<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Communication policy and national development</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Author(s)</td>
<td>Kuo, Eddie Chen-Yu</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date</td>
<td>1986</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10220/341">http://hdl.handle.net/10220/341</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rights</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Communication Policy And National Development

By

Eddie C Y Kuo
Communication Policy and National Development

EDDIE C. Y. KUO

Mass Communication in Singapore

The relationship between communication and national development is complex and complementary. On the one hand, communication is a fundamental social process underlying social change and development, while on the other, a communication system is an integrated part of the fabric of society and is highly dependent on socio-economic development for its sustenance and growth.

Whatever the causal explanation linking the two, the symmetrical relationship between communication and development is well attested in the case of Singapore, whereby the development of mass media communication has been closely associated with rapid social and economic change in the Republic during the past decades. Both in terms of media operation and media exposure, Singapore ranks amongst the top in South-East Asia.

In 1980, there were twelve daily newspapers in Singapore, with the thirteenth expected to make its debut in 1981. Of the present twelve, three are published in English, five in Chinese, one in Malay, two in Tamil, and one in Malayalam. Daily newspapers in all official languages are therefore available, serving the ethnically diversified population. The total daily newspaper circulation (not including Sunday papers) is reported to have been 587,600 in 1979, giving a circulation rate of 249 papers per 1,000 people, which marks a healthy growth from a rate of about 200 in 1974. Moreover, while almost one-quarter of the population subscribe or buy a daily in an average day, more than 80 per cent of the population aged fifteen and over read a daily everyday.

Radio and television broadcasting in Singapore were operated by Radio Television Singapore (RTS) under the Ministry of Culture until early 1980 when it was re-organized as the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), a semi-governmental statutory board.

SBC Radio broadcasts in four channels and in four official languages for a total of 504 hours weekly. In addition, an FM stereo service broadcasts 56
hours a week. In Singapore, a licence is required to operate radio sets at any premises, or in a vehicle. Since a radio licence allows the use of one or more radios on a site, it is difficult to estimate the total number of radios in use in Singapore. In 1979, a total of 58,912 radio licences and 371,692 radio and television licences were given. The combined figure of 430,604 suggests a ratio of 182 licences per 1,000 population, an impressive increase from the figure of 236,856 (114 licences per 1,000) in 1970.4

In terms of audience, market survey statistics indicate that about one-third of the adult population listen to SBC Radio in an average day. While this percentage may appear to be low, it should be noted that SBC Radio is particularly popular among Malays and Indians in Singapore, with about 76 per cent of Malays and 79 per cent of Indians listening to programmes from SBC Radio daily in 1980.5 Many Chinese turned instead to Rediffusion, a cabled broadcasting service, for the highly popular Chinese entertainment programmes.

In 1979, Rediffusion, a private commercial enterprise, claimed to have 100,487 subscribers, compared with only 60,704 in 1970.6 Significantly, there were more Chinese who listened to Rediffusion than to SBC Radio channels regularly.

Television is a highly popular and powerful medium in Singapore. SBC Television operates its programmes on two channels and in four official languages. Of the more than 100 weekly transmission hours from the two channels, about 59 per cent are in English, 25 per cent in Chinese, 9 per cent in Malay and 7 per cent in Tamil.7 Statistics show that a total of 371,692 television licences were given in 1979, giving a ratio of 157 licences per 1,000 persons. That is an impressive expansion compared with a total of 156,856 licences (76 for every 1,000 persons) in 1970.8

According to 1980 statistics, about 1.6 million or 90 per cent of adults lived in homes with a television set; and about 65 per cent (1.2 million) of them watched at least some SBC Television programmes on an average day.9

Another highly popular medium of communication is the cinema, which is in keen competition with television as another major form of entertainment. In 1979 there were 74 cinemas in Singapore, a great majority of them air-conditioned. The total seating capacity was estimated to be 69,000, or about 29 per 1,000 people. This is an impressive increase from the 1970 figure of 27,980 seats with only 14 per 1,000 people. The total annual attendance of 46,054,000 makes Singaporeans the top movie-goers in the world, with every Singaporean attending 19.5 films per year on average.10

