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The Role Of Mass Media In National Development

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There are two ways of looking at this particular topic – from the Academic view, with rosy glasses and freshman optimism (it sounds like 'How to get the most of your marriage!') and impress all of you here on what 'the ACTUAL role' of mass media SHOULD be (how theoretical can you get?) OR should I give you a rather sober (not gloomy) analysis of the realistic problems that are currently confronting (or is it preventing?) mass media (within the context of the Republic of Singapore) as far as "National Development" or the fostering of some kind of national awareness/identity is concerned.

It is not my intention to trace back the historical roots of the development of mass media in my country (Sir Charles' Moses has certainly done an excellent Readers' Digest version in his latest book "Mass Communications in Asia" AMIC 1978) but two outstanding points are worth noting: (1) The Straits Times and its close relationship with British colonialism; the Chinese press as an extension of China's political and cultural activities (Chen: The History of Early Chinese Newspapers in Singapore) (2) ALL major press in Singapore are not subsidized by the Government and recent press laws even made sole proprietorship difficult. Heavy reliance upon "advertising" as a major revenue has made newspapers profit-oriented organization just like departmental stores or supermarkets.

My paper will deal primarily with the daily press and "source" of information since Broadcasting is state-controlled and that it is serving the interest of the Republic (by the fact that the banning of tobacco products and alcoholic beverage (prime time) has resulted in great losses for RTS has not affected the quality of its programmes.)

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With "profitability" as the first objective - Singapore's dailies have to operate within certain guidelines set by the Government; the needs of a highly commercialized society and the tastes of a fairly complex target readership. I personally feel that the Government's so-called 'strong-arm' tactics on "rebellious" pressmen whenever action was taken to close down the Singapore Herald & Eastern Sun in the early 1970s was justified. Prime Minister Lee's drastic action against pro-Communist leftwing journalists was hailed as a major move to draw a clear line dividing self-interest and national interest in modern journalism. Comparing to the People's Republic of China, Singapore truly has the freedom of the press and as the Prime Minister once told the IPA that our country cannot afford to have the "luxury" of having "subversive" elements in mass media.

In Communications - "source" is the most important factor in determining credibility (Apolebaum). In other words, if an item "country X claims to have captured 5 spies from country Y" would not have the necessary conditions for credibility unless the medium in which it is "associated" with has the built-in credibility (MacLuhan). Each major newspaper has its mass readership following. The nature (or philosophy) of each daily determines its own readership profile. This "pre-selection" process (especially when we talk about the Straits Times which has been around for more than a century) is as complicated as "the chicken and the egg". Nanyang Siang Pau and Sin Chew Jit Poh both started as "NON-FARTISAN" Chinese papers in the turbulent 30s, they have managed to survive the Chinese Civil WAR; remaining pro-Chiang Kai-shek in 1945, declaring neutral in 1948; somewhat left-wing (opportunistic?) in 1949-50 and pro-China (not necessarily motivated by Communist ideology). Although the trend for both Chinese papers is to swing-away (alott) from foreign politics (i.e. the Communist-Nationalist conflict), the visit of Richard Nixon to Peking in 1972, the death of Mao Tsetung, the fall of Vietnam, the recognition of the Peking regime by 3 ASEA states (not Singapore) has its "moral" effects on the press and they have been playing down China's "achievements" while at the same time totally ignoring any news about the Nationalist regime in Taipei.

Nothing surprises me about how "news" (especially those originating from China) are treated. Recently, I had the opportunity of reading (free subscription) the China Post of Taipei and it suddenly dawned on me that it takes "two to tango" – in other words, before the average reader is finally exposed to a story – The "source" (already filtered) is re-filtered by the Editor before the presentation. The "Original" report may almost be totally different than the final look. I have always been a doubting Thomas on the reliability and efficiency of wire-service reporting. Every year, I lead my mass communications students to Sin Chew Jit Poh and each time, we're told that "hundreds of stories came in each day on the teletype machines and how the editors select ONLY those suitable for translation (into Chinese)". But how did these wire services (UPI, AP, AFP etc) managed to obtain such stories so fast? In China Post (International Edition) they have a page where 8 Afro-Asian states (including Malaysia and Singapore) are given daily reports based entirely on AP or UPI news. The formula is actually quite simple:-

