New digital realities and old PSB models – the case of public access and participation in Singapore’s televisual landscape

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Abstract

Does public service broadcasting (PSB), with its 20th-century state-controlled and state-funded structure, still have a role to play in increasing access, public participation, and a strong national media system in today’s globalising East Asia? This article, by taking Singapore as a case study, examines why and how traditional PSB media players have been forced to change their institutional and transactional responses to the ‘shocks’ of digitization. In particular, it examines how the rise of web 2.0, with its de-territorialised media services and social media, challenges PSB’s relevance as trends towards universal access, a greater participatory culture and active audiences render PSB content increasingly anachronistic.

Introduction

On 4 May, 2016, local news site Mothership.sg described how Singaporeans’ fascination for the latest Korean drama series Descendants of the Sun on their TV and personal computer screens almost became a ‘cultural moment’ in Singapore. It also declared that “local TV must up its game on locally-produced content or we’ll one day live-stream its death” (Lim and Tan, 2016).

This anecdote reveals an underlying ‘crisis’ that Singapore’s local TV broadcaster MediaCorp faces in delivering Public Service Broadcasting (PSB) to audiences. For PSB service providers like MediaCorp Singapore (hereafter MediaCorp), competition for TV audiences has intensified. De-territorialised media services on the internet, like Netflix and Viu, offer easy access to popular local and foreign content, flexible scheduling, and customisable streaming experiences enabled by the internet, mobile platforms and its associated technologies. This issue is not a Singapore-only phenomenon. Despite differing
PSB models adopted across Western and Asian countries (Brevini, 2015), most PSB systems face a similar ‘PSB crisis’. Declining mass TV viewership (Nakamura et al., 2013; Tambini, 2015), greater audience fragmentation, niche channels, and increasingly distanced audiences (Tambini, 2015) demand new PSB models that engage with new audiences actively. These audiences consume and produce media content in a ‘sharing’ economy, accessing content offered by online media distributors like Netflix, and online ‘produsers’ in a Youtube-like environment (Bruns, 2008). Moreover, digitisation has created new business models for content production, programming and distribution across entire media industries (Cunningham and Silver, 2013). New transnational media and technology giants (Flew and Cunningham, 2007), and the rise of Internet-based social media have also created ‘agitations’ to economy, state and civil society (Fuchs 2014).

Thus, digital technologies, changing media consumption trends, and regional dynamics of increased pop cultural flows present a challenge for the old BBC ‘Reithian’ PSB model for organising PSB media globally (see Baranjee and Seneviratne, 2005). In a digital era where PSB broadcasters no longer dominate local viewership trends, especially in Europe and East Asian countries like Singapore, they need to renegotiate their relationship with various publics, audiences, the market and the state. They need to revamp older PSB models into new digital-based Public Service Media (or PSM) (Tambini, 2015; Jakubowicz, 2010).

Scholars distinguish between PSB and PSM in several ways. Jakubowicz (2008, 2010) focused on PSM in terms of “public service content provision” that is not restricted to traditional broadcasting but uses other platforms, including the Internet or “PSB + other platforms + Web 2.0, representing a technology-neutral definition of the [PSB] remit”, and allowing for stronger citizen participation in content production. Bardoel and Lowe (2007) discuss PSM as a new phase of public services that improves upon the legitimacy and relevance of traditional PSB services. They view PSM operators as public communicators which actively engage with a demanding audience to deliver customized content on online, mobile and social media. Brett (2009, 2010) refers to PSM as “PSB online” that encourages innovation in content, production, formats, and ultimately engaged with a younger and networked audience. Thus, while both PSB and PSM are non-commercial media, PSB offers national publics universal access to scheduled TV and radio broadcasts, PSM extends beyond scheduled one-way broadcasting to include more interactive media services, such as
the use of web-based social media that enable greater public active participation, even in content production.

