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Ethnicity, Media And National Unity:
The Experience In Singapore

By

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Ethnicity, Media and National Unity: The Experience in Singapore

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Primordial Sentiments of Ethnicity: View of a Singaporean

British colonization in early 19th century created a multicultural society in Singapore as British attempt to build a free trading port in the island of Singapore attracted Chinese from southern provinces of China, Indians from southern India, Malays from the Malay archipelago, Europeans and others to this island. These diverse peoples brought with them their languages, religions, moral standards, folkways, etc. Their common denominator was economic activity which brought them to meet and mix in the market place. But after that each group retired to socialize with members of their own culture or kin groups.

The cultures and social organizations brought here by each ethnic group were not only different but were sometimes contradictory to one another. Religion is one example of such incompatibility as each group professed its own religion. Marriage norms are another. For example, among Hindus marriage may take place only between people of the same jati (subcaste); non-Hindus as outcaste members cannot enter into union with even members of the lowest caste. However, there are Indian Muslims and Christians who may be eligible partners to Malay Muslims and non-Indian Christians respectively. These examples nicely illustrate the complexity of ethnicity in Singapore as well as the problems and opportunities for inter-ethnic relations. Given such cultural diversity and contradictions, the tasks of forging national unity are difficult indeed.

The pioneering studies of Goodman, Marsh, Lambert and Klineberg, and others on children's ethnic awareness and prejudice show that awareness of ethnic differences in phenotypical traits such as skin colour or hair form, and ethnic preference (like and dislike of ethnic in-group and out-groups) are established at the age of four years. Even among adults, physical traits are often mixed up with cultural traits in their perception and evaluation of human groups. Young children pick up their ethnic cues from their families, teachers, media, and the general social environment and grow up to like their own cultural ways of life and look upon other cultural ways of life as strange if not wrong. Such cognition of physical traits and cultural traits of a child's in-group and out-groups is always intricately bound to sentiments of likes and dislikes. Hence ethnicity is not only entrenched at an early age but is always charged with primordial sentiments. Ethnocentrism is universal and is not a peculiar trait of only a few cultural groups. Thus ethnic issues...
are often if not always charged with emotions. The same event of inter-ethnic relation may, thus, be interpreted from the vantage point of a person's or a group's system of values, norms and interests, producing thereby different interpretations by different reporters or ethnic groups.

As one born in Singapore and as one with a stake in Singapore, I cannot look upon ethnic riots in Singapore at an impersonal distance which a foreign correspondent may be able to do. Likewise on the issue of allowing free reign to people bent on creating ethnic riots and tensions in my country, people who have permanent stakes in Singapore and passing observers are most likely to differ in their attitudes toward these events for the effects of ethnic riots on the former will leave permanent scars on them as they experience the loss of lives or limbs and hard-earned property of their families, kins or friends, but the passing observers are spared all these traumas. Citizen media reporters, thus, have stakes in their country while foreign correspondents do not. When their country is on fire, the former has no escape but the latter may just take the next plane or train out of it all. Of course there are foreign correspondents who care a great deal about the welfare of our society or people. However, their families, their life savings and careers are not permanently tied to the fate of our country; these facts must dilute their degree of commitment as they are not likely to swim or sink with us when the terror of an ethnic riot strikes.

This preamble serves as a back drop for my personal discussion of the issues of ethnicity, media and national unity in Singapore.

Legal and Statutory Restrictions on Ethnic Reportage

New Printing Presses (Applications & Permits) Rules 1772 will not grant a newspaper a permit to print if it carries "any article which is likely to cause ill-will or misunderstanding between the government and people of Singapore, and the government and people of Malaysia; or which is likely to excite communal or racial emotions; or which glorifies or justifies the use of violence in politics" (Lim, 1985: 118, emphasis added). When ethnic reportage is deemed to excite communal emotions the permit to print may be withdrawn. However, when violations of these rules occurred in May 1971 the government invoked another Act, the Internal Security Act (ISA) and detained four senior executives of Nanyang Siang Pau, a Chinese language daily, "on the grounds that they were stirring up racial issues and glamourising communism in the paper" (Lim, 1985: 113).

