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ADDRESS BY PRIME MINISTER MR LEE KUAN YEW
TO THE AMERICAN SOCIETY OF NEWSPAPER EDITORS
ON THURSDAY, 14 APRIL 1988, IN WASHINGTON D C

Introduction

The media play a key role in the life of every country, but it is a role which differs from one country to another. When these differences are misunderstood or ignored, as frequently happens with Western media operating in developing countries, the result is friction.

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Experience of Other Countries

In the US, the press enjoys considerable influence in political and public affairs. This US model is a particularly important one. It represents the ultimate in terms of media freedoms and prerogatives.

In March 1987 the US State Department explained in an aide memoire to the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs that it deplored the government's action to restrict the sale of the Asian Wall Street Journal despite the fact that the Journal had refused the Singapore Government the right of reply to an inaccurate report. It was because Americans believed that "the press (should be) free to publish or not its actions may seem to be" *. The logic is that "where the media are free, the marketplace of ideas sorts the irresponsible from the responsible and rewards the latter" **.

US State Department Aide Memoire, 10 Mar 87.

** *ibid.*

But the US model is not a universal standard. The media in other countries play different roles. These roles have grown out of their different historical experiences, political systems, and national temperaments. They represent equally valid functions which the press fulfills in different environments.

A more appropriate model for the Singapore media would be the BBC World Service, which reports events impartially, but provides an interpretation from a definite perspective - in the BBC's case, the point of view of Western liberalism. The BBC broadcasts in Singapore on FM 24 hours daily. It was a

service meant for the British community including their troops stationed in Singapore. When they departed in 1971, I personally asked them to continue it as a service to Singaporeans.

Another model is the Japanese media, which also stay out of partisan role in active politics, but go beyond plain reporting to shape public opinion to help build up a national consensus on important issues.

Singapore was a British colony. It has no history of a freewheeling rambunctious press. In fact if the British did not have press laws which they invoked to prevent the Chinese language press in Singapore from crusading for the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in the 1950s and 1960s, the MCP might have succeeded in doing to Singapore and Malayan what the Chinese Communist Party had done in China. Singapore's experience has made Singaporeans chary, even suspicious, of any paper crusading for causes or policies which people feel should be left to those who are openly in the political arena.

When the marketplace contest of ideas has been practised in newly independent nations, it has ended in less than happy results. This has happened in Sri Lanka and India. Both are heterogeneous, multiracial societies. In both there are intense racial and regional disagreements on important, emotional issues, such as race, language and culture. In both a plethora of media propound divergent and incompatible policies, mobilising sectional constituencies and arousing emotions. In both the result has been confusion and dissension, rather than enlightenment and consensus.

Similarly, the Philippines, before martial law, was an Asian version of the US system. The Philippines press enjoyed all the freedoms but they failed the Filipino people. A wildly partisan press helped Filipino politicians to flood the marketplace of ideas with junk, and confused and befuddled the people so that they could not see what their vital interests were in a developing country. And because basic issues like economic growth and equitable distribution were seldom discussed and never tackled, the democratic system malfunctioned and President Marcos declared martial law. Fortunately a miraculous demonstration of people's power in February 1986 saved the country from impending disaster.

Thus while the US model of the role of the press is good for the US, as a universal standard, its applicability has not been proven.

Singapore Unique

Singapore's case is unique, even among countries with colonial backgrounds. We do not have one press, but four major ones, in four different languages, catering to four different segments of population - English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil. Each has different key values and world views. In the past, the English press took the standpoint of the colonial government. The Chinese press promoted Chinese language, education and chauvinism, looking to China for inspiration. The Malay press agitated for Malay rights and privileges and promoted Malay nationalism, identifying itself with the Malay Muslim communities of Malaysia and Indonesia. The Tamil press maintained the ties of the local Tamil community with the mother country - Tamil Nadu in India.

Imagine an island one-fifth the size of Rhode Island, inhabited by 2.5 million with over half of its adults first generation immigrants. Seventy-five per cent are Chinese from seven major clan and dialect groups, springing from South and Southeastern China, 15 per cent Malays and Indonesians from the archipelago around Singapore, 10 per cent Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Burmese, and Eurasians. They have never been one community. For

decades, they coexisted in separate segments of the island demarcated by the British for disparate immigrants.

From these unpromising beginnings we have had to try to build one Singapore nation. But the “melting pot” was not an option. We have been independent for less than 23 years. Parents are determined to remain the different kinds of Asians they are and keep their children that way. We cannot obliterate the cultural and religious distinctions between the racial groups. Yet we have to create enough shared values and a single national identity. It has taken the government many years to get the different races intermingled into new towns. Gradually we hope to reconcile these centrifugal trends and to bring the press in the different languages closer by approximating, however inadequately, one national view.

