

**TRANSCRIPT OF 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

I would like to respond by taking as read a speech which I had prepared but omitting the opening passages because my Chairman has very deftly brought us right to the meat of the problem and I think I should attack the bone.

[This para was not read] 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.

Experience of Other Countries

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

In March last year, the US State Department explained in an aide memoire to the Singapore Ministry of Foreign Affairs that it deplored the Singapore Government's action to restrict the sale of the Asian Wall Street Journal despite the fact that the Journal had refused to publish the Singapore Government's reply to an inaccurate report. It was because Americans believed, there is a US State Department aide memoire, that "the press (should be) free to publish or not to publish what it chooses, however irresponsible or bias its actions may seem to be."¹ The logic is that "where the media are free, the marketplace of ideas sorts out the irresponsible from the responsible and rewards the latter"².

I want to point out that 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, their political systems, and their national

¹ US State Department Aide Memoire, 10 Mar 87.

² Ibid

temperaments. They represent equally valid functions which the press fulfils 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. 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. They also stay out of partisan role in active politics, and they go beyond plain reporting to shape public opinion to by helping to build up a national consensus on important issues.

Now, Singapore's history 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 newspapers in Singapore from crusading for the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) in the 1950s and 1960s, the Malayan Communist Party would have succeeded in doing to Singapore and Malaya 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 many 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, in the Philippines, before martial law, it was an Asian version of the United States 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 was able to declare 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 – in Chinese, the majority, Malay, Tamil and English, which is a language of a small educated British subject class. 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, culture 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, just over 200 square miles, inhabited by 2.5 million people with over half of its adults first generation immigrants. People born in China, in India, in Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Indonesia and the rest of the archipelago. 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, 10 per cent Indians, Pakistanis, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Burmese, and Eurasians. We have never been one community. For decades, we coexisted in separate segments of the island demarcated by the British for disparate immigrant groups.

From these unpromising beginnings we have had to try to build one 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. We cannot even try to remove

the language differences, yet we have had 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 as we resettle the population. Gradually we hope to reconcile these centrifugal trends and to bring the press in the different languages closer together, 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 their first language, a stepmother tongue if you will. But this has created new dangers and problems. 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 irrevocably 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, because Singapore is not the West.

One value which does not fit Singapore is the theory that the press is 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 from time and time led to riots and bloodshed.³ I have this anecdote as a footnote but my colleague the Ambassador tells me perhaps I should read it out because it should not be a footnote for Americans.

[Start of Footnote] "One example: the Jungle Girl (Maria Hertogh) riots in the 1950s. An English woman, journalist 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 then, 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 then took up the story from there, and hell broke loose. A Malay girl in a Christian convent. Muslim forcibly being reabsorbed to Christianity. Bloody anti-white riots broke out, and the Singapore Police Force, mostly Muslim-Malays went inert. In one week, 18 were killed and 173 injured, nearly all Europeans.

³ Footnote has been incorporated in the main text.

Could it happen today? Because of the resurgence of Islam, the results would be even more disastrous. Recently, in November 1986, barely a year and a bit, Muslim Malaysians in Malaysia mounted demonstrations against Singapore because the President of Israel, President Herzog was visiting us. It was said the Singapore Government showed a lack of sensitivity for the anti-Zionist feelings of their Muslim neighbours. Reports of these demonstrations in the press and on TV set off similar protests from by Muslim Singaporeans in Singapore.” [End of footnote]

The Foreign Press

Now the foreign press. We welcome a free flow of information from abroad. It keeps us up to date with developments in the world.

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

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 Chinese language newspapers, pro-Communist, which caused problems. We banned all of them. We had to.

In the 1980s, it was a turning point in the electorate of Singapore, from a mainly Chinese-educated majority to now 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, as I know only too well from my own personal experience, the cultural values of the British and Americans whose civilizations they encompass. But Singapore cannot model itself on America. It does not have the cultural, the historical or the 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 in the 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.

My Chairman was kind enough to remind me that he met me in 1976 for the first time because he was the first editor of the Asian Wall Street Journal. It was a new kind of press. It is offshore Singapore press. Western correspondents, primarily Americans, some British, some Australians and New Zealanders and their staff, reporting Singapore as a Singapore newspaper for Singaporeans, not reporting Singapore to America or Europe or Australia. They have become, in fact, become domestic Singapore press, based offshore just like the American dollar based in Singapore offshore. Their correspondents act like journalists do in America, and they take sides to determine the outcome of issues under debate.

Americans tend to think of Singapore as one of the NICs, Newly Industrialising Countries. But it is very different from Korea, Taiwan or Hong Kong. They are racially homogeneous, homogenous speaking peoples, ethnically, linguistically, culturally. They have their own language, their own culture, they are one racial type. Unlike Singapore, English is not the language of their people, not even in British-governed Hong Kong. In this countries, English has to be translated into Korean for South Korea, Mandarin or Hokkien in Taiwan, or Cantonese in Hong Kong, before you can reach the people. And if you have visited these countries just watch the television channels and you will see almost no English. Switch on in Singapore and you will see more than half of it in English.