Despite shifts by Western and other distinctive Asian media systems (such as Japan’s) towards developing PSM services, many Asian broadcasters still operate under the ‘old’ PSB model, as is the case in Singapore. Though policy efforts have ‘nudged’ Singapore’s traditional PSB provider, MediaCorp, to address this PSB crisis (including incentivising PSM services), it is clear that state responses to revising the PSB models do not go far enough, as their measures are potentially complicated by conflicting policy objectives and entrenched market practices.

In this article, we discuss what constraints and challenges Singapore’s PSB operator faces in its attempt to transform into a PSM operator that is responsive to digital agitations. This article is organised as follows. First, we examine how MediaCorp faces both structural and policy constraints because of its overlapping (and conflicting) roles as both national PSB operator broadcaster and as commercial profit-making media operator. Second, we analyse the institutional practices of Singapore’s current PSB model by examining its entrenched media structures. Finally, we review recent policy responses by Singapore’s PSB services to modern challenges and trends. We conclude by arguing that Singapore’s PSB institutional practices should disentangle from commercialisation and focus on going back to delivering a good quality PSB service while encouraging PSM experiments which appeal to interactive and online audiences. Where such PSM experiments is supported by public funding, funding bodies should consider applying an *ex-ante* public value test when entrenched PSB operators, like MediaCorp, plan new services on both old and new media platforms, similar to what is applied to different European media systems (see Holland and Moe, 2011). In the following section, we look at PSB in Singapore as an example of how old PSB models created for a different era are outdated and largely fail to meet public interest objectives.

**The multiple roles of Singapore PSB**

MediaCorp is Singapore’s main public service broadcaster, and by default the key PSB operator. It delivers content over seven TV channels, eight FM radio stations, and Toggle.sg, an internet-enabled application service that is accessible online. MediaCorp has been a state-
owned corporation since 1994, and its primary shareholder is Temasek Holdings, a state investment company (Temasek, 2017). It was first established as a government department in 1963 under the Ministry of Culture as Radio TV Singapore (RTS) (Nair, 1980: 4). RTS was later transformed into an independent statutory board in 1980 and became the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) that was itself corporatised in 1994 and revamped several times into its current form as MediaCorp (McDaniel, 1994; MCI, 2016).

Up until the entry of Singapore International Media’s pay TV service, Singapore Cable Vision in 1992 (see NLB, 2004) SBC (MediaCorp’s predecessor) was the only PSB broadcaster of publicly-funded content and services to Singapore audiences on free-to-air TV and radio. During this time, SBC ventured into commercialisation while retaining its PSB role (see Gwee, 2011; Curtin, 2007). From 2000 to 2004, a brief period of limited competition was introduced in the broadcasting market. A second free-to-air terrestrial broadcaster SPH MediaWorks (henceforth MediaWorks), then fully owned by Singapore Press Holdings, was awarded the second FTA licence. This briefly broke the ‘unity of control’ that MediaCorp had enjoyed as the monopoly FTA terrestrial broadcaster in Singapore and diluted the dominance of MediaCorp who also enjoyed strong links to the state. MediaWorks competed with similar imported programming as MediaCorp but added more locally-commissioned English-language and Chinese-language content. This also triggered intense and commercially devastating competition for advertising revenue.

Although MediaWorks won recognition for some of its original productions, receiving the ‘Broadcaster of the Year’ award at the Asia TV Awards 2002, it restructured and eventually shut down in 2005. The terrestrial TV market reverted to a single Free-to-Air broadcaster, MediaCorp, delivering most of the PSB programmes once again (OECD Global Competition Forum, 2013). From 1994 until 2011, a Radio and TV Licence (RTV) fee was collected directly by the media regulator from the public who had TV sets in their homes, and radio sets in their vehicles, which became a key funding source for PSB programmes on MediaCorp Singapore’s TV and radio channels. As part of FY2011 budget, the Singapore government announced that the RTV licence was to be abolished in 2011 (MDA, 2011).

Subsequently, the government launched a PSB Review Panel in 2010, which submitted its report in 2011, and was acted upon by the Government in 2012. The Review Panel recommended ways to raise PSB viewership through tweaking some aspects of the PSB
funding schemes, to extend the reach by including online media platforms that could carry PSB programmes, and nurture programs for talent development (MCI, 2012a). While this widened the range of possible PSB facilities beyond the model of the single facility operator, most PSB content was commissioned and produced by MediaCorp.

