

ADDRESS TO THE GENERAL ASSEMBLY OF THE  
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THE MASS MEDIA AND NEW COUNTRIES

In the mid-term elections in America in November 1970, television, the most powerful of contemporary mass media, did not prove to be decisive in winning elections. The neat packaging and slick presentation of programmes and personalities, and frequent spot advertisements, could not sell a candidate as well as T.V. could sell soap and detergents. For it is not improbable that the way people vote depends on more complex factors than what they are told on the mass media. Their pay packet, their subsidised housing, schooling, health and social services, the way specific policies hurt or advance their interests, these are probably more decisive in how they vote.

The sustained repeated "sell" through all mass media, television, radio, newspapers and magazines, undoubtedly helps to shape attitudes to fashions in clothes, foods and consumer durables. Although this power of persuasion falls short of what John Kenneth Galbraith expounded in his Manchester Lectures in 1968, that the consumer bought what he was insidiously told to buy, not what he

wanted, the huge and ever growing advertisement industry is evidence that sellers believe it helps sales. It is therefore not improbable that the sustained plugging of a line can also mould public opinion on political issues and policies. The recent bitter rows over T.V. and newspaper coverage of the war in Vietnam was a sad admission that even in highly developed countries, objectivity was the subjective views of the owners and commentators of the mass media as against those of the Nixon administration.

New countries can choose either this laissez-faire system of the West and allow complete free play and competition between T.V. stations, dailies and weeklies, or follow the closed and controlled system of Communist countries, or some intermediate point between the two, depending on the level of education and sophistication of their peoples and the political traditions and style of the governments. But in practice, new countries, particularly the smaller ones, cannot altogether insulate themselves from outside news and views.

Some governments like China, or the Soviet Union in pre-Khrushchev days, effectively sealed off their people from the outside world. Then the world is what the rulers say it is. And the rulers are unchanging for long years. But there is a heavy price to be paid for such isolation. The incessant exhortation to

progress, the constant stress on conformity in ideology, ideas and action, they lead to drab uniformity.

But watching the chaos and confusion that have followed the election of temporarily popular governments in many new countries, many leaders, especially in Africa, have decided against free play and opted for the one-party state with all mass media supporting the one-party. On the other hand, in several new countries in Asia, every election is an exercise in auctioning the country's non-existent reserves and future production. With an electorate ignorant of the economic and administrative facts of life, it is no surprise that governments do get elected on programmes and promises the countries' resources and administrative capacity cannot fulfil.

In just about all new countries, radio and television are controlled by the State. When power was handed over from a colonial government to the first elected government they remained in state control, with varying degrees of latitude for dissenting views. But the problem, despite ownership and control of T.V. and radio stations, is that the economics of operation makes it necessary to buy foreign programmes. At best, these programmes entertain without offending good taste. At worst, they can undo all that is being inculcated in the schools and universities. This is particularly so in the new countries where the English

language is widely used. Francophone states have only France, (and perhaps Quebec), to worry about. English-speaking ones find their mass media carrying large chunks of canned programmes and syndicated features from the developed English-speaking world.

Their newspapers, even if nationalised, carry reports from the well-organised world-wide news agencies of the West. There is also a whole range of American and British language magazines and journals to cater for all tastes. And if people cannot afford them, U.S.I.S., and the British Information Services provide ample library facilities.

At a time when new nations require their peoples to work hard and be disciplined to make progress, their peoples are confused by watching and reading of the happenings in the West. They read in newspapers and see on T.V. violent demonstrations in support of peace, urban guerillas, drugs, free love and hippieism.

Many people are uncritically imitative. A report of an airplane hijacking leads to a rash of hijackings in other unexpected places. A report of a foreign diplomat kidnapped for ransom by dissident groups is quickly followed by similar kidnapping in other countries. Some monks burned themselves to death

in South Vietnam in acts of gruesome protest. Others in Ceylon and elsewhere followed suit.

Is it not possible to take in only the best of the West? Why does T.V. in new countries not cut out the sensational and the crude, and screen only the educational, and aesthetic, the scientific and technological triumphs of the West? We have tried this in Singapore. However the costs of acquiring good programmes become higher, the less popular they are with other potential buyers in the region. Thus we are caught in the lowest common denominator of viewers in the region.

