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Perspectives And Cases On Using The Media For Information, Education And Mobilization On The Constitution And The Electoral Process

By

Martin Soong
Before I begin, I'd like to declare my interest, or non-interest in this discussion. I am not a Singaporean, and my journalistic orientation isn't Singaporean. I don't consider my perspective any more objective than a Singaporean's, but perhaps because I'm discussing this issue as an outsider, I'd like to think I'll be able to offer one that's different yet still valid. Finally, I'd like to add that my views, opinions, and impressions are my own, and not those of the newspaper or any other publication that I work for.

My discussion will be about the media and its role and influence in politics and public policy formulation in general rather than specifically about its function and performance in the electoral process and on constitutional matters. The media in Singapore has a peculiar role defined officially and agreed commonly upon, as an integral force shaping and aiding the process of nation-building. If you like, it has been, and continues to be, a catalyst for nationalism. Therefore while its function and performance is more crucial and under heavier scrutiny during elections, even its daily existence is inextricably linked with political development and continuity of the political process. So my discussion of media influence in general can apply to specific instances and events such as elections.

The media in Singapore is not the independent, non-partisan watchdog for the public that it is in the western tradition of the fourth estate. But control, oversight, and direction in reality are relative terms. Interest and lobby groups, not the least of which are the powerful media owners themselves, exert an undeniable, but rarely publicised, influence over Western print and broadcast journalism. In the Singapore context, the media master is the government which exercises "reserved powers" over the press.

Under specific legislation, newspapers including their publishers, editors, and printers operate and exist only if they are issued licenses which are renewable every year. Licenses are granted based on the credentials of publishers, editors, and printers. It is a method of media control used commonly in Third World countries. But the novel, and revolutionary, feature of Singapore's press laws is an instrument that pre-empts open, and politically costly, battles with newspaper companies -- the management share. Through the management share, the government can control, away from the public gaze, the editorial direction of any newspaper through its board of directors.

Singapore's press laws state that newspapers can only be published by publicly-listed companies. There have to be two classes of shares, ordinary and management. Management shares have 200 times the voting power of ordinary shares in decisions on the appointment and dismissal of directors and staff, including editors. And they can only be held by people approved by the government. Without government consent, newspaper companies cannot refuse management shares to people that have been approved.

The broadcast media here means the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, which is state-owned, state-run and administered by the Communications and Information Ministry. Singapore doesn't have any private television or radio stations. Both the newspaper industry, with the exception of several small publishing houses which produce lifestyle-type publications, and broadcasting, are essentially monopolies. This phenomenon came about for both historical and political reasons. But the fact remains that any industry in which there is a monopoly is that much more open to government intervention.
Yesterday, we talked about how the media can confer status, set the agenda, and act as a gatekeeper during elections. We also talked about its functions in society: surveillance, identifying public and national threats; correlation, relating and interpreting issues; and transmission, how it disseminates and reinforces values; its education role.

The Singapore media does all these, some better than others. Faithful newspaper readers or television watchers, even foreigners here for short stays, will inevitably come away from their experience remembering Singapore's basic priorities and concerns, whether they realize it or not. These themes are continually reinforced in government statements and policy speeches reported in the media -- the surveillance, gatekeeper, and transmission roles. Singapore's priorities are political stability, economic flexibility and resilience, and social cohesion. Conversely, its main concerns are that its small size, lack of natural resources, and peculiar racial and religious profile make it extremely vulnerable to external threats as well as internal instability. Consequently, topics such as race, language, and religion are largely off-limits to media coverage and, more importantly, analysis or comment unless officially initiated.

How successful the media is in fulfilling its functions depends largely on whose perspective you're looking at it from -- government/establishment or opposition. I'll look at it from both.