Further, the PSC scheme was widened in scope into the PSB Contestable Fund (PSCF) for selected PSB funding to PSB programmes that can be showcased on the online media platforms. The PSC Scheme (known as Public Service Content Scheme) was an alternative scheme created by the government to encourage innovative content through a co-investment mode where an independent media producer who co-finances TV production and secures local terrestrial TV scheduling, can commercially exploit the same content overseas. Since 2012, this scheme was changed to the PCFS (PSB Contestable Funds Scheme) where it is given out as a grant to platform owners instead (MDA, 2012). Examples included ‘local online multimedia sites like MediaCorp’s xinmsn and Singapore Press Holdings’ RazorTV and nationwide pay-TV platforms such as Starhub TV and SingTel’s mio TV’ (MCI, 2012). While responding closely to audiences’ new media habits, MDA limited platform partnerships to the big local media players in the Singapore market.

The PSB remit and meaning of ‘public service’ has morphed into diversified media choices and technological advancement. This placed industry exportability alongside serving the educational needs of the public. Indeed, the 2012 PSB Review Panel recommendations demonstrate how raising content quality was not only a public service goal, but also an industry development goal:

> The panel has recommended several strategic measures to raise the quality and appeal of PSB programming and to widen the reach of these programmes beyond traditional FTA channels. These recommendations also seek to benefit public viewing interests and contribute to the development of the media industry in Singapore. (MCI, 2012a – emphasis added)

In 2012, the Ministry of Communication and Information (MCI) noted that it was revising PSB funding schemes that were administered by Media Development Authority (MDA). MDA was established in 2003 with the intent to regulate and develop the media industry. Central to these revisions were incentives to raise the quality of PSB content for local
to explore new markets overseas for locally-produced Singapore TV content. The latter was a significant shift from its initial remit of producing ‘public service’ content, towards commercialising local content.

MDA also regularly reviews its domestic schemes to ensure that these are aligned with the internationalisation efforts. For instance, effective from end-July 2012, MDA has put in place a revised copyright ownership framework for MDA-supported, locally produced Public Service Broadcasting, or PSB, programmes. It put in place institutional mechanisms and a generous copyright framework which allows content creators to better exploit their assets for sale of programmes overseas, licensing, and merchandising. (MCI, 2012b)

While the changes made in 2012 were noteworthy, multiplying media platforms to maximise the reach of PSB content does not equate to effective PSM delivery, without exploring new content genres that cater to active audiences. Encouraging independent media producers, many who are used to servicing the monopoly broadcaster, to commercially exploit their content, without viable digital business models, strays from what counts as ‘public service’.

Existing scholarship on Singapore TV (Tay and Turner, 2009; Lee, 2010; Chan, 2012; Tan, 2008) demonstrates how locally-produced Singapore TV content have served the state’s cultural and linguistic policies. Examples included encouraging themes of multiculturalism on its mass English-language TV channels while asserting the use of standard English language, simplified Mandarin Chinese for its Chinese-language channels, as well as ensuring Malay and Tamil language programming. These moves reflect national language policies. Lee (2010) describes how ‘governmentality’ is cultivated amongst its media players and audiences, to support its nationalist agenda and larger social policies. For example, this is evident in recent discourses of the PSB crisis faced by MediaCorp Singapore in providing PSB programmes in 2015 and 2016:

*It’s going to be a challenging environment for Mediacorp, as it is for most broadcasting companies in the world. Even the BBC is struggling with declining viewership and tight budgets. Commercially, MediaCorp will face greater competition for eyeballs and for advertisers. Even more challenging, will be for MediaCorp to maintain its place as the broadcaster of choice for news, current affairs and*
entertainment… And yet it’ll continue to play an indispensable role as the national broadcaster helping to bring the whole nation together. It’s not just another commercial entity, responding to market signals without caring about the value and the significance of your content. You have to continue to produce programmes that celebrate our culture and heritage, reflect our society and values, educate and entertain your audiences, as well as report news and produce current affairs content which matter for Singaporeans, and which are compelling to watch. (Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, emphasis added)(CNA, 2015)

