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Communication Research In Singapore: Themes, Gaps And Priorities

By

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COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN SINGAPORE:
THEMES, GAPS AND PRIORITIES

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COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN SINGAPORE:
THEMES, GAPS AND PRIORITIES

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SINGAPORE'S SOCIAL CONTEXT

The communication system of a society operates within a given social context. It is therefore important to understand the nature of such social context in order to understand the structure and functions of the communication system, the characteristics of media audience/readers, and, most importantly for our present purpose, the communication research tradition and types of communication research conducted.

Some features of Singapore society are particularly relevant.

Singapore is a densely populated city-state. Living in a small island of slightly more than 600 sq kms, the population of Singapore, which numbered about 3 million in 1990, are urban in outlook and life-style, demonstrating a pattern of media behaviour which is typical of the urbanites.

Singapore is also a multi-ethnic society, consisting of about 77% Chinese, 15% Malays, 6% Indians, and the rest, "others". Each of the major ethnic communities has its own cultural and linguistic tradition. While English has evolved to be the dominant language and the lingua franca among the better educated younger Singaporeans, the society as a whole remains linguistically diversified.

Singapore is also a young nation, formed as a result of a reluctant separation from the Federation of Malaysia 25 years ago in 1965. Under the leadership of Lee Kuan Yew, the PAP government has transformed the former British colony into a modern state, sustaining continuous political stability, economic prosperity and social development. The government is strong, efficient, non-corrupt, and unabashedly paternalistic. The dominance of the state is overwhelming.

As we shall see in the next sections, these features of Singapore society become relevant when we begin to describe its communication system and to analyse the type of communication research which has been conducted. It is also within the same context that we discuss the kinds of communication research needed as Singapore moves into a new era in the 1990s.
THE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

Living in an urban environment with a relatively high level of economic prosperity, people in Singapore are active media users. Singapore’s newspaper circulation rate of 280 per 1,000 population is amongst the highest in Asia, comparable with those of several advanced countries such as Australia (292), Canada (220), the United States (268) and France (213). [1] There is however still a long way to go to reach the high circulation rates of over 400 being enjoyed by other highly literate societies such as Japan (562), Sweden (521), the Soviet Union (422) and the United Kingdom (413).

The penetration of radios and televisions in Singapore’s households is practically universal. As is shown in Table 1, the number of radio licences (including all television licences, which also permit the use of radios) per 1,000 population was 244 in 1988, and the number of TV licences per 1,000 was 209. It should be noted that these are figures for licences and not actual numbers of sets. These figures therefore almost certainly underestimate the actual number of radios and TV sets in use since each licence permits its holder to use one or more sets on the same premises. Most households now own several radio receivers, and many middle-class families are adding a second TV set for more “personalized” viewing. Furthermore, an unknown number of households may have obtained radios and TV sets for use without licences.

The penetration of TV sets is associated with popularity of VCRs, which, in turn, explains the decline of cinemas in the past decades. The number of cinemas in Singapore decreased from 80 in 1980 to only 46 in 1988. Correspondingly, the total cinema seating capacity has declined from 77,000 to 48,469 during the same period of time. Every year, there are more reports on cinemas being converted into entertainment halls or places of worship. Larger cinema halls are also split into smaller ones, trying hard to compete with the increasing popularity of VCRs and VCR rental services.

Responding to the needs of the linguistically diversified population, and in support of the government policy of multilingualism, mass media in Singapore provide their services in several languages, notably the four official languages. Thus, of the eight daily newspapers printed in Singapore, there are three each in English and in Chinese, and one each in Malay and Tamil. Circulation-wise, out of daily circulation of 747,334 copies in 1988, 354,840 (47.7%) were from the Chinese language papers, and 340,401 (45.8%) from the English papers. The rest were published by the Malay (42,458 copies, or 5.7%) and the Tamil daily (5635, or 0.8%). (Singapore 1989, Ministry of Communication and Information)
**TABLE 1: THE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM IN SINGAPORE (1988)**