The process has been helped by the adoption of English as a common working language. A new generation of Singaporeans has been educated with English as its first language, a stepmother tongue. But this has created a new danger. If we lose too much of our original cultures and their value systems, we may lose our bearings altogether. Singaporeans have to be Asians because Singapore is forever a part of Asia. Parents know that if their children take in too

much of America and the West daily on TV and in the newspapers the result will be disorientation, for Singapore is not the West.

One value which does not fit Singapore is the theory of the press as the fourth estate. From British times, the Singapore press was never the fourth estate. And in Singapore's experience, because of our volatile racial and religious mix, the American concept of the "marketplace of ideas", instead of producing harmonious enlightenment, has time and again led to riots and bloodshed.**

***Footnote:**

One example: the Jungle Girl (Maria Hertogh) riots in the 1950s. An English woman in the Singapore Standard wrote up a human interest story about a Dutch woman who handed her baby daughter to a Malay woman as the Japanese swept through Southeast Asia. After the war, the Dutch mother traced her daughter. In the meantime, she had been brought up as a Muslim. The Singapore Chief Justice, an Englishman, sent the child to a convent pending his decision on the custody of the child. It was good colourful journalism in English.

Unfortunately, the Malay language press took up the story, and hell broke loose. Bloody anti-white riots broke out, with the Singapore Police Force of Muslim-Malays inert. In one week, 13 were killed and 173 injured, nearly all Europeans.

If the events were repeated today, because of the resurgence of Islam, the results could be as disastrous, if not worse. Recently, in November 1986, Muslim Malaysians mounted demonstrations against the visit of Israel's President Herzog

to Singapore, because they said the Singapore Government showed a lack of sensitivity for the anti-Zionist feelings of their neighbours. Reports of these demonstrations in the press and TV set off similar protests from Muslim Singaporeans.

The Foreign Press

Singapore welcomes a free flow of information from abroad. It keeps us up to date with developments overseas.

Foreign correspondents can and do report us to their domestic readers in America or Europe in any way they choose. Of course, when foreign journals get important facts wrong, we write to correct them. But it does not matter to us what their ideological slants may be.

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The Offshore Press

Right up to the late 1970s , Singaporeans were mainly Chinese-educated. The foreign English language newspapers had few readers and little impact. It was Hong Kong-based Communist Chinese newspapers which caused problems. We banned all of them.

The 1980s marked a turning point in the electorate of Singapore, from a Chinese-educated majority to an English-educated majority. In 1981 English displaced Chinese, Malay and Tamil to become the language of instruction in all schools and universities in Singapore. The English language carries with it the cultural values of the British and Americans whose civilization they encompass. But Singapore cannot model itself on America. It does not have the cultural, historical or economic base for an American approach to life and politics. If you put 2.5 million Americans into Singapore, you will come to grief with your neighbours and the rest of Southeast Asia within six weeks.

At about the same time in late 1970s and early 1980s new publications like the Asian Wall Street Journal based in Hong Kong began to report Singapore daily not to readers in America or Europe but to Singaporeans themselves and to the rest of the region.

In fact they are no longer the foreign press. They have become domestic Singapore press, based offshore. Their correspondents act like journalists do in America, taking sides to determine the outcome of issues under debate.

America tend to think of Singapore as one of the NICs. But it is very different from Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong. They are racially homogeneous speaking their own language, and living their own culture. Unlike Singapore, English is not the language of their people, not even in British-governed Hong Kong. English has to be translated into Korean for South Korea, Mandarin or Hokkien in Taiwan, and Cantonese in Hong Kong, to reach the people.

None of the NICs nor our ASEAN neighbours can be penetrated by the offshore English language press like Singapore. Singapore, a country with one of the smallest population in Asia (2.6 million), was the largest single-country market for the Far Eastern Economic Review, and the second largest for the Asian Wall Street Journal (see attached table). Sales per million population in the NICs and ASEAN compared to Singapore were:

<u>NICs</u>	<u>FEER</u>	<u>AWSJ</u>
Hong Kong	1/2	4/5
Taiwan	1/80	1/20
South Korea	1/70	1/40

ASEAN

Malaysia	1/6	1/14
Philippines	1/80	1/40
Thailand	1/80	1/50
Indonesia	1/280	1/30

No Involvement in Domestic Politics

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Singapore's domestic debate is a matter for Singaporeans. We allow

American journalists in Singapore in order to report Singapore to their fellow countrymen. We allow their papers to sell in Singapore so that we can know what foreigners are reading about us. But we cannot allow them to assume a role in Singapore that the American media play in America, that of invigilator, adversary, and inquisitor of the Administration. If allowed to do so, they will

radically change the nature of Singapore society, and I doubt if our social glue is strong enough to withstand such treatment.