Foreign programmes will not reflect our local values and culture. Through PSB programmes, our media industry players can tell the Singapore story from a Singaporean perspective, with a Singaporean heart… Over the years, our vernacular channels have contributed significantly to the development of bilingualism here… They allow Singaporeans to stay connected to our language, culture and communities. Besides Chinese programming, we will also ensure that Suria and Vasantham have adequate resources to continue producing quality programmes to serve our different ethnic communities. (Minister Of State Chee Hong Tat, emphasis added) (CNA, 2016)

PSB discourses related to MediaCorp conflate its role as a national broadcaster with that of providing PSB programming that fulfils nation-building objectives. Such objectives included celebrating multilingual and multicultural Singapore culture and heritage. By clearly segmenting its PSB programming along multiculturalist lines for TV and radio, MediaCorp’s PSB output was successful in attracting local audiences in the 1980s to late 1990s. However, the banality of its local content across multiple language channels failed to attract a younger viewership in the 2000s (see Chan, 2012a). This was symptomatic of ‘pockets of passive resistance and contestations’ to popular discourses of civil society in Singapore (see Chong 2005). It also limited MediaCorp’s regional expansionist efforts (Pugsley, 2007), and has had an economic impact on the independent production industry and its plans for regional expansion, while also suffering declining local viewership and limited audience engagement on diversifying its content to appeal to younger, active audiences.

Scholars like Jakubowicz (2010) and Debrett (2009) have argued that when PSB operators transform to PSM through innovation, it would spur cross-promotion and encourage diversity
online. In its pure form, PSM creates shared public spaces for citizens to engage and interact across various media platforms and participate by giving feedback on programming to sharing content of public interest (van Dijck and Poell, 2015). However, as Singapore’s attempt towards developing PSM has risen mainly from a single media broadcaster with a dual commercial-public remit, MediaCorp has continued to focus on its national broadcaster role, while trying to provide quality PSB content to Channels 5 and 8, its biggest viewership channels (Chan, 2012b).

In response to a 2017 query, raised during a regular Parliamentary session, about how the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI) articulated support for local media development and PSB’s relevance in the digital era, Minister Chee Hong Tat responded by drawing on PSB discourses that focused more on MediaCorp’s roles in developing the Singapore media sector, rather than of its ‘public interest’ role:

Locally produced PSB programmes can best capture and convey our unique Singaporean flavour… Last month, our first local bilingual TV series for preschoolers ‘Junction Tree’ was shown on Okto. This series is supported by IMDA² and the Lee Kuan Yew Fund for Bilingualism. Mediacorp has also started featuring sports programmes, including programmes that encourage young Singaporeans to take an interest in sports and lead active lifestyles. (MCI, 2017)

Online media competition from Netflix and social media like YouTube have triggered a policy response that has moved MediaCorp Singapore’s institutional practices closer to those of commercial media. MediaCorp invested heavily in digital delivery and online originals on Toggle.sg. This echoes early phases of PSM development in Europe (see Hellman and Sauri, 1994). While MediaCorp Singapore is constantly restructuring itself in a bid to maintain its dominant position within the local media industry, it is unclear if this will lead to transformative, institutional arrangements that deliver PSM services that engage audiences. What follows is our discussion of some constraints that may hinder MediaCorp developing effective PSM services.
**Constraints on developing viable ‘PSM’ models**

In today’s digital media age, institutional and policy changes to existing PSB models to address digitally-networked and active audiences is necessary but inadequate in delivering and developing engaging ‘public service’ content. The gold standard of an existing PSB model that has adapted digitally is the BBC. Arguably one of the most successful PSB operators to convert digitally into PSM, the BBC delivers great breadth of quality news, information and drama programming. All PSM operators need to go beyond simply creating content that “inform, educate and entertain” audiences, to serving the public in ways that the private sector, left unregulated, would not. In a digitized world with viewer sovereignty and a vast range of programs available at relatively low cost, the traditional market failure rationale that forms the basis of PSB legitimacy is now largely mitigated. In this section, we examine MediaCorp’s entrenched economic structure and institutional practices, and content strategies to illustrate how these serve explicit cultural policy objectives, and argue that both constrain MediaCorp’s ability to deliver engaging PSM services to diverse local audiences.
Economic structure and institutional arrangements of PSB funding