| The press | 8 Dailies in 5 languages  
|           | Daily circulation: 743,000  
|           | 280 per 1,000 population  
| Radio     | 4 AM channels, 1 FM, 1 short-wave service  
|           | Transmission hours per day: 115  
|           | Licences: 647,717  
|           | 244 per 1,000 population  
| TV        | 3 SBC channels*  
|           | Transmission hours per week: 163  
|           | Licences: 554,133  
|           | 209 per 1,000 population  
| Cinema    | 46 cinemas  
|           | Seating capacity: 48,469  
|           | Seats per 1,000 population: 18  
|           | Annual attendance: 22,128,000  
|           | Annual attendance per person: 8.4  
| Telephone | 1,271,000 phones  
|           | Per 1,000 population: 480  
|           | International calls: 43,672,000 per year**  
|           | Annual calls per person: 16.5  
| Telex     | 13,633,000 calls per year  
|           | Annual calls per person: 5.1  
| Post      | 88 post offices  
|           | 2.5 million postal items handled per day  

* Audience can also tune in to 3 additional channels from Malaysia.  
** Excluding calls to West Malaysia.

Similarly, SBC (Singapore Broadcasting Corporation) broadcasts its TV programmes in four official languages, again dominated by English and Mandarin. Programmes in Mandarin invariably receive the highest ratings in viewership, often a few times higher than those of the English-language programmes. The shares of the Malay and Indian (including Tamil and Hindi) programmes, both in broadcast hours and in viewership, are much smaller. SBC Radio broadcasts its programmes in five channels, with four allocated primarily to the four official languages each, and the fifth dominated by English.

Provision of mass media content in different languages is necessary so that they can reach the linguistically and ethnically diversified population. This is both a question of language proficiency (since monolinguals can only rely on certain media as sources of information and entertainment) and ethnic/cultural preference. While the situation implies a diversified media system, there is also much redundancy in media content in the system. As a result, a mono-literate Malay reader, for instance, has no other choice except the only Malay-language paper published in Singapore for daily newspaper reading (as newspapers from Malaysia are not permitted for public circulation in Singapore, and vice versa). Meanwhile, as there tends to be a substantial overlap in content between newspapers published in different languages, a bi-literate reader gains only marginally information-wise in reading two or more newspapers published in Singapore. [2] This is compounded by the fact that all but one newspapers in Singapore are published by one company, Singapore Press Holdings.

To a lesser extent, the same can be said of the informational programmes on TV and radio channels in different languages provided by SBC, which comes under the purview of the Ministry of Communication and Information (re-organized as the Ministry of Information and the Arts since 1991).

Operating under the dominance of a strong government which exerts its influence directly and indirectly, mass media in Singapore work closely in conformity with government regulations and expectations. The guiding government communication policy can be summarised in two points. (See Kuo, 1983.) Firstly, the media must not be abused to mislead the population against the "public interest", as defined by the authority. Both domestic and foreign media must therefore be scrutinized to fend off any undesirable content which may have de-stabilising or "polluting" effects. Secondly, since mass media are seen to be effective means of persuasion, they must be mobilised to support government policies for nation-building. For almost two decades since the early 1970s, the political leadership has been able to draw almost total support from the mass media and indeed all existing social organizational networks for the promotion and implementation of government policies.
Over the years, the above guiding principles have led to a dilemma in the development of communication systems in Singapore. On the one hand, the government exerts strong influence, directly and indirectly, on the operation of the media, and enjoys full support and cooperation from the latter. On the other, from time to time, some government leaders have also expressed the concern that the media have become too docile and that the population too conforming and politically passive. The crucial question of the credibility of the press has also been raised. Moreover, the situation is also not conducive to the goal to transform Singapore into a "global city", as a centre of international trade, and to provide services in finance, banking, medicine, science and technology, and telecommunications. (For some critical discussions on the relations between the press and the government in Singapore, see, for instance, Lent, 1984; Parker, 1988; and Tan, 1990.)

However, it would be wrong to perceive Singapore as a closed society, and one in which the government and the existing domestic media organizations have the total control of information sources in the society. Television viewers in Singapore can tune in to three Malaysian channels in addition to the three SBC channels. As a result, SBC does not enjoy a total monopoly and is known to have re-scheduled its programmes so as to better compete with popular programmes from Malaysia. The same is true with radio broadcasts only here the competition is even wider, keener and more open. Some radio stations from Indonesia and Malaysia are highly popular in Singapore, while BBC's overseas news service stationed in Singapore is another important information source for the better educated.