- (1) three news stories break out in Singapore on the the same day. These are written by different reporters and they appeared in the following day. (Straits Times).
- (2) The UPI correspondent rehashes the three stories but phrases like "according to the Straits Times" will be inserted where direct quotes are attributed to – Let's say, the stories are
 - (a) People's Republic of China's trade with Singapore increases by X %.
 - (b) 100 Vietnamese refugees lands in Singapore after daring escape from Ho Chi Minh city.
 - (c) U.S. Ambassador opens Art Show – talks about ASEAN cultural identities.
- (3) UPI "filtered" these stories out of many because this particular correspondent "felt" that the three stories may have a general international interest (at least in the Asian-Pacific Area). Just how this selection process takes place – naturally depends on the political, economical, social attitude background and philosophy of the UPI "man on the spot".

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- (4) The China Post (Taipei) receives the three stories from Singapore. The first gets thrown out because it "conflicts" with the Nationalist policy of printing "good news" about Peking; the third will be cut and reduced in half and the second will get top priority because it is basically anti-Communist. It will then be given a heading (by the Edition) like "Refugees sailed to Freedom lands in Singapore". The Taipei reader will only be able to read the final presentation.

I am not against this system (although many third world leaders are getting upset over 'irresponsible' wire-service reporting - but the SOURCE (which has to be human) and the treatment should to a certain extent get us some cause for anxiety.

We are living in the age of Information Explosion - the Common Man has merged as the determinant factor in international politics. His views, attitudes, reaction to any given situation or personality are often based on bits and pieces and incomplete reporting (what one well-known British journalist referred to as Disinformation) formulates the gestalt picture of that subject in its totality. While mass communicators like Applebaum, Schramm, Berlow are interested in "media's" relationship to its target - I am as a practitioner, particularly fascinated in how the "manipulation" of the source is made to fit into the needs (often artificial) of a given public.

These are six common sources from where the Straits Times will "abstract" its "news" for tomorrow's edition. Let's examine them carefully...

- (1) News Agencies (wire services). There are official ones (which should reflect the views of their respective governments) like Tass (U.S.S.R.), NCNA (Peking), CNA (Taipei), Bernama (Malaysia). (the old U.S.I.S. cannot be classified under this category). Government sponsored News Agencies will "hand-out" official statement/comments to both local reporters, foreign correspondents and the international agencies. Most official news agencies are treated with certain suspicion and additional

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comments often completes the final version. In countries where reporters are given the freedom to roam, the official news can be "supported" by the supplementary findings or "diluted" by other "unofficial" views that many even contradict the source. Japanese reporters (noted for their freedom and liberal views) found Peking to be a dead-end alley because they can only report what NCNA had released or Radio Peking broadcasted on the same day. It is therefore assumed that News Agencies (as an official mouthpiece) are effective in a totalitarian state such as PRC and terribly ineffective at times in a democratic state (such as Malaysia). Unpleasant reporting (by deliberately twisting the official statement) was probably the main cause for the tragic end of the Anti-Communist Saigon Government. I believe that as long as international News Agencies are "gathering" news and that as long as their correspondents are not restrained/prohibited from either "filtering" local/domestic news - true or factual reporting is still in the "questionable stage".

- (2) Exchange features - In the old days (1948 when Singapore had four Chinese papers - the Communist Nam Chiao Jit Poh; Kuomintang Chung Hsi n Jit Poh; Neutral but pro-left Nanyang Siang Pau and Sin Chew Jit Poh. Besides carrying the wire services, they also "import" directly from Chinese papers (especially Hong Kong) with "similar views and political philosophies". The practice was common referred to as "Chien-dao Cheng Chen" (Scissors policy). Today, the Chinese press are still doing this on a "smaller scale" and the Straits Times have embarked on what is now known as the "exchange" system. In other words, they would enter into contractual agreements with one or two U.K. dailies, U.S. dailies, Japanese dailies in which they could use ANY special feature from the Straits Times and the Straits Times can also carry their features. Again, we are at the "mercy" of "foreign newsmen" whose views may not be the same or in accordance with our national development. So far, features like how drug addiction is combatted; the problems of inflation are certainly "in-line" with our thinking. But the selection of course, lies with our own editors.