Figure 1 synthesizes various economic and institutional relationships between MediaCorp and key stakeholders in the media landscape of Singapore: Temasek Holdings (one of the two sovereign wealth funds of Singapore) owns MediaCorp; IMDA provides regulatory oversight and PSB funding; MediaCorp also receives funding from other government agencies and ministries.

**Figure 1: Simplified Architecture of Singapore’s PSB Landscape vis-à-vis MediaCorp**

![Diagram of the PSB Landscape](image)

Source: Constructed by authors (drawing on various published sources, including past MDA Annual reports and news releases, Advisory committee reports by PACE (Programme Advisory Committee for English Programmes), ACCESS (Advisory Committee for Chinese Programmes) and other PACs (Programme Advisory Committees)², and MediaCorp news releases)

MediaCorp’s delivery of traditional PSB and new PSM content that relies on both public funding and advertising can, at times, lead to diverging programming interest. For instance, a TV programme that garners higher advertising revenue may not necessarily serve the TV station's PSB remit. Making this compromise dilutes programming quality. In part, the challenge in shifting from PSB to PSM models stems from having to change institutional...
practices to allow for more innovative strategies to be deployed to actively engage viewers. This is particularly relevant in the current context where there is a high premium on viewer sovereignty and bespoke experiences. For instance, short of territorial viewing rights, viewers are now able to access content on any device, anytime, anywhere at their own pace on services like Netflix and YouTube. In contrast most of MediaCorp’s content is still delivered through scheduled programming.

Prior to 2011, SBC (MediaCorp former namesake up to 1994) was funded through a household TV and vehicle radio receiver tax that was collected annually by IMDA and ad-hoc grants by the government for key programming content that it deemed of national significance, such as key sporting events like the Olympic Games, Asian Games, and World Cup football matches (Han, 2014). The conventional argument for pricing PSB is that against high production and fixed costs, the cost to add an additional viewer (i.e marginal cost) is low. However, this logic holds true for existing content but not for producing new content. Notwithstanding the limited incentives such pricing strategies may provide for innovative content, responding to these challenges will require governments to explore newer approaches to generate revenue to fund PSB.

Through PSB funding, the government supports the production of about 90% of the 5600 hours that PSB programmes annually (Channel NewsAsia, 2015), which include local and acquired overseas programmes such as educational, arts and cultural programmes (Lau, 2016; MediaCorp 2015).

In exchange for funding, the government expected MediaCorp to deliver good quality and sufficient hours of PSB programming that reached as many households as possible, and disseminate nation-building messaging. These expectations concerning the purpose of PSB programmes were often expressed in MDA’s annual reports:

Our Public Service Broadcast (PSB) funding backed a total of 4,744 hours of content on MediaCorp’s free-to-air (FTA) channels, attracting some 4.5 million viewers. (MDA Annual Report 2014: 8)
Supported by MDA, local content has been steadily improving in quality. Local content producers have also been working hard to create more compelling and engaging Public Service Broadcast (PSB) programmes. Together, such content has been crucial in helping to strengthen the Singapore spirit and identity. (MDA Annual Report 2013-2014: 57)

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The tax was discontinued in 2011 and replaced with block grants from IMDA and other government agencies, and advertising revenue. The replacement of the annual tax (collected from viewers) with block grants from the government had a structural impact on power relations, strengthening the links between the state and MediaCorp. This made it more difficult for the broadcaster to be seen as independent of state and market interests. With increased government funding for PSB programmes, the relationship has become more entrenched.