The confrontation between the Singapore government and the Dow Jones group is by now well known. While the government continues to limit the circulation of such important regional information papers and magazines as Asian Wall Street Journal, Far Eastern Economic Review and Asia Week, these news sources are publicly available in libraries. Interested readers have no doubt been "inconvenienced" by the limitation, but not "barred" from such sources. With further progress in modern information technology, censorship and control of information flow are becoming more and more difficult, and may well prove self-defeating.

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: THE INSTITUTIONAL SETTING

As we have seen, mass media communication plays an important role both in the daily life of Singaporeans and in the Republic's long-term nation-building and social development. In the past decades, the media industry in Singapore has demonstrated stages of growth and expansion. It is thus perplexing that formal training and education in mass communication has been generally
neglected until recently. This rather unique situation has had major consequences on the state of communication research in Singapore.

Until Ngee Ann Polytechnic launched its Mass Communication Programme in 1989 and the National University of Singapore set up its new Department of Mass Communication in 1990, the only formal mass communication education programme ever existed in Singapore was conducted by the former Nanyang University in the 1970s. The programme was discontinued after it produced its first batch of honours graduates in 1980 at the time of the merger of Nanyang University with the University of Singapore in the same year.

Without a formal educational programme in mass communication at the tertiary level, there was the lack of a core group of researchers and students and a conducive environment to generate systematic research in mass communication. All communication research done in Singapore so far has been conducted mostly by scholars who did not (and could not) claim communication as their central field of specialization. As a result, such research was typically done in a multi-disciplinary context; the communication component was often marginal or incidental. The small number of communication researchers (or, more appropriately, researchers whose interests cover elements of communication) came from different disciplinary backgrounds and had only limited contact with one another in their respective research ventures.

More serious, there was also a lack of an institutional base to coordinate the work of the small number of researchers interested in communication. Critically missing was a systematic and comprehensive research agenda on mass communication, and a group of researchers supported by students majoring in mass communication to carry out the research as a coherent team. Hopefully, the situation may now be changed with the new programme at Ngee Ann and especially with the setting up a new Department at NUS. [3]

Without the support of local institutions and a core group of researchers, communication research in Singapore, however, has been facilitated by AMIC (Asian Mass Communication Research and Information Centre) which has its headquarters in Singapore. Although AMIC, as a regional organization, does not specialise in communication research in Singapore, local scholars have benefited from its library resources and the opportunity to participate in various seminars and research projects organised by AMIC. The supporting role of AMIC is well attested by the number of publications on communication on Singapore which bear the AMIC imprint. With recent establishment of mass communication programmes at the tertiary level in Singapore, there is no doubt that there will be close cooperation between AMIC and these institutions, and that AMIC will be able to play an even bigger role in communication research in Singapore.
In order to review the extent and features of communication research in Singapore, a select bibliography is compiled and attached as Appendix I. For the purpose of identifying relevant works to be included in the bibliography, communication is defined broadly to include the press (including books and publishing industry), broadcast media, advertising, public relations, and the social aspects of communication and information technology (CIT). The bibliography consists of both published and unpublished works, listed under separate categories, and done by both local and foreign scholars. The list is not intended to be exhaustive, but should include all major works on communication in Singapore up to 1990. Before an analysis of research topics and themes is attempted, some observations on communication research in Singapore can be made based on the bibliography. These can be revealing.

Firstly, considering that the bibliography spans a period of more than two decades, the number of research works completed, especially those published is small. Relatively few items were published before 1975, and the great majority of the publications have been done after 1980. Generally speaking, communication research is an under-researched area which is gaining momentum only in recent years.

Secondly, most of the works have been done by local researchers (up to 80% in the published category) and have been published locally (about 70%). This is of course expected as such topics appeal to local researchers and local journals/publishers. The pattern may well be commonly found in most countries. For better sharing and dissemination of research findings, it is however undesirable that works by local scholars are published only locally. There is clearly a need for local researchers to make a more aggressive attempt to publish internationally to share their findings with the larger international scholarly community.

