechanism, the position vis-a-vis political impartiality is different from that in England and Japan. Although Organisation of Radio and Television Francais (O.R.T.F.) is a "State institution of an industrial and commercial character", that is, as a public corporation, it is under the influence of a Control Council, under the aegis of the Minister of Information, and comprising representatives of Government, Parliament and the public. Invariably, O.R.T.F. has to reflect public opinion as well as that of the sectors represented in the Council. Its very structure makes it self-censoring and self-restraining with respect to matters of morality, politics and other social values. In politics I should say that5/-

say that it will probably not express the type of opinions that are expressed by B.B.C. in Britain or the Japanese Corporation in Japan.

In short, one can say that Radio and Television France is an excellent example of intelligent use of mass media to educate, inform and entertain. Its very constitution and State control prevents the mass media from enjoying phenomenal growth, but at least none of the excesses associated with American television can be repeated in France. R.T.S. cannot be dramatic but at least it can be efficient in its three-fold function of educating, informing and entertaining. Its structural pattern seems to reflect the very values we preach and practise in Singapore - that is, a tolerant society but one which cannot afford to go permissive.

The German example is a vindication of the theory of flexible State control of broadcasting, a theory so vehemently rejected by the Americans. German broadcasting is State-owned and therefore State controlled, the Federal Government being responsible for the technical aspects of broadcasting and the various State governments responsible for the day-to-day business of running the stations.

Despite being State-owned, the position vis-a-vis freedom of political expression is probably nearer to that of Britain and Japan rather than France. In operation, Radio and Television Germany enjoys autonomy - the stations are independent of the Federal Government, so that these mass media are committed to objective reporting. This does not mean that they can have things their own way. In fact, the stations in the various Federal States have, by law, to take cognisance of the wishes of society, political parties and the churches in their programming. This makes for restraint, and if you must use the term, a certain degree of control or censoring.

In analysis, the conclusion seems to be that it is most desirable to exert flexible State control over the mass media. It is up to the individual country concerned to find formulae best suited to its social conditions. The best thing is of course the happy medium, for as we have seen, too much liberalism as in America results in chaos, or at most, a sort of semi-controlled chaos. At the same time, too much control tends to stunt the development of the mass media. When it comes to Singapore's turn, we find that we can learn much from the experiences and knowledge gained by other countries. In any case, R.T.S. as it is, which is State-owned and monopolised, is already providing a satisfactory service in Singapore. By any standards it is a very satisfactory service in the context that the policy in Singapore is to streamline and achieve greater efficiency in the field of public services.

In Singapore, historically the first broadcasting station in Singapore was privately established at Caldecott Hill in 1935 by the British Malay Broadcasting Corporation. Regular transmission commenced on June 1935, without a break until today. In 1940, the State interposed by purchasing the entire properties and assumed the responsibility for operating the service known as the "Broadcasting Station, Posts and Telegraph Department, Singapore and the Federated Malay States."

The subsequent history of its development need not detain you. These are part of local current history and you are no strangers to them, except for me to say that the Singapore Television service was inaugurated on February 15, 1963.

The programming of television during the last six years must have met with the usual problems that stations outside the giant T.V. areas must face - that is the problems of meeting the varied values and tastes of our viewership. Add to this the problem of having to communicate with so many racial groups, and the wonder should be that television has been able to attain its present viability.

Singapore has 110,000 T.V. sets and a viewership of at least one million at a conservative estimate of 10 viewers to each T.V. set. The viewing demands must be not only tremendous, varied but also oddly at variance. It is no surprise that criticisms of R.T.S. programmes appear frequently in the local Press. Some criticisms have been downright destructive. Some critics have shown good sense. Others have been constructive and helpful. And there have been a good many bouquets. These are as expected, and no television organisation can escape this, which is part and parcel of broadcasting in a democratic society.

In fact, it is an essential aim of R.T.S. to stimulate opinion, and the attitude we have adopted is to show that there is often more than one viewpoint to any problem; and when it comes to debate, the more viewpoints the merrier. It is expressly the stimulation of dissent that is the guiding spirit behind the current series of inter-school debates, which needless to say, have proved to be very popular with the local viewership.

It is unnecessary to elaborate on the limitations that are imposed on a one-station country like ours. For one thing, the viewership should not expect too much by way of local feature film productions. Even in a comparatively sized country in the United States, I am told that an independent station can only provide 85 hours of local productions per month by way of sport, songs and other local 7/-

other local programmes. By this criterion, R.T.S. is certainly far ahead in quantity, scope and variety.

Our limited viewership does not have what it takes to sustain a television film industry, and our efforts in this creative field will have to be restricted to very modest attempts, particularly in the field of short documentaries. For the most part, our programming will have to depend on imported films - from the United States, England, Germany and Japan - where because of the film industry's viability, commercial companies flourish, and in fact a whole host of occupations have cropped up - T.V. producers, script-writers, costume-designers, editors, directors, etc.

Nevertheless, attempts are and will be made to increase the local content. And it is largely through such features that some of the basic objectives of the Government vis-a-vis nation-building can be fulfilled - to induce tolerance in the people as a way of life, to foster a sense of national identity and common outlook amongst our multi-racial audience, and to aid social and economic development. These general aims provide the driving force in the production of local programmes.

Let me run through some of the home-made productions by R.T.S. and their specific aims.

The productions by R.T.S. include straight talks on given topics with the background on local and international events; film documentaries with pictorial descriptions of achievements in Singapore industry and urban planning; features to commemorate special occasions such as the 150th anniversary of the founding of Singapore, or the Asian Highway, magazines programmes giving a digest of political, social and cultural events, interviews with foreign experts and visiting professors in many fields of human endeavour; and school debates on controversial themes.

All these programmes are aimed essentially at giving awareness of the problems in Singapore and also to stimulate opinion-making, in short, to produce a well-informed public so necessary to the operation of the democratic process.

These then are the more serious aspects of broadcasting in Singapore. All talks and documentaries, and no entertainment will make the station a dull one. And so, the cultural aspects must not be ignored. In the cultural field, the overall aim is to promote the emergence of a common culture from the four separate cultural streams, that is, Malay, Chinese Tamil and English. Hence the practice is integration of programmes rather than to put them in water-tight compartments.

In discharging the threefold function of R.T.S. that is to educate, inform and entertain, as I said just now, there are bound to be criticisms from the listening public from time to time. These criticisms are taken in the right spirit - that is, as indicators of public concern, and rather than to stifle criticism, it is our aim to encourage the spirit of the open debate. Where criticisms appear in the local Press, appropriate answers are given in the tradition of good public relations. Where constructive positions are made, they will be given consideration. Where a critic criticises for the sake of criticising, this will also be pointed out. Whatever the criticism is about, from the most fatuous to the most constructive, the value is there and it is noted.

These criticisms simply mean that even within the area of programming itself, personal values too are involved. But it does not mean that the private values of programmes are imposed upon the viewership. Far from it, since public tastes from all sectors of society, ranging from low, middle to high brow must be taken into consideration. Because of its experience since 1963, R.T.S. is now in a position to have improved knowledge of the biases, prejudices, tastes and other values of the viewership.

Recently, there was an enquiry as to whether R.T.S. would become a corporation. Whether R.T.S. should remain a Government Department or become a corporation is a matter that will have to be considered very carefully. The pros and cons of the broadcasting systems in other parts of the world will have to be weighed. The local situation will also have to be considered. The over-riding factor will have to be that our broadcasting service should be effective and efficient - a democratic instrument of public education, information and entertainment, and therefore dependent on human values in the last analysis.

APRIL 26, 1969.

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