In an information and educational role, newspapers and broadcast media in Singapore are prolific, sometimes almost to the point where it oversaturates the public. Whether this information is really newsy or educational is debatable. Part of the problem where the print media is concerned is that newspapers like the Straits Times, a national paper with a circulation of nearly 300,000 daily, has to be all things to all people. Consequently, its pages are often a mix of dense, grey reportage on highly technical policy issues which the government wants the public to understand, as well as what many perceive as mundane, inconsequential pieces about peculiarly Singaporeans vices such as urinating in lifts and failing to flushing toilets after using them.

From the officially government perspective, the broadcast media has been very successful in its information and educational role. Government speeches, for example, are carried almost without any editing or independent angling. The printed press has been almost as successful in this regard, but because of its greater relative autonomy, has at points been haulled up for perceived treachery against the establishment, of giving undue emphasis to the opposition. For the most part though, the printed press has rarely deviated from its self-prescribed role as an agent of nation-building, and as a catalyst for nationalism. It is unabashedly and unapologetically pro-government supports the government in power and operates on the policy that it should be kept in power.

Where accusations of coverage biased against the opposition are concerned, it is also a fact that political opposition in Singapore is factionalized, riddled with internal dissent and torn by internecine power struggles. It lacks not only cohesion and organization but perhaps more importantly in Singapore's political context also solidarity. This, together with its consistent and continuing failure to generate original, alternative agendas instead of reactive complaints based on establishment policies has, in even the most generous view, amounted to a credibility problem. Based simply on professional objectivity and news worthiness, opposition issues, events, and speeches, usually deserve a far lower priority than government ones.
That said, efforts are made to give equal treatment, in terms of air-time or column-inches relative to the number of candidates fielded, to both establishment and opposition politics. While the government has been accused, and perhaps rightly so, of taking an overly arrogant and high-handed communications approach, it is often more sensitive to public sentiment than it is given credit for. Increasing public concern over the issue of fair coverage and treatment has pricked the conscience of the government which believes its honesty, integrity, and fairness are its hallmarks. Thus, in recent elections, fair coverage and treatment have been demanded by the government, and scrupulously enforced. While television has continued to perform on cue, the print media in some cases has been chastised for going too far the other way in giving the opposition a positive advantage.

But paradoxically, the forum through which the opposition has perhaps gained the most influence and support is television. Because of its inherent capacity, one might even say talent, more as an emotional rather than an intellectual medium, television has helped to generate for opposition politicians, particularly in Parliament sessions, much greater visceral public interest and attention. The fact that opposition politicians, successfully elected ones, are few and far between, compounds the effect, and may have taken public response further than sympathy towards well-meaning martyrs with their hearts in the right places to ascribing even an anti-hero status to them. But that advantage has its limits. While their general intelligence is not questioned, it is clear that no opposition politician so far has credentials that count in the Singapore context towards a wider acceptability and credibility. By credentials I mean their achievements in a meritocratic system that has become elitist as a consequence.

Singaporeans have been enculturated to place more value on substance and achievement: as measured by the rather narrow academic criteria of this meritocracy, than on image. But this is changing. As Singaporeans grow more affluent, more educated, specifically English educated, more well-traveled, and more cosmopolitan, their values are rapidly changing to become more western, in the liberal democratic political tradition as well as culturally. Even here, opposition politicians tend to be at a disadvantage. While their lengthy, often emotional diatribes in Parliament elicit good cheering; their performance ratings as speakers simply on style and delivery alone, are perhaps even more dismal than that of government leaders. The thorough, carefully considered, though legalistic and lengthy style of ruling party politicians may not elicit the same response from the public; but in the Singapore context still appear to carry more credibility, particularly with better-educated viewers and readers. At the visceral, gut level though, hearts probably go out to the opposition. This is partly due to the fact that while the second-generation PAP government is beginning to achieve an intellectual mandate, it has yet to develop the emotional bond that the first generation leaders enjoyed with older Singaporeans. A well-defined and mature rationalism is also lacking. It is the battle for hearts, as well as minds, that the second generation leaders are fighting to win.