For example, few foreigners are aware that to lessen our inter-communal conflicts, Singapore and Malaysia have banned each other's newspapers for about 20 years. The last big Malay-Chinese riots in Malaysia in 1969 sparked off similar riots in Singapore. We are the closest of neighbours. Unfortunately, one country's newspaper reporting what its people are doing and saying, can cause Malay-Chinese troubles in the other. The reason is simple, that the two countries have different solutions to their not dissimilar interracial problems.

No right to Circulate

No foreign television station claims the right to telecast its programs in Singapore. Indeed American's Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations bar foreigners from owning more than 25 per cent of a TV or radio station. In other words, only Americans can control a business which influences public opinion in America. Thus before Rupert Murdoch purchased the independent TV stations of the Metromedia group in 1985, he first took up US citizenship. If a nation of 240 million finds such safeguards necessary, what about a plastic, unformed society like Singapore?

As for the US print media, in 1976 the South African Ministry of Information was negotiating covertly to buy the Washington Star to soft sell apartheid. When the story broke, a storm broke out in Washington and the purchase fell through. Americans were outraged at this South African attempt to soft sell apartheid in America's marketplace of ideas. But apartheid is patently abhorrent. If the marketplace of ideas automatically separates the good from the bad, and rewards the good, why this outrage at an attempt which is surprising that Singapore feels it cannot take chances with the offshore press taking sides on Singapore's domestic debate?

Circulation in Singapore is a privilege granted by the Singapore Government on our terms. The terms are that they should report as outsiders, i.e. do not become a partisan in our domestic debate. If they do not want to accept these conditions, they do not have to sell in Singapore.

The Disputes with TIME, etc.

In the last one-and-a-half years, the Singapore Government has restricted the circulations of a number of offshore publications in Singapore: TIME, AWSJ, Asiaweek and FEER.

The dispute with TIME, AWSJ, and Asiaweek have been over the right of reply. All three published inaccurate reports. The government wrote to set the facts straight. TIME and AWSJ refused to publish the government replies. Asiaweek published a government reply, but without our consent tampered with it and attributed the doctored version to the Singapore Government spokesman.

FEER published a story which was not only false but defamatory. The government challenged it either to substantiate or to withdraw its allegations. Only when FEER repeatedly refused to do so did the government restrict its circulation. I also had to sue them for libel, for unless I demolish their damaging misrepresentations they will affect my standing with my own people.

Restriction of Circulation

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The government could simply have banned these journals. But to ban them would have been an over-reaction. Since sales is one of the principal motivations of these journals, it was sufficient to restrict their circulation.

Restricting the circulations does not deprive Singaporeans of access to information. Once a few hundred copies are available in Singapore, anyone who need any information in them can make a photocopy for himself. Alternatively, he can buy an advertisement-free copy of the journal, since the law now allows individuals to reproduce and sell copies of restricted journals, provided all advertisements are removed, and the person doing so makes no profits from his public service.

But not allowing journals to increase their sales, the government has achieved some concessions. Both TIME and Asiaweek, after they had been gazetted, published the dispute letters intact. So we restored TIME's circulation, and in due course, we would restore Asiaweek's.

Conclusion

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I have not come to convert you to my point of view, for that would be impossible. All I aim to do is to persuade you that the Singapore Government's position is not irrational, that we seek no quarrel with the foreign press when we require them to remember that they are observers, not participants, in Singapore's domestic politics.

CIRCULATION FIGURES OF FEER AND AWSJ BY COUNTRY

	Population (million)	Circulation*		Circulation (Per Million Population)	
		FEER	AWSJ	FEER	AWSJ
Singapore	2.6	9300	5100	3577	1962
Malaysia	16.1	9200	2300	571	143
Philippines	55.0	2600	2600	46	46
Thailand	52.1	2300	1900	44	36
Indonesia	166.9	2200	2500	13	15
Hong Kong	5.5	9300	9100	1691	1655
Taiwan	19.4	900	1900	46	98
South Korea	41.6	2100	1900	50	46
Japan	121.5	2700	4400	22	36
India	750.9	1200	600	2	1

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*Source: Audit Bureau of Circulation (London)

FEER - Jun 87

AWSJ - Dec 86