From the above, it is clear that mass media industry is expanding and that exposure to mass media has become an increasingly important part of life among Singaporeans. This trend can be attributed to Singapore's growing economy and per capita income, as well as its rising education and literacy level. In the meantime, it must be noted that this development has been achieved within a political context which takes an ambivalent, even somewhat sceptical, view of the mass media. We turn now to communication policies and laws in Singapore.
Guiding Communication Norms

In the following discussion of the guiding communication policies in Singapore, we adopt the definition by UNESCO which sees communication policies as sets of social norms "established to guide the behaviour of communication system." We will especially focus our attention on the social norms formulated by political leaders through legal and institutional constraints to guide the actual operation and functioning of the communication system.

In principle, PAP leaders perceive mass media as powerful instruments that can guide or misguide the masses. The audience, in turn, is seen to be composed of gullible individuals who can do little to resist the influence of the mass media. Based on these assumptions, two propositions are arrived at: first, the mass media, if in the 'wrong' hands, could be abused to destruct social harmony and political stability; secondly, the mass media, with proper guidance, can be utilized to perform a constructive role in nation-building, especially in developing countries. Mass media communication is therefore a 'double-edged weapon', as a former Minister for Culture put it. The above propositions logically lead to the conclusion that the operations of the mass media must be properly controlled and supervised.

A review of parliamentary records and speeches made by government leaders since Singapore's autonomy in 1959 shows that, while political leaders have been on the whole consistent in their views regarding the freedom of the press and the role of the mass media, some changes in emphasis can also be observed over the years with changing socio-political conditions of the Republic.

The constitutional laws of Singapore, like those in most countries throughout the world, guarantee that every citizen has the right to freedom of speech and expression. Such freedom, however, in Singapore as in any other country, is never absolute or without limitations. In a speech to the University of Singapore Law Society in 1962, the Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, made this point clear: "The rule of law talks of habeas corpus, freedom, the right of association and expression, of assembly, of peaceful demonstration... But nowhere in the world today are these rights allowed to be practised without limitations, for blindly applied, these ideals can work towards the undoing of organized society." During the early years after self-government, when the PAP government was still confronted by opposition MPs in the parliament, its leaders were compelled to define explicitly the limitations of such freedom. Rajaratnam, the then Minister for Culture and an ex-journalist himself, was among the first to do that. In a parliamentary session, he pointed out that,

If a newspaper indulges in tactics which might incite communal hatred or race riots, we will interfere. In fact, during the last one year, we have had occasion to ring up the Press and ask for their cooperation to keep certain unpleasant stories out of the Press... When we think that the interest of the country as a whole is involved, then, to that extent, we are quite prepared to modify the absolute
freedom, which nobody accepts, not even in Britain. To that extent, ... we concede that we do interfere with the Press.

Issues and problems relating to ethnic relations and communal conflicts are therefore considered 'sensitive' areas to be treated with great care. Another issue defined as a taboo topic involves pro-communist opinions and activities. As Ong Pang Boon, the then Minister for Home Affairs, described it: 'Our policy in this respect is generally like this. All publications in praise of the Communist way of life and advocating unconstitutional means to overthrow the government and publications of a purely propaganda nature must, of course, be banned and will continue to be banned."

After Singapore's independence in 1965, and as the PAP control became more stabilized, government leaders began to put more emphasis on the positive role of the mass media in national development. This was stated as a guiding policy of the Ministry of Culture. According to Jek Yeun Thong, then Minister for Culture:

In the mass media aspect of our activity, it is [the Ministry of Culture's] policy to induce the change of attitudes in our people. Many a developing country has rightly endeavoured to modernise itself on the basis of economic and social transformation but has inadvertently omitted a vital area—the minds of men. Our modernisation process should never neglect attitudinal change in our people and this is where the mass media come in to play an essential role.

Yet the relationship between the PAP government and the press during the 1960s and early 1970s was tinted with tension, suspicion and the lack of mutual trust. As an powerful institution, the press was obviously not exerting its influence in a 'positive' direction as defined by the ruling party. The confrontation reached its climax in 1971 when the PAP government decided to clamp down on the press.

