

Country report on Singapore

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By

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PAPER: COUNTRY REPORT ON SINGAPORE

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A Background

1. Brief History of the Mass Media in Singapore.

Newspaper

The history of mass media in Singapore may be traced back to 1824 when the "Singapore Chronicle" was published. As in any other part of the world, the newspaper was one of the earliest media arising to assume the tasks of communication for this tiny British colony.

The Singapore Chronicle was published on Jan 1, 1824 by Colonial Police chief and master attendant of Singapore, Francis James Bernard. At the time of its publication, Singapore was then inhabited by a population of 10,638, out of which 4,580 were Malays, 3,317 Chinese and 74 Europeans. This paper was followed by the Singapore Free Press, published on October 8, 1835 by a lawyer, William Napier, and the Straits Messenger, published on April 16, 1842 by Edwards. The Straits Times was founded by R.C. Woods on July 15, 1845. All these early papers were published by the British with the aim of propagating their own interests and nurturing their culture and traditions. Most of them were commercially oriented.

However, the years after 1870 saw the rise of a different kind of journalism that shifted their target to the local immigrant society which was then composed of Malay, Chinese, Indian and Eurasian. The first to come into ^{the} scene was a Malay paper Jawi Peranakan published by an Indian muslim Munshi Mohammad Said bin Dada Mohidin. This was followed by the first Chinese newspaper Lat Pau which was catering to the need for the Chinese community. Lat Pau was founded in 1881 by a Chinese businessman See Ewe Lay. A few years later the first Indian newspaper Singai Varta Mahni was also published (1876). Further, there were a few English newspapers published to serve the English speaking community during this period. They were Straits Intelligence (1870), Singapore Eurasian Advocate (1887) and Malaya Tribune (1914). Among these papers, the Malaya Tribune was the most successful.

The development of newspapers has gathered momentum during this period due to several factors which included the rapid increase of trade activities in the region and the influx of immigrants from neighbouring countries into Singapore. The opening of Suez Canal, the improvement of communication system, the introduction of steam-powered ships for sea transportation and the opening of major ports in China to the West were some of the factors contributing to the trade boom in Singapore which in turn generated a great need for more and fastest information.

The newspapers of Singapore have taken the form of modern newspapers in terms of content, news writing style and equipment at the beginning of the 1920s. Most of the newspapers had consolidated and modernized their facilities. During this period in the English press, manual type-setting was replaced by linotype. Added to the row were some influential newspapers which have dominated the press world of Singapore until today. They were:- Nanyang Siang Pau, published in 1923 by Tan Kah Kee; Sin Chew Jit Poh founded in 1929 by Aw Boon Haw and Teng Liap Seng; Warta Melaya (1930); Utusan Melayu, founded by the late President Yusof bin Ishak in 1939; Tamil Misan (1924) and Tamil Murugan (1935)

The thirst for news and freedom immediately after the Second World War has pushed the business of newspaper to a boom which Singapore has never had before. During the period between 1945 to 1948, about twenty newspapers were published in Singapore. One of the characteristics of newspapers published during this period was that they were mostly political echoing the political movement of their respective home-countries. However, after the declaration of the state of Emergency in June 1948. The Colonial government took drastic action to clamp down the communist or pro-communist newspapers. Dominating the English press world was still The Straits Times though it was contested by a new comer, the Tiger Standard in 1950. Straits Times has emerged to be the most important newspaper group in this region

after taking over the Free Press, Brunei Press and Borneo Bulletin in 1960s. It has further expanded to the Malay press by founding Berita Harian in 1957. In the domain of Chinese press, Nanyang Siang Pau and Sin Chew Jit Poh remained as the two giants competing against each other for bigger circulation. Utusan Malaya and Tamil Murasu were the most influential Malay and Indian newspapers during that period.

Singapore has been the newspaper centre for this region since the early 19th century. However, the press of Singapore has separated from that of Malaysia after the independence of Singapore in 1965. Both governments of Singapore and Malaysia required their respective press to be edited and published in their own countries. As such the press of Singapore has developed into a national press all working for the common goal of nation building and cultivating national consciousness despite their diversity in tradition and language.

In 1975, both Nanyang Siang Pau and Sin Chew Jit Poh were converted into public companies as required by the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act which came into force on Jan. 1, 1974. The newspapers of Singapore are going into a period of consolidation and modernization at this stage. While most of the newspapers are going off-set, the Straits Times has moved one step ahead by computerizing their editing and typesetting process lately.