The ISA empowers the government to ban publications and detain journalists without trial on grounds of subversion. Newspapers and journalists are deemed subversive if they publish news or views that "incite people to violence, advocate disobedience to the law or cause racial or class conflict or
prejudice the national interest, public order or security of Singapore" (Lim, 1985: 113, emphasis added). The maximum penalty is three years jail or S$2,000 fine or both.

There are thus laws which explicitly control ethnic reportage in Singapore. However there are practices which evolved over the years which help journalists to stay on the side of the law. Business-like relationship between the PROs of various ministries and statutory boards and journalists is maintained. The government PROs handle press inquiries on government policies and help to arrange for coverage of official functions and interviews of ministers and senior bureaucrats. They also serve to deny or confirm news picked up from the grapevine. These PROs also ask for press cooperation to play down or highlight certain stories pertaining to their respective ministries. Likewise, press editors meet ministers and top bureaucrats for briefing on government policies. With electronic mail nowadays, press releases and ministerial speeches are now transmitted to the press by telex or fax. Certain sensitive issues like national service and matters pertaining to the Defence Ministry cannot be questioned. These frequent contacts and mutual consultations provide journalists sufficient cues on government positions and hence the degree of risks in slanting a story on ethnicity and national policy. As Ivan Lim observed, local journalists learned how to balance nicely the official line and their professional need to inform the public and to provide readers alternative view points in their reportage.

Codes of Ethics, Press Councils or Other Monitoring Agencies

There are no explicit codes of ethics on ethnic reportage in Singapore. There are no Press Councils. But over the years there developed structures which serve to monitor newspaper reportage by government nominees who sit in the Boards of Directors of newspapers.

Historically newspapers in Singapore were not only business enterprises but they pressed for causes in their pages in print. During colonial times, the Jawi Peranakan pressed for Islamic reforms (Lim, 1985: 106). The Nanyang Siang Pau and Sin Chew Jit Poh raised funds through their pages to help motherland China against, at first, the Manchurian government, and later, against the Japanese invasion of China.

Prior to independence, the Chinese-educated were divided into three groups: (1) pro-Beijing, (2) pro-nationalist, and (3) pro-Singapore. The first two groups were very vocal and politicised. The Malayan Communist Party (MCP) and the Huomintang (KMT) were contesting for their allegiance. Both drew political allegiance of the Chinese away from Singapore.
In the late 1950s and early 1960s, the Chinese newspapers raised funds for the founding and maintenance of the Nanyang University, a Chinese medium university. It soon became a target of infiltration by both the MCP and KMT. The Chinese press at that time attacked the establishment of national service for young males, first mooted by the British colonial government. This culminated in an island-wide riot by Chinese school students, resulting in the death of a high school student. In the late 1960s and early 1970s a senior staff of Nanyang Siang Pau attacked the People’s Action Party (PAP) government for promoting English education and for not promoting Chinese education, commenting that Chinese in Singapore would soon become “fake Westerners” with black eyes and hair. At that time Chinese chauvinism and communism threatened political stability as Chinese high school students supported workers on strike. Given this background, as mentioned earlier the Nanyang Siang Pau journalists were detained under ISA.

The keen rivalry between Nanyang Siang Pau and Sin Chew Jit Poh for increasing market share (both advertising and readership) led eventually to a government-induced merger between them in April 1982 (said to achieve the objective of ending the squabbles) and the Singapore News and Publications Ltd. (SNPL) was formed. Then in July 1984 the Times Organisation and SNPL merged to form the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) which now publishes all the English language newspapers, all the Chinese newspapers and the Malay newspaper, Berita Harian. Thus family ownership and influence on press policies and editorials ended. The press industry falls into the hands of banks and others whose ethnic orientations do not coincide. The past ethnic causes are thus diluted if not eliminated as business motives come centre stage. However, these newspapers do try to maintain their own unique public images in order to appeal to different market segments, and may be to safeguard their respective turfs in the improbable case of future breaking up into their original independent units. That is, there are observable attempts in market segmentation among the English, Chinese and Malay newspapers, as well as among the three Chinese newspapers (the Lianhe Zao Ban, Lianhe Wan Bao, and Shin Min Daily News) despite the mergers.