Thirdly, several institutions seemed to have been particularly active and served as "mini-centres" of communication studies in Singapore. The first is the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, although only a very small number of staff in sociology have concentrated their research efforts on communication-related issues. Over the years, quite a number of Academic Exercises (Honours theses) by Sociology honours students have contributed to this rather barren field. The other "centre" is the Faculty of Business Administration of the same university, which has contributed to research in advertising and marketing. Again, the cumulative body of student theses provides a rich source from which more systematic research could be pursued.

Still another "former centre" was the short-lived Mass Communication programme at the former Nanyang University. The Programme produced its first and only batch of Honours students
in 1980 and enriched the field of communication research with ten Graduate Theses on various aspects of mass communication in Singapore. As far as communication research is concerned, it was most unfortunate that the Nanyang programme was short-lived.

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: ANALYSIS OF THE THEMES

Some major themes of communication research in Singapore can be identified based on an analysis of the items listed in the bibliography.

Firstly, as far as published works are concerned, communication policy and planning clearly ranks the top in number (Abdul, 1985; Cheong, 1984/85; Kuo, 1977, 1983; Kuo and Chen, 1983; Lent, 1984; Lim 1985; Parker, 1988; and Ang, 1984 which is an unpublished thesis). This theme reflects the importance of communication policy and planning in a social context which stresses social engineering and state dominance. The work by Kuo and Chen (1983) remains one important contribution by local scholars to the field. Notably, two critical essays on communication policy in Singapore were done by foreign scholars (Lent, 1984; and Parker, 1988). The differences in perspective and orientation between local and foreign researchers are themselves revealing.

A somewhat related topic, the role of mass media in social campaigns in Singapore, has also been highly popular. These include works on family planning campaigns (Loh, 1973, 1974; Lee, 1979; A. Ng, 1980) which captured the interest of many a scholars in the 1970s, on language campaigns (Kuo, 1984a, 1984b; Nah, 1981) or simply overviews of campaigns in the Singapore context (Nair, 1982; Tham, 1982; and Wee, 1977). Considering the relevance of social campaigns in the daily life of Singaporeans and the role of mass media in campaign activities, a comprehensive research work is yet to be done for an overall evaluation of mass media and mass campaigns in Singapore.

As indicated above, one feature of the communication system in Singapore is its multilingual content and the policy of multilingualism. As such, communication planning is closely related to language planning, and at least two of the titles on communication and social campaign quoted above (Kuo, 1984a and 1984b) touch on the topic of language and communication. To this theme, we can add the following: Kuo, 1977, 1978; Ang, 1984; G. Ng, 1980; and Nah, 1987; making this one of the better researched topics in communication studies.

Another theme in the applied communication research tradition is advertising. This topic has been actively explored by researchers and students in business administration (L. Chen, 1984; Tan and Ngui, 1985; L. Chia, 1986; M. Chia, 1982; Ngui, 1982; Ong, 1982; Tsui, 1983). Several of these studies applied
rigorous empirical approaches including the experimental design. Students from other disciplinary backgrounds have also contributed to this topic (C. Teo, 1980; Goonting, 1984; J. Chan, 1990).

Television is an important medium in urban Singapore. A major systematic work on television has been conducted by a German scholar as his PhD dissertation (Herdt, 1984, 1987), while an article by Kuo (1984b) deals with the role of television in language planning. In addition, an impressive number of theses on issues relating to television as a popular medium in Singapore has been completed by students, at both the honours and graduate levels (Ang, 1984; Goh, 1980; Heng, 1982; Liu, 1980; K. Tan, 1973; C. Teo, 1980; Yap, 1988). As a contrast, research work on radio broadcasting has been glaringly absent.

Many titles also relate to the press, although their content varies widely from general overviews of the press system (Nair, 1989; P. Tan, 1971; C. Ho, 1980) to critical analysis of the relationship between the state and the press and the issue of press freedom (Parker, 1988, P. Tan, 1990; and Liao, 1981). Still others relied on newspaper content to analyse the coverage of minority/disadvantaged groups (Lee-Phillips, 1985), to discuss the issues of objective reporting (Beri, 1988), or to compare the reporting of news events cross-nationally (Cheng, 1980).

