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SPEECH BY PRIME MINISTER MR LEE KUAN YEW

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The Media's Impact On Political And Government

Technological changes in the last 30 years have profoundly changed the way people get news. When the town crier was the main source of information, society moved at a leisurely pace on foot and horseback. But during this Gulf crisis, leaders in government found information from diplomatic despatches was slower than what came through 'live' on CNN. Because news, information and opinions are spread so rapidly and widely the people's reactions have change profoundly and governments have had to take this into account in formulating and implementing their policies.

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When Barbara Walters of ABC interviewed Sadat and Menachem Begin in 1977, she was in fact facilitating the conduct of Sadat's foreign policy. Her telecasts affected American opinion and led to President Carter taking initiatives that resulted in the Camp David Agreement. In another way, when Dan Rather of CBS interviewed Saddam Hussein on 29 August 1990, he ventured into the domain of US foreign policy at a time of crisis. President Bush protested that he had no reciprocal access to the Iraqi people, which made Saddam Hussein give Iraqi TV time for Bush. He then wanted some 75 minutes of US TV time.

The full impact and implications of these technological changes have not worked their way through completely. Indeed many more technological innovations are on the way with DBS (direct broadcasting satellites) and integrated IT systems. Leaders in governments have already altered their methods and style of government to take account of these changes. Reagan was telegenic, so he could appeal on television over the heads of Congressmen and the press commentators, to mobilise support and get his policies through. President Bush is not as telegenic. So the Baker - Bush team has different ways to get their policies through, one of which is by skilfully co-opting media support for their policies, like reshaping their presentation to make the policies appear amended along the main lines the media is pressing for. By co-opting media

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support, Bush's policies in the Gulf have achieved very broad support in America.

Television has more immediacy and greater mass impact than the press. Without television the American hostage issue would never have become so overpowering. President Carter was totally absorbed by the problem of the American hostages in Teheran. The nightly television scenes from Teheran demonstrating America's impotence resulted in tragedy when in April 1980 the rescue mission failed. It destroyed President Carter. Similarly, American television handling of the American hostages in Lebanon contributed to President Reagan's decision to open a line with the Iranians to get them to use their influence to free the American hostages in Lebanon. When this story broke, it damaged Reagan's standing.

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Both American television and the press learned from these self-inflicted national injuries. They handled the hostages in Iraq differently. The hostage issue was so muted that Saddam Hussein brought out his American women and children hostages on to Iraqi TV in the hope that parading them would arouse mass emotions in America. The sustained television coverage of releases in batches of American and British women and children was on balance a plus for

Saddam Hussein, when it should have been a minus. The American and British men hostages he continued to detain were never shown on television.

The Unintended Consequences of Television Viewing

Television transmits events across continents effortlessly. This makes television viewing contextless. A viewer has "no sense of place". Watching television, to quote Professor Joshua Meyrowitz, Professor of Communication in the University of New Hampshire "fosters contextless and placeless experiences. Television breaks the age-old connections between the places we are in and what we can experience and see with our own eyes".

A recent study he quoted found that "most people watch television while doing other things : eating, playing, washing the dishes, talking on the telephone, reading, arguing or even making love". In other words the event being watched is not in a "specific matrix of time and space coordinates".

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I believe it is this contextless television experience that led to the tragedy of Tiananmen on June 4. Students in China had been watching on Chinese television for several years, the almost nightly demonstrations of "People Power". People Power in 1986 won in the Philippines when President Marcos

fled from Manila. Violent demonstrations by South Korean students and workers in 1986-87 forced changes in the political system, including direct elections for the President. For many years, Chinese students watched South African policemen beating black demonstrators and firing tear gas. They also watched Israeli police firing rubber bullets, tear gas, and beating the Palestinian Intifadas. In all these clashes between protestors and policemen, there was much display of police strong arm tactics and of pain from tear gas, batons, rubber bullets, water cannons, and of body wounds. But although there was the occasional death, no demonstrator was ever shown being shot and killed on television.

Because their television viewing was contextless, China's students forgot that China was a very different country from either the Philippines or South Korea, two countries with close links with the United States where the media and Congress wield immense influence. They were also unaware that South Africa and Israel had governments which had to pay close attention to American public reaction because the media's views influenced the public and the US Congress and so reshaped Administration policies. The Chinese students were euphoric when the groundswell of support for them was shown worldwide on television. Encouraged by feedback from Chinese students abroad, they pressed on hoping to achieve something as dramatic as the changes in the Philippines and South Korea. But the ending was different.

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What had happened earlier in Burma in 1988 was real bullets and real deaths as a result of mass demonstrations. But the Chinese students never saw this on television because there were no television crews to record these clashes in Burma. There is also little television viewing in Burma. So the Burmese protestors had no illusions that people power comes easily. Hence the greater their courage when they took to the streets. They paid the price in lives and blood. Although they did get more or less free elections, their elected representatives have yet to take office. Because Burma's military leaders were prepared to forego economic or military aid, and did not need American political support internationally, they were not responsive to either American or European suasion.

The Chinese students should have remembered that Solidarity in Poland took nearly 10 years from their first demonstrations in Gdansk in 1980 to free elections in 1989. Their mass support was enormous. Polish workers, peasants, students, intellectuals and Catholic church were all united behind them. Polish Solidarity had more solid support than the students in China. But Solidarity leaders were aware that they had to contend with a Communist government backed by the Soviet Red Army. So by patience, flexibility and determination, they wore down the government by non-cooperation and finally got free elections

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in June 1989. Even when they had won the elections, they left communist ministers in key positions to stay in charge of the armed forces and the police. And they also left a communist president, Jaruzelski, undisturbed. Gradualism brought about change for the better.