Magazine

Although the history of magazine is as long as that of newspaper, its development has been precarious and handicapped by a host of problems such as lacking support or capital.

The publication of magazines began in the early 1820s. The first magazine published in Singapore was The Price of Goods At Singapore printed on 31st May 1822 in the English language. Most of the magazines appearing during that early period were trade magazines, school reports or almanacs. They were published either quarterly or annually. Since then, the publication of local magazines has been dragging along slowly for almost a century until 1930s when the literary magazines emerged from the Chinese community. Most of these magazines were published by the Chinese newspapers.

The post-war boom of the newspaper has further stimulated the development of magazines especially in the Chinese language. An estimate of 30 Chinese magazines were published during the period between 1949 to 1956. Again literary magazines were still the mainstream of the magazine publication.

The magazine industry has recorded a more healthy and rapid development during to 1960s. The industry began to provide its readers with more variety of reading materials. They have widened their scope of coverage. This period was also characterized by the rise of many special-interest magazines, professional journals and house organs (mostly published by industrial and commercial firms, charitable and civic organization). Among all these magazines, feminine, movie & TV magazines commanded the largest circulation.

To-day, the magazine publishing in Singapore is dominated by four important publishers. They are:

- (1) Educational Publication Bureau, which publishes Prospect, Teachers' Rostrum, New Worker. Prospect is published in Chinese, English and Malay whereas "Teachers' Rostrum" in four different languages.
- (2) Times Publishing Berhad which owns Her World (1960), Fanfare (1969), Singapore Business and others.
- (3) Malayan Publishing House which publishes Female (1974), Living, Signature and Silver Kris. The latter two are published

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for Diners Club and Singapore Airlines respectively. M&H has recently expanded into the Chinese magazine world by taking over a Chinese feminine magazine, Letticot.

Broadcasting

The history of broadcasting is rather short as compared with the print media.

- Radio broadcasting was started in 1936 by a private company, British Malaya Broadcasting Corporation, although the local experimentation with radio has begun as early as in 1920s. This early experimentation has resulted in setting up of a radio station VSIAD in 1930 (later changed to ZHI) to provide irregular radio programmes to the listeners. But the BMBC was the first commercial radio station to start regular broadcasting from its station at Caldecott Hill. However, this private ownership of broadcasting did not last long. In 1940 the Colonial Government took over the station and put it under its **direct** control. Malaya Broadcasting Corporation was set up in the following year to administer the radio station. The income of the radio station was mainly from the licence fee collected from the owners of the radio sets.

Before 1957, Radio stations in Singapore were responsible for providing programmes to both Singapore and Malaya, it was then under the Department of Broadcasting in Singapore and Malaya. But after the independence of Malaysia in 1957 the radio station was separated from radio Malaysia.

After the separation, Radio Singapore has taken step to improve its programme and service to its listeners in Singapore. In 1959 it introduced news programmes in various dialects and a year later it began to accept advertisements so as to strengthen its financial position. In 1963 it introduced FM stereophonic broadcast to further improve **its** service to the listeners.

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To-day, Radio Singapore is directly under the Ministry of Culture. It transmits a great variety of programmes in Malay, English, Chinese and Tamil on separate channels on the medium wave, short wave and FM. The average weekly transmission hours are 525.

Television

Television broadcasting was started in June 1963 after the success of a pilot service began in February 1963. Initially television programmes were offered only on one channel i.e. channel 5. But as from May 1966, Television station began transmission on its second channel. Today, programmes are broadcast in four official language over 2 transmission channels for a total of thirteen hours and a half daily on weekdays, and 22 hours on Sundays and public holidays.

Colour TV service was introduced on August 1, 1974. The transmission hours of colour programmes are 70 hours a week. 70% of total television transmission hours are in colour.

Cable broadcasting Service

The cable broadcasting service was started in 1949 under the management of Rediffusion (Singapore) Private Limited. This station provides programmes in 5 Chinese dialects and English each day over 2 networks to its subscribers which number about 86,000.

2. The nature of media ownership and government control

Media Ownership

The ownership of mass media in Singapore may be categorized into 3 different types: Government, Public and Private.