Several incidents involving the press happened in 1971 in Singapore. *The Eastern Sun* and *Singapore Herald* were closed for alleged foreign funding and control. Earlier in the same year, four top executives of the *Nanyang Siang Pau* were detained on charges of 'glamourizing the communist way of life' and trying 'to stir Chinese racial emotions'. These incidents naturally caused concern and criticism both locally and internationally. To defend his policy, Lee Kuan Yew made a revealing speech to the general assembly of the International Press Institute at Helsinki in June 1971. As he put it: 'The Singapore Government has the responsibility to neutralise the attempts of foreign agencies and communists to make political gains by shaping opinions and attitudes of Singaporeans. In such a situation, freedom of the press, freedom of news media must be subordinated to the over-riding needs of the integrity of Singapore and to the primacy of purpose of an elected government.'

The fear of foreign control over the local mass media has since become a common theme and has been presented as another legitimate reason for imposing political control and stringent legal constraints on communication media in Singapore.
Foreign influences need not take the form of direct control or ownership of the local mass media. Such external influences may be unintentional but nevertheless effective as a result of cultural imperialism. Ironically, Singapore is especially susceptible to such cultural encroachments because of its relatively well-developed communication system and frequent contact with the outside world. As Lee Kuan Yew observed, 'We are an international junction for ships, aircraft and telecommunications by cable and satellite. People from the richer countries of the West, their magazines, newspapers, television and cinema films, all come in. We are very exposed. It is impossible to insulate Singaporeans from the outside world.' This situation justifies the need for censorship. But 'censorship can only partially cut off these influences. It is more crucial that local production of films and publication of newspapers should not be surreptitiously captured by their proxies.'

The same concern was reiterated by Jek Yeun Thong, in his speech to the Commonwealth Broadcasting Association meeting in 1976. He indicated that the concern over the influence of broadcast satellites and communications technology centred on two issues:

The first is the imbalance in the flow of TV films from the technologically advanced countries which control the production and distribution of these films. The second concerns the influence which this one-way flow of TV films can exert on the receiving countries . . . [To solve the problem,] one solution is to ensure cultural pluralism in TV programmes with less air time and a judicious selection of programmes. . . . An alternative is to be culturally self-reliant where each country produces most of its television programmes.

Obviously, in Singapore the first alternative has been adopted as part of the broadcasting policy with regard to the imbalance of the flow of programmes.

One of the consistent themes regarding communication policies in Singapore is the government's view on the 'relativity' of freedom of the press. As discussed above, PAP leaders believe that the unique social-cultural and political situation of Singapore justifies the application of a special form of and boundaries for the freedom of the press. According to Jek Yeun Thong,

Singapore has never had freedom of the press as it is understood in the Western world. . . . It is . . . futile to try to draw a comparison between the case of the New York Times and the case of the newspapers in Singapore. . . . In the first place, we do not have such traditions [of freedom of the press]. In the second place, in the United States riots can happen every day and everywhere, and yet the country remains stable and prosperous. But in Singapore, one bloody riot will wreck the whole country.

Later in 1977, the view that freedom of the press in a society is relative rather than absolute was reiterated by the Prime Minister when he commented on the human rights issue championed by President Carter of the United States: 'We have got to hope that [President Carter's] measures are sufficiently practical to be able to take into account the different historic, cultural and value systems of different parts of the world in different stages.
COMMUNICATION POLICY & NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT 273

of development. In another interview with a foreign correspondent, Lee asked, 'Can we and must we all accept the same moral standards, or human rights? Or like varying dress styles they have really evolved over different historic, cultural, climatic and technological circumstances.'

While freedom is relative, a line somehow should still be drawn between an open and a closed society. It is thus significant that the Prime Minister expressed his vision of an open society in the same interview. In his view, 'as long as there is freedom of access to information about what is going on in the world and you can read more than what the Government puts out, that is an essential part of the ingredient to the open society'.

This statement may be seen to represent the 'minimum level' of freedom of the press that the PAP government will maintain in its policies regarding communication activities.