Substance, of course, is an entirely different issue. And again, in Singapore's context, the incumbents have an overwhelming advantage; partly because of their generally higher intellectual calibre, and partly because of the massive government information and data gathering machinery they have at their disposal to support policy positions.

Media coverage of government is almost entirely issue oriented. So not surprisingly is coverage of elections and the electoral process. In the neo-confucian value system that Singapore has developed and is inculcating in its people, the collective takes precedence over the individual. The government has worked consciously and assiduously to avoid creating personality cults. For the one leader around which such a cult could very easily have developed, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, you will find little if any mention of personal anecdotes; or such background about his personal life beyond the bare minimum in local media coverage. It is hard to deny though, that he is, of course, a man of almost mythical or legendary stature, particularly in Singapore where the second generation leaders are concerned; if there is a distinctive outstanding personality or image that is communicated through the media; it does not belong to any individual. Instead, it is the uniform conformity of the PAP personality: all-white dress, modest, conservative and practical, meaningful clipped style of speech, and almost identical technocratic backgrounds and impeccable moral and social credentials as incorruptible, decided unmaterialistic married men with no vices and the high calling of state-service their greatest ambition.
Election coverage of individual candidates thus tends to be unexciting and predictable because of their similar profiles. Even the opposition is starting to take the credibility issue more seriously, and fielding candidates with more acceptable credentials. More technocrats and professionals with a counter-establishment political orientation. Fewer factory workers, more lawyers.

Substantively, where election issues are concerned, the government sets the agenda and the media, because of its pro-government or government-controlled position, has the function of communicating, explaining, and supporting it. It also has a gatekeeper role in ensuring that what are perceived as opposition attempts to exploit race, religion, and language issues to political advantage — all issues considered to have extremely volatile potential by the government — are not propagated or at least given short shrift.

In some rare but increasing cases where national and party concerns deviate on issues, it is the print media rather than their broadcast brothers that diplomatically challenges the status quo. For individual political aspirants, it is also largely the criteria and standards, if not the personality, of the ruling party which sets the tone and parameters of media coverage. Again, it is the print media, not television, which will note that a particular candidate displays qualities, characteristics, or an orientation that is either refreshingly different from the standard mould, or dangerously deviant.

Singapore’s media definitely falls into the virility school of thought on media power. It is a powerful tool, unavoidably political and subjective. But the influence of the print and broadcast media is quite balanced. The weaknesses of both are that while they can be applauded for being thoroughly explanatory, they lack analytical depth and are too narrow in their range of content and opinion. Another criticism is that both media tend to report and present news in too such of a vacuum, without adequately considering or taking into account the context and history of issues and events.

While the media has been clearly successful in helping the ruling party to continue in power, its influence, particularly in television, is also nowhere as influential as it is in the west. In terms of its capacity for mobilising support from the electorate, the media has taken a back seat to the PAP’s powerful and meticulously organised election machinery.

Despite its official parameters and role, the Singapore media, print but particularly television, will become potentially more influential in the political process in the near future. For all the criticisms that Singapore suffers as a clean, thoroughly efficient, exceptionally well-managed, and a country in a hurry. And in that kind of mood, to build, to develop, to grow, changes take place very quickly. A significant part of these changes will be in the political process. Under pressure from an electorate whose profile is becoming increasingly younger, better educated, and more western in outlook, it is slowing but inevitably being forced to become more inclusive, more tolerant of dissenting views, more open to alternative perspectives. Political survival for the ruling party, which itself is changing, will require that these views and perspectives be increasingly reflected in and through the media. Here a distressing lack of tradition, interest, and talent in the media will have to be overcome to satisfy the increasingly discriminating and sophisticated standards of a new electorate. Otherwise the gap between the official view of political, social, and economic reality — as the government would like it to be seen — and reality as perceived by Singapore’s new electorate, will grow dangerously and unacceptably wide. Singapore could become not only schizophrenic, but efforts to create the nationalism that is essential to its continued viability as a city-state may also be set back indefinitely.