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Towards ICCS 2022

The Media: Force of Cohesion or Division?

By Han Fook Kwang

SYNOPSIS

Public trust in media is declining worldwide. Yet, there has never been a more critical need for trusted media amidst the proliferation of fake news and disinformation. What can be done to regain trust so that media can play its role in strengthening social cohesion instead of promoting further division?

COMMENTARY

THE TRADITIONAL mass media faces unprecedented challenges today. Media has been fragmented by the Internet resulting in newspapers and television losing their dominance as sources of news and information. This has had a catastrophic impact on their financial viability, and many have folded.

In Singapore, the Government had to intervene, and the country's main media company, Singapore Press Holdings, had to divest its media arm which is now a company limited by guarantee receiving public funding. The Government argued that mainstream newspapers provide a public good not only through reporting accurately but also by helping to form a national consensus on important issues facing the country.

Government Funding and the Trusted Media

[This](#) was what then Communication and Information Minister S. Iswaran said in Parliament last year: "The local media also express our identity, values and priorities,

so that the world gets a perspective from Singapore itself, and not through the filter of others.

“Domestically, the local media not only report on events and developments but also publish a balanced range of views, to inform the national debate and help foster a national consensus, not allowing disagreements to deepen into divisions in our society.

“They help to sustain the common ground in our multi-racial and multi-religious society, whilst preserving the voice of each of our communities through the vernacular media.”

Those comments were as forthright as the Government has ever expressed on the media’s role in strengthening social cohesion, and it was now prepared to back it up with public funding of \$180 million a year for five years.

Credibility and Role of Media in Singapore

There are, nevertheless, some key questions: how can the media play this role well; what are the pitfalls; and what must be done to ensure it fulfills the stated goals?

The first requirement is for it to be independent of the government, or of any power, so that it can serve the reading public in the best interest of the country, without being beholden to anyone. This is the most basic criterion without which it cannot hope to be a trusted source of news and information.

If media is unable to speak truth to power, it will have no credibility, and will find it impossible to deliver its public good, much less become a force to engender a socially cohesive society.

Indeed, the issue of the media’s independence in Singapore became a challenge soon after the Government announced its intention to publicly fund SPH newspapers. Commentators raised concerns about whether it would lead to newspapers becoming even more pro-government than critics say they already were.

The Government has assured that these newspapers will retain editorial independence, and that it was publicly funding them because they were trusted sources of news.

Declining Trust in Media Worldwide

Media objectivity is not a uniquely Singaporean problem. Traditional media around the world has suffered from public mistrust because it is seen to be biased and beholden to vested interests.

A [2022 survey by Edelman, a consultancy firm](#), found that two thirds of those surveyed believed that journalists purposely mislead people about news that they knew were false or grossly exaggerated. Only 39% of Americans and 35% of those in the United Kingdom trusted their media. The equivalent number is 59% in Singapore.

Far from fostering a socially cohesive society, a media that is mistrusted will create

even greater division and disunity. Partisan media in the US thrives in the country's politically divided landscape, serving readers and viewers with one-sided news and views which they are happy to lap up.

That is why newspaper readership and television viewership of several major news outlets rose during President Trump's years, feeding on the extreme political partisanship of that period. Readership and viewership went up, but trust declined. It was the worst possible outcome.

It might seem surprising that in a world with so much fake news and hate speech, including those that promote religious hatred and disharmony, the public is losing faith in traditional media as a source of trusted news.

One would have thought that in such a world, there would be a ready market for reliable media. It shows that the issue is not a simple one and that the traditional media operating in a free market has largely failed to rise to the challenge.

Restoring Media Credibility

One safeguard to ensure the media's objectivity and freedom from vested interests is to subject it to a public charter spelling out its role and responsibility and how it intends to discharge its duty. This will have to include its accountability to an independent board of directors, the yardsticks it adopts to measure its performance, and what it does to gauge and respond to public feedback on its content.

Perhaps the best example of this is the BBC which is publicly funded and governed by a comprehensive charter along the lines mentioned above.

Another example is the [Journalism Trust Initiative \(JTI\)](#) launched last year to implement a set of trust and transparency indicators to be adhered to by participating media. It is a self-regulating body with agreed standards on transparency of media ownership, sources of revenue, journalistic methods, and ethical norms.

These initiatives are necessary because the free market has failed to improve trust and credibility in today's fragmented media world. They are worthy efforts – necessary but still not sufficient to produce media which is truly trusted and able to act as a unifying force for the public good. To do this, it needs to go beyond these benchmarks, and be an institution which the public can identify with at an emotional level.

Trust, Media, and the Public Good

This is because trust is not just about the accuracy of facts and information, important though these may be. Ultimately, it is about identity, and has to do with the relationship between the media and users: what is it that the newspaper or television station stands for which makes people believe it is acting in their interests?

This emotional connection is what will make the media a long-lasting, trustworthy partner able to counter the onslaught of fake news and disinformation present today. It takes time to build this sort of relationship. Moreover, it needs to be demonstrated

every day through the media's reporting and coverage of important issues. Only then can it fulfill the lofty ideals which Minister Iswaran talked about.

Finally, all this can come about only if the people themselves care about the media and its role in delivering the public good. If they are unconcerned and apathetic about the quality of media and whether it is performing its task well, they will have one that they deserve.

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