Conspicuously, in the above policy statements by PAP leaders, no mention was made regarding the role of the mass media as a public forum for the articulation of public opinion and as a 'watchdog' to oversee the functioning of the government. It was not until the late 1970s that the mass media was encouraged to do more than simply support government programmes and policies and that its political watchdog role was publicly recognized.

According to a report in Far Eastern Economic Review in 1980, there were indications that the government was prepared to 'let the thousand flowers blossom', and that newspaper editors were criticized by both Prime Minister and Deputy Prime Minister for excessive conformism in their coverage and for a dearth of discussion of issues. It was reported that the government would like to see more critical analysis, including questioning of fundamental premises.

Indications of the latest switch in the government attitude towards the role of the mass media, as indicated above, can be found in several public statements by MPs in the late 1970s.

In June 1978, the Senior Minister of State for Foreign Affairs, A. Rahim Ishak, a former journalist, expressed the view that a good journalist should feel free to criticize the government if he feels that certain policies or their implementation are not correct, as long as he can 'offer a better alternative'.

A more significant statement came from the Parliamentary Secretary (Culture), Dr. Ow Chin Hock, in early 1979 during a parliamentary session:

The mass media ... could play a constructive role towards encouraging political participation] ... . The mass media could invite views on the more important topics from the readers or audience, providing a forum for serious and in-depth discussion. We, on the other hand, should be more tolerant of the different views which come in the form of constructive criticisms. We should trust our mass media men to know what are and what are not damaging to the country's image and its social stability.

From the above review, it should be noted that, over the past two decades, the guiding norms for communication operation have shifted
from the prescription of a passive to an active role for the mass media. Correspondingly, the perceived function of the mass media has changed from basically a channel for one-way communication to that for two-way communication. This trend, corresponding to changing social-political conditions in Singapore as we shall discuss later, provides new challenges for media practitioners as Singapore enters the 1980s.

**Law and Order in Communication**

As discussed above, the political leadership in Singapore perceives the mass media as a powerful instrument in society. As such, media communication activities should on the one hand be carefully controlled or supervised so that they do not go against the national interest, and on the other hand be properly utilized to play an active role in nation-building and social development.

These guiding policy principles have been translated into acts, statutes and regulations in Singapore. Some of these laws are designed specifically to regulate the operation of certain types of communication media, while others are general for all types of communication and information activities.

Several communication media are according to existing laws put directly under government control either as part of the government bureaucratic structure or under statutory boards. Thus, the Post Office Act (1947) puts the operation of postal services under the jurisdiction of the Postal Services Department, under the Ministry of Communication.

Similarly, the Telecommunication Authority of Singapore (Telecom) was created under the Telecommunication Authority of Singapore Act (1974) 'for the exclusive exercise, performance, administration and regulation of functions relating to the provision of overseas and domestic telecommunication services'. Under the Act, therefore, the government has complete jurisdiction and control of matters relating to telephone, telex, telegraph, and satellite communications.

With regard to radio and television, the recent Singapore Broadcasting Corporation Act (1980) gives the SBC the functions

1. To provide television and sound broadcasting services for disseminating information, education and entertainment;
2. To exercise licensing and regulatory functions in respect of the sale and use of television receivers and broadcasting receiving apparatus; and
3. To act internationally as the national authority or representative of Singapore in respect of matters relating to broadcasting.

Legal constraints on the operation of newspapers and other printed media are more indirect. Under the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (1974), which stirred up some heated discussion and criticism in 1974, the government has the right to grant and withdraw licences for the operation of printing presses in Singapore. (This is thus a constraint against all publications, rather than newspapers only). According to the Act, all newspapers in Singapore have to be published by newspaper companies in which,
1. A permit is granted, which is to be reviewed annually;
2. All the directors are Singapore citizens;
3. There are two types of shares: ordinary and management shares; and
4. No management shares may be issued or transferred except to Singapore citizens and corporations which have been granted specific approval by the government. Every management share carries two hundred votes in any resolution relating to the appointment or dismissal of any director or member of the staff of the newspaper company.