This was real tragedy for Tiananmen. The students had gained an opening. China's press and television had become more liberal in their reporting. They had achieved a dialogue with government leaders. If they had been patient and circumspect, they could have contributed over 10 years to the gradual opening up of the system which had already started.

The Print Media

My next subject is the different impact of the print media. Television depends on pictures rather than words. The press uses language to make its points. Readers respond rationally to words whereas viewers respond emotionally to images. So the press can make up for deficits of television pictures because the press communicates ideas whilst television transmits images or impressions. Nevertheless, the press are not merely passive reporters of events. On the issue of Hong Kong and China, over a sustained period, they could and did at first, create excessive optimism after the agreement was signed

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between the British and Chinese governments in 1984. Later after Tiananmen in June 1989, the press created excessive pessimism. The Western press in Hong Kong began a campaign for elections in Hong Kong as the way to protect Hong Kong from China. When Beijing rejected these proposals, excessive despair set in.

When the foreign press in Hong Kong tried to foist Western values on China by pressing for a democratically elected government in Hong Kong to protect Hong Kong Chinese from China, they angered China's veteran leaders who resented this insult to their national pride. It would have been different if the Chinese in Hong Kong, the people with abiding stakes in the future of the territory, had got together to articulate their group needs and interests. They could have organised themselves to talk directly with Beijing. As fellow Chinese they would have been able to put their concerns across without offending the Chinese leaders or impugning Chinese honour. They should have done this before quietly uprooting themselves and leaving for the US, Canada and Australia.

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But the majority of Hong Kong Chinese will have to stay. For them the reality is that once China resumes sovereignty over Hong Kong, China's will must prevail. Much of the gyrations of Hang Seng Index (of the Hong Kong

Stock Exchange) could have been lessened if the Western press based in Hong Kong had not crusaded for their vision of democracy in Hong Kong and, indirectly, for democracy in China.

Another instance of a press crusade is Cambodia. About two and a half years ago, the American press set out to change the attitudes of the US Congress and get the Administration to change its policy. They campaigned tenaciously and skillfully against the Khmer Rouge and its horrific genocide of 1975-78. But the genocidal acts of the Khmer Rouge were old news. From 1978 to 1988 for over ten years, the Khmer Rouge had occupied the UN seat, first alone from 1978 till 1982, and then from 1982 onwards as part of the Coalition Government of Democratic Cambodia.

The European press followed the American lead in this crusade. After two years of sustained pressure, European governments began to change their policies late last year. They have less stakes in the outcome. The US Administration changed its policy only in July this year. But the position on the ground in Cambodia has not changed. That European and US governments have withdrawn recognition for the CGDK for the UN seat is not going to prevent the Khmer Rouge from fighting and winning unless American or European troops are sent to Cambodia to replace Vietnamese troops. The press campaign wrought

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little change on the policies of ASEAN governments who have stronger interests in any final resolution of the war in Cambodia. They are only too aware that the reality of Khmer Rouge strength on the ground requires a solution which takes this reality into account.

Western Regional Press Interference In Singapore's Domestic Politics

Now I come to my final point. New technology has made it difficult if not impossible to censor or shut out news carried in the world press. The photocopier, fax machines, computers and satellites make it increasingly difficult to block out news from any literate society connected electronically to this modern world.

But this does not entitle the regional newspapers based in Hong Kong and owned by American news corporations to intrude into the domestic debate of small countries and settle their agenda. To remove any doubt over this, the Singapore Government has enacted laws which enable us to gazette any foreign newspaper which has interfered in Singapore's domestic politics. The papers concerned are American-owned, based in Hong Kong reporting on Singapore to Singaporeans and to others in the region. Gazetting does not mean a ban, but only a limit on their sales of papers with advertisements. If they do not carry

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advertisements, there is no restriction to the number they may sell. In retaliation, the American press mounted a strong campaign. The European press gave them sympathetic support. But Singapore voters were unmoved. In the last elections in Singapore in September 1988, they gave the Singapore Government a solid majority in Parliament with over 61% of the votes. The American press discovered that whilst they could move mountains in Washington, they were not an irresistible force in a foreign third world country like Singapore.

The Singapore Government's position is straightforward. It will not allow interference by foreigners in its domestic debate. Singapore's voters are English-educated unlike voters in other countries in Asia. Singapore is a totally urban society with state-of-the-art telecommunications and no government can effectively censor what the people read. But the government can and will insist on no foreign interference in the domestic politics of Singapore. We do this by insisting on our right of reply. If a foreign publication does not give us the right of reply, or if it persists in its partisan reporting of Singaporean issues in order to influence political developments in Singapore, we will restrict the number of copies they can sell.

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You may ask what does Singapore gain by this. Well, amongst other things, it brings home to Singaporeans that regardless of the pontifications of

foreign correspondents and commentators, it is the values of the elected government of Singapore that must and will prevail. Ministers in Singapore are rational and logical people. They do understand the Western world and the changes which Western technology has brought about. They welcome, indeed they embrace, these changes. Singapore has found its niche in the world as a centre for trade, finance, banking, transportation and telecommunications because its ministers have recognised and embraced these innovations. But the Singapore Government cannot change its stand that the political process of Singapore is reserved only for Singaporeans.

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