Issues relating to the concept of information society and new information technologies (IT) were attracting increasing numbers of researchers in the 1980s. This is to a large extent because IT has been identified and promoted since the early 1980s as a prime mover of Singapore’s economy. In the meantime, the social and economic impact, both actual and potential, of new IT (such as computers, satellite communications, videotext, teletext, and cable TV), are catching the attention of a multidisciplinary group of researchers, including those with backgrounds in communication studies (Lowe, 1987); sociology (Kuo and H. Chen, 1987; Kuo, forthcoming), law (Mohan, 1984; Chin, forthcoming; Wei, forthcoming), and business administration (N. Tan, 1985).

It is noted that many of the works on IT discussed above do not fall into the conventional definition of communication studies, and are often only marginally related to the core issues of communication networks and dissemination of information. Works on information society and information technology are evolving to become a major research area by themselves, although a cohesive framework incorporating works from multidisciplinary backgrounds is yet to be established. It is also expected that there will be increasingly more studies which bridge communication studies and new information technology in the future. The distinction between the two is becoming less distinct.
Still another research theme on which a cluster of works have been done is communication-related laws. Some of these deal specifically with issues relating to new communication and information technology, referred to before (Mohan, 1984; Wei, forthcoming). Others involve topics on privacy (Chin, forthcoming), copyright (Owi, 1986, Kevin Tan, 1984) or more conventional areas of press laws (Abdul, 1985) and defamation (S. Koh, 1980). Understandably, most of these publications are of very specialized nature.

The above are topics in communication studies which have been more actively researched in Singapore. It is significant to note that these (relatively) popular research topics are generally those which were policy-oriented (such as those on policy and planning, legal issues, and public campaigns) and those with applied relevance (on advertising and information technology). Some, such as those on language and communication, also tend to reflect unique features of Singapore society.

In addition to the above popular themes, two other topics have received moderate attention from researchers. These are: (1) Books and publishing (Anuar, 1984; Byrd, 1970; Gopinathan, 1989/90; Gopinathan and Clammer, 1986; and Yuen, 1986), mostly done by a small group of professionals who are devoted to the promotion of books and reading in Singapore; and (2) Popular culture (Francis, 1982; W. Ho, 1979; Quek, 1987; L. Yap, 1988), notably by students in sociology.

As a contrast, the following topics have only been scantily addressed: (1) Communication history, with only a minimum of works done in the 1960s (M. Chen, 1967; Kanayson, 1964); (2) Movies and films (A. Koh, 1980; Liu, 1980); (3) Public relations (Chew, 1988; P. Yap, 1980); and (4) International news flow (Scheller, 1983; Szende, 1984, 1986).

COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: GAPS AND PRIORITIES

From the above overview, some gaps in communication research in Singapore have become apparent. Generally, the "popular" themes covered by Singapore scholars have been selective, reflecting the interests of a relatively small group of researchers from a divergent academic background. Few of the studies deal with theoretical issues in communication, either to test a western model or to propose an Asian (or Singaporean) model. Most of the works have been conducted with minimal reference to the wider communication research traditions or theories beyond the Singapore context. More fundamentally, issues relating to some basic communication components such as media organizations, media effects, and audience analysis have not been systematically researched. The situation calls for a more systematic and concerted approach to set up a strong foundation for communication research in Singapore.
In the meantime, considering some unique features of Singapore society, there are a number of relevant topics which should be given some priority by researchers in or outside of Singapore. Two areas are suggested below as examples.