Reflecting the concern over the possibility of foreign control, the law also stipulates that a newspaper or a journalist is prohibited from receiving foreign funds without the approval of the government.

Film censorship, according to the Cinematograph Film Act (1954), is the responsibility of the Board of Film Censors, which is under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Culture. There is no system of film classification in existence in Singapore, although the issue has been brought up for discussion frequently. The Board of Film Censors is responsible for the censorship of films of all lengths and types and film accessories which include posters, handbills, pressbooks, newspapers, film advertisements, catch-lines, colour transparencies, still photographs, videotapes and cassette films. Films may be approved in total or with alterations or excisions. Those who disagree with the decision can bring the matter to the Appeals Committee for a second and final opinion.

According to the Ministry of Culture, films may be banned for various reasons, such as 'the glorification of gangsterism, violence, crime, hip-pism, free love, promiscuity, homosexuality, lesbianism, incest, permissiveness, religious prejudice and racism'. Films are also banned for 'political reasons'.

Several legal acts are applied to communication activities in general and are therefore more profound in their constraining power. These include the Undesirable Publication Act (1967), which prohibits the importation, sale or circulation of publications published or printed outside or within Singapore that are considered 'contrary to the public interest'. The Ministry of Culture is authorized to be responsible for the administration of the Act. Other than the vague definition of undesirable publications being those judged to be 'contrary to the public interest', there has been no public revelation of the criteria applied by the Ministry in the implementation of the Act. Four broad categories can however be identified: (1) politically offensive, (2) morally offensive, (3) religiously offensive, and (4) ethnically offensive.

The Sedition Act (1964) prohibits behaviour including speeches, publications, and distribution or circulation of such publications with 'seditious tendency'. In this case, a 'seditious tendency' is legally defined as a tendency
1. To bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against the Government;
2. To excite the citizens of Singapore or the residents in Singapore to attempt to procure in Singapore, the alteration otherwise than by lawful means, of any matter as by law established;
3. To bring in hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against the administration of justice in Singapore;
4. To raise discontent or disaffection amongst the citizens of Singapore or the residents in Singapore;
5. To promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population of Singapore.

Another basic and probably the most controversial legislation which affects the mass media in Singapore is the Internal Security Act (1963) which confers wide-ranging powers onto the Executive to fight subversion and to repel security threats. The Minister for Home Affairs is authorized to prohibit the printing, publication, sale, issue, circulation or possession of a document or publication deemed prejudicial to the national interest, public order or society of Singapore.

The Public Entertainments Act (1959) requires that public entertainment can only be provided in an approved place, and in accordance with a licence issued by the Licensing Officer. In this Act, public entertainment is defined to include, amongst others, performing arts, exhibitions, sporting contests and trade fairs.

The Emergency (Essential Powers) Act (1964) prohibits all members of the Singapore armed forces from communicating with newspapers. Any matter which discredits the Singapore military, or constitutes a grievance against his position as a member is also prohibited from being discussed. The law specifies that if a member of the Singapore armed forces does communicate with any editor, proprietor, manager, printer or employee of a newspaper and that newspaper publishes the content of the complaint, the newspaper management is required to divulge the identity of the complaining member of the armed forces if the Ministry of National Defence so requests.

Under the Prohibition on Advertisements Relating to Smoking Act (1970), no advertising activities relating to the use of cigarettes, cigars or tobacco are permitted. Another legal regulation on advertising activities is the Medicines (Medical Advertisements) Regulations (1977) which requires that a permit from the Ministry of Health must be obtained to advertise medicinal products, apparatus or any device.

In addition to the above, other legal acts relevant to the operation and functioning of media communication include Indecent Advertisement Act (1941), Defamation Act (1965) and Copyright (Gramophone Records and Government Broadcasting) Act (1969).

Towards Responsible Journalism

Legal constraints on media communication are effectively enforced in Singapore, as attested by the unpleasant incidents of the Nanyang Siang Pau and Singapore Herald in 1971. While no incidents of such scale and impact have been repeated since 1971, the government has occasionally and strategically applied its restraining power whenever it deemed necessary to define the limits of freedom of expression. Two recent examples in 1980
may serve to illustrate such strategic exercise of power by the Ministry of Culture.