As for the newspapers, the vernacular press, before independence, had usually joined in the anti-colonial crusade. After independence they often seek an uncritical reversion to a mythical, romantic past. In the second phase, the more intelligent of these papers try to find some balance in retaining the best of the old, whilst absorbing the best of the new in the West. But in any case foreign news and features are still extensively translated and published.

The English-language press in new countries, however, were, by and large, unenthusiastic about independence in colonial times. They were often owned by Western investors. Most change ownership after the colonial governments have

relinquished power. In countries like India and Ceylon, there has been a plethora of anti-establishment newspapers. Twice the left-inclined Ceylonese Government have threatened to nationalise the English-language newspapers. At this moment all editorials are censored. And foreign correspondents had to be restrained or be expelled for what the Ceylonese consider over-imaginative reports of the Che Guevarist uprising. How much of the confusion and dissensions in these new countries are compounded by the daily outpourings of hundreds of anti-establishment newspapers, no one will know.

What role would men and governments in new countries like the mass media to play? I can answer only for Singapore. The mass media can help to present Singapore's problems simply and clearly and then explain how if they support certain programmes and policies these problems can be solved.

More important, we want the mass media to reinforce, not to undermine, the cultural values and social attitudes being inculcated in our schools and universities. The mass media can create a mood in which people become keen to acquire the knowledge, skills and disciplines of advanced countries. Without these, we can never hope to raise the standards of living of our people.

If they are to develop, people in new countries cannot afford to imitate the fads and fetishes of the contemporary West. The strange behaviour of demonstration and violence-prone young men and women in wealthy America, seen on T.V. and the newspapers, are not relevant to the social and economic circumstances of new under-developed countries. The importance of education, the need of stability and work discipline, the acquisition of skills and expertise, sufficient men trained in the sciences and technology, and their ability to adapt this knowledge and techniques to fit the conditions of their country, these are vital factors for progress.

But when the puritan ethics of hard work, thrift and discipline is at a discount in America, and generally in the West, the mass media reflecting this malaise can, and does, confuse the young in new countries.

We have this problem in a particularly acute form in Singapore. We are an international junction for ships, aircraft and telecommunications by cable and satellite. People from the richer countries of the West, their magazines, newspapers, television and cinema films, all come in. We are very exposed. It is impossible to insulate Singaporeans from the outside world. One consoling thought is Arnold Toynbee's thesis that crossroads like the Lebanon benefit from the stimulation of ideas and inventions from abroad.

Western investments in industries in Singapore mean importing western machinery. With the machinery come Western engineers and managers, and their families. They live in Singapore, reinforcing by personal contact the impact of Western mass media. To take in Western science, technology and industry, we find that we cannot completely exclude the undesirable ethos of the contemporary West. This ethos flakes off on Singaporeans. So we must educate Singaporeans not to imitate the more erratic behaviour of the West.

Few viewers and readers of the mass media in new countries know of the torment amongst Western intellectuals. Some Americans question where their bureaucratised science and technology, their military-industrial complex, are leading them. Even fewer read of the torment of American intellectuals who question the wisdom of exporting this science and technology to the impoverished people of the under-developed world, when it has wrought such havoc on America, dehumanising an opulent society.

But the under-developed have no choice. Whatever the side effects of importing Western science and technology, not to do so will be worse.

With parts of our population it has been wiser to inoculate them from these maladies. Those who have been brought up in their own traditional life styles and cultural values, have greater resistance to Western ills. By all means the pill to keep the birth rate down. But must it lead to promiscuity, venereal diseases, exhibitionism and a breakdown of the family unit? I do not have all the answers. I can only hope the pill plus the traditional importance of the Asian family unit, where paternity is seldom in doubt, can prevent the excesses from imitating contemporary Western sexual mores.

To compound our problems, the population of Singapore is not homogeneous. There are several racial, linguistic, cultural and religious groups. For the Singapore Chinese, about 76% of the population, there is a wide range between Confucianism and Taoism to Maoist-materialism. They can view or read the output of local talent, or that of free-wheeling Hong Kong, with its own brand of Westernised life-styles, or the archaic values and political styles of Taiwan, by and large still those of Kuomintang Nanking, or films and publications of the People's Republic of China, every product dyed in Maoist red. Censorship can only partially cut off these influences. It is more crucial that local production of films and publication of newspapers should not be surreptitiously captured by their proxies.