- (3) News syndicates: News syndicates like Semini, Kings Features etc. provide specialized stories or comic strips for our local papers. I understand news syndicates have large number of "free-lancers" or "stringers" whose "amazing capability of snooping" has kept many readers "hooked".
- (4) Overseas Correspondents: These would be individuals either from Singapore or on the payroll of the Straits Times in the major western capitals. For example, Straits Times keeps a man in London on a "rotation" basis. In the U.S. they have Milton Chase (a retired congressional assistant) who is doing a fabulous job of direct reporting from Washington D.C. and sometimes with "Asia" in mind. The average Singaporean's (if you don't subscribe to the New York Times or Washington Post) opinion of American politics is through the eyes of Milton Chase. Just now Chase "filters" American news is another problem. In London, the Straits Times recently carried a despatch about a Singapore lawyer who denounced the government (part of the eurocommunist plot to discredit Prime Minister Lee and the PAP?) over BBC-TV. Now isn't this complicated? A "political refugee" attacks the government over the TV of a "friendly state" - I personally thought the Straits Times handled this extremely well. In the first place, the London man (Philip Lee) interviewed five Singaporeans residing in London and they all discredited the Lawyer and this was supplemented by a follow-up local interview with the government and it was officially announced that the government had no intention of replying to the lawyer or to get in touch with the BBC. Not one single Chinese paper carried this story.
- (5) Free-lancers - this would be again in special fields like drama, art or cuisine. By-lines often accompanied these stories.
- (6) Staff reporters - paid members of the Straits Times. Since 1975, there has been a streamlining programme for training reporters to handle certain type of stories. Generally, their "sources" are as follow:

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- (1) Government press conferences/handouts.
- (2) Private sector press conferences/handouts.
- (3) Phone in 'tips' from the general public.
- (4) Follow-ups on 'Letters' to the Editor.
- (5) Re-hashing of stories which has appeared in trade/
house journal (public and private sector).
- (6) Press releases from Public Relations/Advertising/
Management Consultancies.

There are certain restrictions placed on reporting (not gag laws) and at this stage it is necessary. The refusal to accept political press releases (from Communist embassies) is one excellent example.

In the case of the Straits Times, there has been a continual shift towards building a stronger national identity. The bilingual page (three times weekly) encouraging readers to study Chinese as a second language; the sponsorship of seminars, sporting events are all positive approaches. The Nanyang Siang Pau and Sin Chew Jit Poh has even gone further by giving top priority to press releases from the various Community Centres (a grass roots organization operating as a statutory body). (Note: The People's Association has recently appointed a Nanyang-Harvard graduate, Lee Mun as Deputy Director for Public Relations). The close-relationship between the community centres (more than 120) and the Chinese press has given a new image to the often "far-fetch" feeling of the average citizen towards the government. Members of Parliament also utilize community centres as a base for "meeting the people" sessions which is also a subject of news reporting.

The Chinese press has also taken an active role in focussing on primary and secondary school activities with both sponsorships of inter-school events (debates, art, music and essay writing competitions); detailed reporting (or feature supports) and pictorial supplements. Both papers through their PR Departments (headed by English-educated executives) have been encouraging Chinese schools to participate in community cultural programmes. The bilingual pages (encouraging Chinese readers to study English) are also well edited.

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Singapore is still in its infancy as far as "nationalism" is concerned - the daily newspaper with all its complicated past, current problems and future anxieties are still the most important contributing factor in developing future awareness and national involvement and development.

Mass Media - especially the daily newspaper has a responsibility to society. Although profit motivations cannot be completely disregarded as it's *raison d'être* - it still owes its existence and future prosperity to the future of the country.

By recruiting some of the best minds and talents - the daily newspaper can be successfully managed and run by individuals whose interests are identical to those of the developing state.

We simply cannot tolerate the kind of sensational journalism that has characterized the Far Eastern Economic Review.

- * it is now being sued by the Singapore Stock Exchange
- * sealed up by the Filipino government, and
- * severely criticized and often banned in Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore.

Hopefully, we will always live in a society of responsible opinion leaders.

Thank you.