The first case involved the temporary suspension of the newspaper permits for two Chinese newspapers, Min Pao and Shin Min Daily, in early 1980. The two papers were accused of playing up yellow journalism, and their annual permits for 1980 were not renewed until the publishers pledged in their appeals to modify their editorial policies. After an eight-day suspension, the papers were back in operation with initial three-month permits, which were subsequently renewed. In this case, the law was applied to put down sensationalism which was considered detrimental to social morality.

The other incident involved Rediffusion, which used to be granted the permit once in ten years for its operation, but in 1980 was asked to renew its permit every year. The grudge as reported in the paper was that the cabled broadcasting service had not kept up with its promise to speed up its plan to increase its programmes in Mandarin in place of those in Chinese dialects. The reluctance in making the switch on the part of Rediffusion was apparently judged to have jeopardized the promotion of Mandarin, which has been an important policy objective since the late 1970s. The granting of the one-year permit, instead of a ten-year one, puts the Ministry of Culture in a better position to monitor closely and when necessary influence the progress in the implementation of Rediffusion’s promise to increase the proportion of Mandarin programmes.

To assure that the mass media conform to government communication norms, ruthless exercise of legal constraints is usually unnecessary; nor is it the most effective. Under the watchful eye of the government, self-censorship by cautious editors is known to be a common practice. While the extent of self-censorship by local media cannot be documented, two instances involving foreign news magazines have been reported and are revealing.

In March 1977, an issue of the Far Eastern Economic Review was withheld from circulation by its distributor. The distributor took the cautious step despite an assurance by the Ministry of Culture that it had no objection to the circulation of that issue. The cause of concern in that issue was lest some replies by the Review’s editor to certain charges by the Singapore government might constitute libel.

Another reported case of self-censorship involved an issue of Time magazine in August 1977. The issue included a two-column article entitled ‘Singapore—Tight Little Island’ regarding alleged governmental ‘muzzling’ of the press. The issue was circulated in Singapore with one sentence (26 words) heavily daubed with black ink. A spokesman for the distributor of Time magazine in Singapore told the reporter that: ‘We censored the article ourselves on the advice of our lawyers.’ The regional manager of Time also commented: ‘Time is quite often censored either in part or in total. There is nothing unusual about this incident.’

The existence of communication laws and their effective and strategic enforcement have thus made it possible for the government to utilize the mass communication system to pursue its defined objectives of nation-
building. This has been obvious in the ready support mass media has given
to government programmes, policies and campaigns over the years. As
such, the mass media in Singapore has faithfully and successfully per­
formed its function in the political education of the population and has
contributed to national development at a time when political indoctrina­
tion and stability have been considered of utmost importance in the
new Republic.

Under such circumstances, the communication pattern in Singapore is
characterized by a largely one-way flow from the leadership to the masses
with government and media people at various levels serving the gatekeep­
ing function. The content of the media is therefore often persuasive and
educational, as well as informational and entertaining. This is reflective of
the paternalistic political structure in Singapore.

As a result, however, the mass media system often fails to become an
effective channel for political articulation and participation by the general
public. As the late Professor G. G. Thomson put it, 'Our mass media have
not generally been prime political initiating agents in themselves, as were
newspapers in other countries.'

The danger of an excessively conforming media system began to be
publicly recognized and discussed as a concern shared among some media
practitioners and government leaders in the late 1970s. The view was well
expressed by a Straits Times journalist, Goh Kian Chee, in a forum in 1977.
Goh was concerned that there was a problem of getting a rational and open
debate on important public issues and pointed out that the mass media
could play a crucial role in encouraging a freer atmosphere for debate.
Newspapers could provide more relevant news, better local and interna­
tional coverages and go into areas imagined by cautious editors to be 'out
of bounds': 'The danger is that if these improvements are not made soon,
the alternative is the creation of a semi-mindless, undiscerning Singa­
porean readership or viewership which can be easily misled in a political
contest into emotional and hysterical responses.'