Now, none of the NICs and indeed, any of our ASEAN neighbours, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 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), the largest single-country market for the Far Eastern Economic Review, and the second largest for the Asian Wall Street Journal. If you reduce these sales per millions of population in the NICs and in ASEAN and you compare it to Singapore. If you take Singapore as one and Hong Kong is half, Taiwan is 1/80, South Korea is 1/70, Malaysia is 1/6, Philippines 1/80, Thailand 1/80, Indonesia 1/280. They are not worried what the English language press writes, their people can't read it. Take the Asian Wall Street Journal. Hong Kong 4/5; Singapore one; but there is no one-man one-vote in Hong Kong as the British Governor is appointed by the British Government and I would suggest to the Asian Wall Street Journal that there might be a change in the complexion of the environment when the Hong Kong

Chinese takes over the self-administered region in 1997, or perhaps even before. Taiwan 1/20; South Korea 1/40; Malaysia 1/14 but the votes are not with the English reading in the towns but the Malay reading in the countryside. The Philippines 1/40; Thailand 1/50; and Indonesia 1/30.

<u>NICs</u>	FEER	AWSJ
Hong Kong	½	4/5
Taiwan	1/80	1/20

South Korea	1/70	1/40
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ASEAN

Malaysia	1/6	1/14
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Philippines	1/80	1/40
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Thailand	1/80	1/50
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Indonesia	1/280	1/30
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No Involvement in Domestic Politics

Now the position of the Singapore Government. 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 newspapers 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, Malay versus Chinese versus Indians, Singapore and Malaysia, both governments, ban each other's newspapers and have done so for over 20 years since we separated. The last big Malay-Chinese riots in Malaysia in 1969 sparked off similar riots in Singapore in a matter of days. We are the closest of neighbours. Unfortunately, one country's newspaper reporting what its own

people are doing and saying, can cause Malay-Chinese troubles in the other country if it is read there. It appears preposterous but the reason is simple. The two countries have two different solutions to their not dissimilar interracial problems and to read of another solution and the implications of that solution causes problems for the other.

No Right to Circulate

No foreign television station claims the right to telecast its programs in Singapore. Indeed, the 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 American public opinion. Thus before Rupert Murdoch purchased the independent TV stations of the Metromedia group in 1985, he first had to take up US citizenship. That has given me a good idea, I must require the journalists in the Asian Wall Street Journal to take up Singapore citizenship. Now if a mighty nation of 250 million Americans finds such a safeguard necessary, what about a plastic, unformed small society like Singapore?

As for the US print media, I remember reading in 1976 that 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, as the State Department wrote to us, the marketplace of ideas automatically separates the good from the bad, and rewards the good, why the outrage at the South Africans wasting their money trying to propagate and sell the bad when it was doomed to failure? When the Americans react in this way, is it surprising that Singapore feels that it cannot take chances with the offshore press taking sides in Singapore's domestic debate?

I need hardly remind my Chairman that circulation in Singapore is a privilege granted by the Singapore Government on Singapore's terms. The terms are that they should report us 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. Now our disputes with the foreign press.

The Disputes with TIME, etc.

In the last one-and-a-half years, we have had to restrict the circulation of Time, Asian Wall Street Journal, Asiaweek, Far Eastern Economic Review, all Hong Kong based publications.

Disputes with three of time, TIME, Asia Wall Street Journal, and Asiaweek have been over our right of reply. All three published inaccurate reports. The government wrote to put the facts straight. TIME and Asian Wall Street Journal refused to publish the government replies. Asiaweek published a government reply, but without our consent tampered with it and attributed the doctored version of the letter to a spokesman of the Singapore Government, part of the freedoms that the press has acquired when it goes offshore.

The Far Eastern Economic Review published a story which was not only false but defamatory. I had my Press Secretary write to them twice. It's a weekly, so there's plenty of time to think it over, to substantiate or to withdraw the allegations. It refused to do it twice, either to substantiate or to withdraw despite my secretary stating out the facts countering the allegations they have made and being ready to prove our side of the story. They left me with no choice but to restrict their circulation but that was not good enough because my voters have read of me cheating or conning my Archbishop to saying things which he obviously never intended to say which would lose me a lot of votes with the Catholics. So I have to sue them for defamation libel in order that the facts would be litigated and either I am a liar or the Far Eastern Economic Review is a purveyor of falsehoods. And in Singapore, our cases go right up to the Privy Council in London. These are printed words, they are not already spoken, there's no question about what was said, there's also no question of what we said took place because that's also in our letters, in print.

Restriction of Circulation National Archives of Singapore

My government could simply have banned these publications but it would have been an over-reaction. We have never banned any publication other than Communist ones. We try very hard not to, amongst other reasons, to deny these publications the moral high ground that we are afraid of what they say about us. Since sales is one of the principal motivations of these journals, we thought it was sufficient if we restrict their sales of advertisements. In fact, we offered the Asian Wall Street Journal the right to sell without advertisements and they turned us down. Their argument was that the advertisement was part of the newspaper. That's also their right, it has the right to circulate.

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, as we have now amended, 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 service.

The whole object of this exercise is a test in wills. Who has the right to publish what in Singapore? That is what it is all about, it is not about copyright, it is not about freedom of the press, it is about the right of a foreign newspaper and its correspondents to participate in Singapore's domestic life, simple and straightforward. By not allowing these journals to increase their sales, we have achieved some concessions. Both TIME and Asiaweek, after considerable delay, relented and published the disputed letters in full. So we restored TIME's circulation, and in due course, we will restore Asiaweek's, and in due course, I hope the Asian Wall Street Journal will see the light and consider it not worthwhile in insisting on their prerogative which requires our consent.

Conclusion

Mr Chairman, ladies and gentlemen, I have not come to convert you to my point of view, for I know 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.

Thank you. National Archives of Singapore

CIRCULATION FIGURES OF FEER AND AWSJ BY COUNTRY⁴

	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

National Archives of Singapore

⁴ Source: Audit Bureau of Circulation (London)
FEER - Jun 87
AWSJ - Dec 86