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These three types of ownership exist almost in every medium of mass communication except perhaps in the film industry which is still exclusively owned by private companies. In the domain of newspapers, while most of the newspapers are privately owned, the major ones are owned by the public as required by the law. But the Government also owns a weekly newspaper the Mirror. In the field of books and magazines, a substantial part of book and magazine publishing is controlled by the Government through its subsidiaries, the Educational Publishing Bureau and Government Printing Office. However, the bulk of the industry is still under public or private ownership. The radio and television stations are owned by the Government as is the educational television. Nevertheless, a private company has complete control over a cable broadcasting station "Rediffusion".

Government Control

Every society restricts the press freedom to some degree and in some ways as no country can afford to grant complete freedom to the mass media. In Singapore, the regulation of mass media takes the following forms:-

1) Common laws:-

As in any part of the world, mass media in Singapore are subject to certain basic laws which restrict the mass media from defaming other's reputation, from interfering the fair trial of the court, from indulging in obscenity, from subverting the legitimate government and from divulging national secrets such examples are the libel law, contempt of court, sedition act and Ministry of Defense regulation.

2) Censorship:-

Censorship system began with the first newspaper of Singapore the Singapore Chronicle which was required to submit all the copies to the Governor for censorship before publication under the so called "Gagging Act". This censorship system was abolished on September 15, 1835 when the "Gagging Act" was repealed. However the censorship system is exercised today on

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3. THE ROLE OF THE MASS MEDIA IN SINGAPORE.

As in many Asian countries the conception of mass media roles is located around the three functions of education, development and social responsibility. It is perhaps more useful to think of the watchdog function as being a sub-set of social responsibility rather than as a **clearly** identifiable objective as it is in some developed areas. This is because the press which is the only medium that can be thought of as partially fulfilling the watchdog role, has taken on the character of a partner to government in pursuing national goals. This does not mean that the press becomes a tool of government although it is a moot point.

We all realise that in Singapore, as well as in other Asian nations, the government regulation places various restraints on the parameters of activity. This situation has led to the press becoming a bit subdued in commenting on official behaviour. We cannot deny that in Singapore there is little criticism of official acts or positions. When we do see criticism it is in the form of politely worded questions to the editor about problems existing in housing estates or bureaucratic situations. This is certainly not what we mean by the watchdog function.

Recently, however, government spokesmen have gone on record as advocating more press **diversity** so as to inspire more public debate of issues. This is a positive indication that the climate for criticism may open up in this Republic.

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a) The education role of the mass media is perhaps one of the foremost accomplishments of the Singaporean media.

Both the newspapers and electronic media give extensive space and time to educational programme and supplements. All daily newspapers in Singapore have a bilingual section, devoted to the improvement of the reader's second language. The best known of these is The Straits Times bilingual section which was recently given a thrice weekly run based on reader demand. The Singapore Educational Media Service (SEMS) is well known for its comprehensive educational programming which is aired five days a week for 8 hours a day. In addition, frequent documentaries are aired on channels 5 and 8 covering such diversified topics as the textile industry, trade, money and banking, health and more. Newscasts are also heavily educational in nature as one considers the newsreels offered in English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil following each newscast.

A recent study conducted by the faculty and students of the Mass Communications Programme of Nanyang University has shown that editorial content of the Chinese newspapers is also heavily education oriented. For Sin Chew Jit Pau 40% of the editorials were devoted to internal problems out of which 58% were on social problems such as drug addiction, long hair, hippyism, crime and sex. The figures for Nanyang Siang Pau were 54% and 41% devoted to these problems.

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b) As for the development role much of what is stated for education can be said for development. A great deal of newspaper space and Radio and TV time is devoted to creating a development consciousness among Singaporeans. Skills training remains a high priority especially for television on the SEMS broadcast.

c) As for social responsibility-despite our failings in the watchdog function, Singapore media, especially the press, have taken a lead in promoting socially beneficial causes and justice. A recent example of press responsibility is evident in the "Spyros¹ Disaster" which claimed so many lives. The press took the lead in launching a massive fund raising campaign for the victim's families. To date more than \$1.5 million has been collected for education and support relatives of the victims. That which I mentioned under education regarding editorial content also applies here in that it demonstrates a commitment to the society and to betterment.

On the basis of what I mentioned earlier, it would be fair to say that Singapore media are especially strong in the educational and developmental roles of mass media but we still do lag behind other developed nations in terms of the watchdog function. This sensitive area is of course closely linked with press and libel laws as well as to government's receptiveness to criticism. I would only say that there is room for development in this respect.