The Malays of Singapore, some 14% of the population, have the mass media from peninsular Malaya and Indonesia. These irredentist pulls are reinforced by visits of businessmen and tourists.

For the Indians of Singapore, some 7% , there are Indian publications and films, primarily from South India carrying the pulls at the heartstrings of cultural and ethnic loyalties. But the second generation are nearly all English-educated, more interested in their future in Singapore, and less in India's destiny.

The rest of the populations -- 3%, are Eurasians, Ceylonese, Pakistanis. They are nearly all English-educated and present no problems of irredentism.

But with nearly all sectors of the population the deleterious influence from the mass media of the West is an increasing problem. Fortunately, we have not gotten to the stage of mod styles, communal living, drugs and escapism.

An interesting question is whether the mass media can affect a people to an extent where over a sustained period they not only determine social behaviour but also spark off political action. I believe every now and again they do. People are affected by the suggestion of the printed word, or the voice on radio, particularly if reinforced by the television picture.

12,000 Sikhs from Punjab form one of the smallest communities in Singapore. They are split into contending factions, reflecting the contest between contending groups in the Punjab, of which they have heard on radio and have read in Punjabi language news-sheets. A recent fast to death by a Sikh leader in the Punjab to get Chandigarh given to the Sikhs, generated tension among Sikhs in Singapore. True, nearly 60% of the adult Sikhs were born and bred in the Punjab and immigrated to Singapore after their cultural values were settled. I believe, and hope, the second generation Sikh will be different.

In 1950, the publication of a photograph in a Malay newspaper of a Muslim girl in a convent, with the Virgin Mary in the background, caused riots. It was known as the jungle girl case. A Dutch girl, given to a Muslim Malay woman to look after, as the Japanese overran Southeast Asia, was rediscovered by her Dutch mother. She claimed her return. The girl had become a Muslim convert. The court, presided by an English judge, ordered the girl to be sent to a convent, pending the outcome of the trial. There were four days of rioting. Some 50 Europeans were slaughtered and many more maimed by Malay and Indian Muslims. Their sin was to be European Christians, like the Judge. The police, then mainly Muslims, just looked on.

And again, on July 21, 1964, a sustained campaign in a Malay language newspaper, falsely alleging the suppression of the rights of the Malay and Muslim minority by the Chinese majority, led to riots in which 36 people were killed and many more injured, during a Prophet Mohammad's birthday procession.

There have been several outbursts of violence by young Chinese workers and students. They were Communist-inspired though few were themselves Communists. These riots and arson were invariably preceded by calculated campaigns in which the newspapers and broad-sheets played an important role. The printed word reinforced the staged mass rallies to stoke up enough emotional steam for the explosions the Communists required for their "people's uprising".

I used to believe that when Singaporeans become more sophisticated, with higher standards of education, these problems will diminish. But watching Belfast, Brussels, and Montreal, rioting over religion and language, I wonder whether such phenomena can ever disappear.

Finally, making for more pressures is the interest in Singapore of our smaller neighbours and that of several great powers. The smaller countries do not have the resources or the stamina to be a threat. But in the growing contest

for maritime supremacy of the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea, the great powers are prepared to spend time and money to influence Singaporeans towards policies more to their advantage. They play it long and cool. Radio reception on handy transistors gives Singaporeans a whole variety of programmes, from the Voice of America to Radio Peking, and also the Voice of the Malayan National Liberation League clandestine radio station. The Malayan Communist Party want to liberate not only West Malaysia, but also Singapore. On top of this, foreign agencies from time to time use local proxies to set up or buy into newspapers, not to make money but to make political gains by shaping opinions and attitudes.

My colleagues and I have the responsibility to neutralise their intentions. In such a situation, freedom of the press, freedom of the news media, must be subordinated to the overriding needs of the integrity of Singapore, and to the primacy of purpose of an elected government. The government has taken, and will from time to time have to take, firm measures, to ensure that, despite divisive forces of different cultural values and life styles, there is enough unity of purpose to carry the people of Singapore forward to higher standards of life, without which the mass media cannot thrive.