In the meantime, political leadership also expressed the concern on the
lack of participation from a politically apathetic population. Twenty years
of political stability in an effective administrative state obviously has given
certainty to PAP leaders that a more active and responsible media system
can provide a much needed forum for the articulation of public opinion.
At the same time, a better educated younger generation appeared more
ready than ever to take the hint of a more open policy from the leadership
and to air their views on various issues through whatever channels avail­
able. Conditions were ripe as Singapore entered the 1980s for a new
responsible journalism to appear and to play its active role in national
development in the new decades to come.

Encouragement from political leaders, as discussed earlier, was unmis­takenly clear. In 1980, another Straits Times journalist, Cheong Yip Seng,
reported to the twenty-ninth International Press Institute Assembly: 'I
believe the government does not want a docile press; indeed, it has made it
widely known that it wants a livelier, more credible press with high
professional standards.'
Signs of change can be found in the active and highly popular Forum page in The Straits Times since the late 1970s. After public appeals for more letters from readers and organizations by The Straits Times in early 1979, increasing numbers of letters have been pouring into Times House. In 1979, a total of 5,094 letters were received, of which 1,788 were published. In 1980, the newspaper received an average of 500 letters a day, covering a wide spectrum of issues.

More significantly, letters published in the Forum page no longer touched only on limited and trivial issues concerning the 'demand for a better and more efficient administration', as political scientist, Dr. Chan Heng Chee, observed in 1975. Many letters published in 1979 and 1980 were critical on government policies on education, language, public health, as well as on administrative issues of public housing and transportation services. Moreover, as one Straits Times editorial pointed out, 'the government has demonstrated in many ways that it regards Forum letters as genuine and legitimate expressions of public opinion. And it has been responsive, not only in print but in action.' The editorial claimed, rightly, that 'the page is . . . an important, and for many Singaporeans the only, channel through which to influence government policies.'

Improvements in journalistic quality has not been only noticeable in the Forum page of The Straits Times, but also in its editorials and interpretative reportings since the late 1970s. Moreover, the Chinese press, while more cautious in its editorial policies, has also been making important reforms in news reporting and management in keen, sometimes heated, competition with one another.

The re-organization of Radio Television Singapore (RTS) into the new Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) is another indication of the more liberal attitude of the political leadership in order to prepare the mass media for the new decades to come. SBC, formed in early 1980, is now a statutory board free from administrative and financial constraints of the bureaucratic structure. While it was made clear that the overall policy of SBC will continue to be under government control, as was assured by the Acting Minister for Culture, Ong Teng Cheong, when he presented the new Bill to Parliament for approval, the new status has nevertheless given SBC more independence not only in purely administrative matters but to some extent also in operational policies.

An episode reflective of the new status of the broadcasting service in Singapore occurred in September 1980 when SBC decided not to report the line-up of candidates for the oncoming general election, probably as a gesture of being non-partisan and impartial. The decision stirred up objections from both PAP and opposition leaders. While the wisdom and propriety of the move may be questioned, as was done by The Straits Times, it is significant that such decisions could now be made independently, and the government need not be put in an embarrassing position to have to explain or defend such decisions.

In Singapore, growing literacy and affluence have led to an increasing demand for participation in decisions affecting the lives of Singaporeans. At the same time, PAP leaders have apparently gained sufficient confi-
dence in the level of social cohesion and political stability and concurrently have realized the danger of political apathy in a socialist democratic system. Meanwhile, the mass media are striving for a higher level of professionalism and are prepared to play the role of providing channels for two-way communication between the government and the people.

Reading the signs in the early 1980s, it is safe to conclude that the time and conditions appear to be ripe for the development of a more responsible journalism to play a greater part in national development in Singapore.

3. The Straits Times, 14 September 1980.
5. The Straits Times, op. cit.
15. Ibid., Vol. 15, 1961, Col. 2040.
18. Ibid.
23. Ibid.
30. Ibid., 13 June 1980.
32. Ibid., 8 August 1977.
35. Ibid., 6 May 1980.
36. Ibid., 14 February 1980.