Legal controls also enter into the picture after 1970. The Printing Presses Act of 1920 was amended in 1970 and was then replaced by the Newspaper and Printing Press Act 1974. This law requires the press to go public and be listed on the Singapore Stock Exchange and individual ownership is limited to three percent of the shares, thus breaking up family ownership of Sin Chew Jit Poh (which belonged to the Aw Brothers) and Nanyang Siang Pau (which belonged to the Lee Brothers) (Lent, 1976: 79; and Lim, 1985: 112-113). A new provision made in September 1981 empowers the government to waive the rule. Family and ethnic causes cannot thus be perpetuated as fractionalised ownership bring different view points to the Board.
Under this Act, newspapers, publishers, printers and chief editors must renew their permits and licenses annually. Thus careers may end in one year, and if long-term interest is sought the journalistic professionals need to self-regulate and work within bounds in their ethnic and other reportage, set by the granting authority, the Ministry of Communications and Information. But controls are nearer "home". This Act created a special class of shares, the management shares. Each management share has 200 votes while an ordinary share has only one vote. Management shares can only be owned by people approved by the above Ministry. Non-citizens cannot own these without the permission of the Ministry. To prevent foreign influence or domination, only citizens can become directors. All local newspapers currently have at least one government nominee as a Director. An amendment by a Parliamentary select committee stipulates that journalists must report to his/her publisher if he or she receives foreign money for his/her news item. The penalty for failure to do so is a maximum of ten years jail and S$2,000 fine. This Act thus induces corporate self-regulation annually.

In-house Guidelines on Ethnic Reportage

I am not aware of the existence of written guidelines adopted by media professionals on ethnic reportage. The example cited by Ivan Lim (1985: 111) indicates absence of such formal guidelines: in March 1985 (11 years after the passing of the Newspaper and Printing Press Act 1974) the editor-in-chief of the Straits Times Press "recalled 10,000 copies of the Business Times because its editorial criticising a minister's proposal to give priority in serving PAP constituencies had used language unbecoming of Times publications. A rewritten version of the same editorial was later published in Business Times."

From about 1985 onwards, the government is adopting a more open approach in terms of policy discussion and the press has a greater role to play. Let me cite two examples to illustrate this new "trend."

The first event refers to the First Deputy Prime Minister's (FDPM) call for an open discussion of Malay needs and problems. Some Malays expressed the view that these should be discussed in privacy but the FDPM preferred it public so that non-Malays may also understand the issues and participate in the discussion. The exchanges of letters between the FDPM and some Malay organisations were published in the press. On 26 November 1988 the President of the Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry wrote a short letter to the Forum Page of the Straits Times and pointed out that the Straits Times and Berita Harian had a panel discussion on Malay needs and aspirations and some of the problems they face. He urged that the contents of that panel discussion ought to be translated into Chinese so that more people, including Chinese readers, understand the issues.
The second and most recent event is the First Deputy Prime Minister’s call for a national ideology for Singapore. The Lianhe Zao Bao, a Chinese daily, immediately reacted and set up a panel discussion comprising Chinese, Malay and Indian prominent figures in Singapore. Their views of what values should be incorporated and desirable for Singaporeans of all ethnic backgrounds were published. Readers of this Chinese morning daily and those of the Straits Times expressed and are still expressing their views through these media.

These events suggest that the government is adopting a more open approach and the press has a greater role to play.