One topic to be given some priority consideration is intercultural communication. In this respect, multi-ethnic Singapore provides an ideal situation for a thorough and fruitful study of the processes and consequences of intercultural communication in a multi-ethnic setting. People of different cultural backgrounds are brought into close face-to-face contact in the urban environment. To what extent do such different cultural backgrounds lead to mutual understanding or misunderstanding? To what extent do such daily encounters lead to certain specific forms of cross-cultural communication? In this regard, comparative studies can be conducted not only between cultural groups in Singapore, but also between those in Singapore and those in other multicultural societies in Asia. This is an area to which both social anthropologists and psychologists, in addition to sociologists, can contribute in an important way. In fact, the Singapore setting should be ideal for the testing of models of intercultural communication, using either experimental design or participant observation. In a society which emphasises multi-culturalism and ethnic harmony, an understanding of the dynamics of intercultural communication is much needed. Research in this area could contribute not only in theory development but could also be applied.

International communication is still another research area which has been generally neglected. Again, this reflects a serious gap in communication research in Singapore. The communication system in Singapore is highly dependent on foreign sources both for information (international news services) and for entertainment (television programmes and cinema films). Cultural imperialism, defined broadly as the hegemony of western cultural forms with "polluting" effects on indigenous cultural expressions has become an ideologised issue in the political discourse in Singapore, as in many other Asian societies. Revitalization of Asian values and traditions is seen to be an effective way to counter such undesirable threats from the west. Paradoxically, local media are seen to be both the culprits, which brought in the polluting western values and life-styles, and the potential saviours, as they could be used to serve to inculcate and reinforce desirable Asian values. Closely related to this theme are the questions of international information flow, world information order, censorship and information control, press freedom and responsibility. An attempt could be made to test an Asian, or Singaporean, model of communication and development.
CONCLUDING REMARKS

Communication research in Singapore has been carried out by researchers from various academic backgrounds without the support of a strong institutional base, and without an established research tradition. It is, in other words, still at the "pre-take-off" stage.

As such, as expected, most communication studies in Singapore have been descriptive rather than explanatory; and few addressed theoretical questions in communication. Most of them were issue-oriented rather than theory driven, and conducted by researchers who were relatively free from the influence of dominant communication paradigms and models. In fact, there has been little reference to established research traditions in other centers of communication studies.

Under the circumstances, we do not find dominance of the so-called "western model", nor have there been any conscious efforts to work from an Asian perspective. Paradoxically, this is perhaps typical of a research environment whereby no established research tradition has been founded.

In terms of research methods, researchers in communication studies in Singapore have tended to be open and would apply methods which best suited their purposes, in part depending on their own disciplinary background and personal interests. Many studies have made use of documentary and secondary sources, including media content; equally common were those applying social survey methods, notably those done by sociologists. Only a few applied rigorous experimental designs.

Generally, communication research in Singapore until 1990 can be characterised as being pursued on an ad hoc basis. This is typical of a pioneer research field which is still at the "pre-take-off" stage of development. Compared to the works done in other countries, communication research in Singapore is lagging both in quality and quantity. A research tradition is yet to be established, and much of previous works are yet to be consolidated. Herewith lies the challenging tasks ahead for the new generation of communication researchers in Singapore. With the setting up of the new Department of Mass Communication at the National University of Singapore, there is reason to be optimistic.
NOTES

1. Singapore statistics are calculated based on Yearbook of Statistics 1989 (Department of Statistics) and those for other countries are calculated based on UNESCO Yearbook of Statistics, 1987, referring to 1984 figures.

2. Newspapers in different languages do differ in content, each catering more to the ethnic/cultural interests and tastes of its readers. There is nevertheless a substantial overlap in content between papers.

3. At the non-formal level, the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) used to run its School of Journalism, providing short-term journalism training to both its own junior staff and young journalists from other organizations. Unfortunately, with recent re-organization, the SPH closed its School of Journalism in early 1990. On the broadcast media side, SBC also runs its own training scheme for its new staff. This is typically on-the-job training on a short-term basis. These being non-formal training programmes for media professionals, they do not contribute to communication research in any significant way.

4. Full references of the publications are to be found in the attached Bibliography. As the Bibliography lists the publications in alphabetical order under two separate categories, published and unpublished, readers should check both categories to locate the full references on the items referred to.
Appendix

MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH IN SINGAPORE:
A SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY*

A. Published Books, Monograph and Articles

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* The assistance of Ms Jasmine S. Chan in the preparation of this bibliography is gratefully acknowledged.
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