Debates in Professional Ethnic Reportage in Singapore


Scholars outside Singapore have also written on ethnicity in Singapore. Just to name two who have worked in Singapore: Babb on Thaipusam (1976), and Deyo on Chinese management practices (1976).

These scholarly publications have so far not stirred up any political or professional storm. They are detached descriptions of empirical observations or analyses of statistical findings either based on published government data (such as population censuses or labour force surveys) or data gathered first hand by scholars. When the works of local scholars are examined, their works on ethnicity are outnumbered by far by works on non-ethnic issues. It must be noted that it is relatively harder to do research in ethnicity than in, say, women’s occupational choice and home-maker roles, or parental concern of their children’s education in the sense that people are more willing to respond
and to respond frankly on these issues than on issues of religion and ethnicity. Due to the few scholars working on ethnic issues and their specialisation within the field, there has been little overlap in their research. This partly accounts for the lack of debates among them on similar issues as each scholar tends to do his special thing. This indicates that ethnicity research in Singapore is a relatively new field.

The discussion tend to be scholarly ones and they are targeted at students and fellow scholars in their special fields of knowledge. These writings have, as far as I am aware, rarely been reported in the media though some of mine received some publicity in sound broadcasting on National Day (on my work on national identity) for two occasions, and once in Nanyang Siang Pau (on educational and occupational attainment of the Chinese) nearly a decade ago.

Summary and Conclusions

During the last decade or so the Singapore press exercise much self-regulation. From about 1985 the government has become more open; even sensitive ethnic issues are discussed openly and publicly through the media. Societal changes also affect the climate of media reporting. Let me mention just a couple of these changes for illustration.

One major change since independence in 1965 is educational integration. In the past Chinese attended Mandarin schools which transmitted Chinese culture. Malays attended Malay schools or madrasas which transmitted Malay culture (such as adats) and Islam. Indian students attended Tamil schools which transmitted Indian culture. These parallel educational systems separated young people of different ethnic backgrounds both culturally and physically. Now the bilingual, English-stream school is the modal type attended by almost all students regardless of ethnic origins. Here Chinese, Malay, Indian, European and Eurasian students are brought together as classmates and schoolmates and they play games together in the school and outside it. The previous monocultural contents of education are replaced by new textbooks which expose them to the four major cultures of the population. Thus the previous cultural exclusiveness is replaced by some mutual understanding and perhaps some degree of sympathy and empathy for each other’s cultures.

Singapore was a poor country in the 1950s and 1960s. The 1970s and 1980s are decades of rapid economic growth, and unemployment fell to within three percent for most years. Having experienced poverty and the anxiety of unemployment, citizens and citizen journalists no doubt do not want to look back. In this sense, journalists too tend to be pro-development in terms of better housing, more and better quality education, higher real incomes, more job security and better working conditions. If my observation is right generally, then it is not surprising that many if not most journalists tend to be sympathetic to the government’s development policies. When they appear to be pro-government in their daily reportage it may be because they are pro-development. Likewise when journalists seem to be concerned
about their ethnic reportage in terms of not wanting to contribute to tension among ethnic groups, it may be because they believe in mutual ethnic tolerance or acceptance and not because they want to appease the government for the sake of keeping their jobs. As Singapore society changes in many ways so too citizen journalists in terms of their values, beliefs, mores, attitudes and lifestyle. That many of the journalists share some ideals and societal goals with ministers is, thus, not surprising. After all the young journalists went through an education which was designed by the government aimed at building national unity.

Cultural and structural differences between ethnic groups can be easily manipulated to bring about inter-group hostility and mutual destruction. Primordial sentiments about religion or language can be easily played up for destructive purposes. Nation-building in the face of such differences among ethnic groups is both a difficult and long-term task. Much peaceful time is, thus, needed for forging unity among ethnic groups for the benefit of all. I personally believe that the media can play a constructive role in these changes which affect the lives of millions of people including the journalistic professionals.
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