In recent years, PSB funding increased by 35% from S$470 million between 2007 and 2011, to S$630 million between 2012 and 2016 (Lau, 2016). For example, in 2014, MediaCorp earned S$653.8 million in revenue, while MDA’s annual report stated that it received government grants of S$145 million for PSB programmes as of 1 April 2014. Of this revenue, PSB funding from the state made up about at least 20% of the PSB broadcaster’s revenues. MDA also supported PSB content production and talent development of S$21.38 million in the same year, directly financing the production sector, not just for the broadcaster (see MDA Annual Report 2014/2015).

Through IMDA, MediaCorp obtains direct funding for its public service remit across its TV and radio channels, while MediaCorp is expected to also maintain its commercial remit, independent of state support, in keeping with its other investment stakeholders, such as Temasek Holdings. In addition, MediaCorp, in consultation with IMDA, also commissions independent production houses to create content that works to increase diversity in its programming.
Adding more complexity to the state’s funding role, several Ministries – such as the Ministry of Communication and Information, and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs – have also begun to overtly seen to be funding TV programmes on MediaCorp’s terrestrial TV channels. State funding for public communications and international relations campaigning is evident on shows such as MediaCorp Channel 8’s dialect programme Eat Already? (CNA 2016a) to reach out to senior citizens about government schemes for them, and Channel NewsAsia’s A Little Red Dot Diplomacy (2017) featuring various Singapore ambassadors.

Interestingly, despite recognising the declining viewership of MediaCorp’s TV channels, for Singapore’s case, there is no such decline in PSB funding from the state. Instead, annual PSB funding will be increased by 28% to $250 million over the next five years (2015-2019) to ‘strengthen the quality of PSB programmes, which aim to promote national values and celebrate the Singapore identity, culture and heritage’. The discursive practice of equating PSB programmes with nation-hood is used to justify the increased state funding ties the PSB service to fulfilling policy goals of nation-building. With decreasing viewership and stagnating growth in Singapore’s resident population, the use of PSM to achieve these objectives of celebrating identity, culture, and heritage will become increasingly expensive.

MediaCorp is still the dominant media player in its domestic TV market because it commands the largest pool of PSB funding and generates the largest library of PSB content. While some pay TV operators such as Starhub TV and mio TV may have increased their subscriber base over the years, the base of domestic audiences still consume some PSB programme on MediaCorp’s channels. However, without a new way of transacting on these PSB funds, there is little incentive to switch to a drastic, new PSB model to arrest the declining viewership (see PSB Review Panel, 2012).

**Impact on PSB Content**

MediaCorp has dutifully fulfilled its role as a national broadcaster, and provided universal access to its PSB services, which should reach all local audiences. However, against the rise of alternative media channels and content, its efforts to continue delivering good PSB content have become less appealing to local audiences over time.
Debrett (2010) lists eight PSB principles identified by BBC’s Peacock Committee (cited by Harrison, 2000: 66) - such as providing quality news and universal access - that define good PSB services. She discusses how the future of public service broadcasting should be based on reinterpreting PSB principles to address supporting the development of PSM. This means leveraging upon the Web 2.0 era of wired and wireless technologies, mobile digital and social media platforms.

MediaCorp appears to comply with many of these principles for being an effective PSB service. For example, it provides universal access, and addresses diversity by serving minority interests through its TV channels and radio stations. MediaCorp broadcasts key events of national interest, including the annual National Day Parade, sporting events that Singaporeans participate actively in, and content that forms an important part of Singapore’s official cultural heritage like newsreels of colonial and pre-independence Singapore, and biographical material addressing founding Prime Minister Lee Kwan Yew’s contribution to nation-building (see MediaCorp, 2015; MCI, 2014).

In terms of PSB’s provision of quality news, Tay and Turner (2008: 78) have argued that MediaCorp News, ‘in the role of Channel News Asia, self-branded as the Asian CNN, epitomises and champions an implicit alternative Asian news value system that is clearly supportive of government strategies to construct the nation and maintain social stability’. Local news programming was often the most watched content on MediaCorp’s TV services across its various four TV language channels. Its award-winning shows such as Current Affairs and Money Mind continue to be refreshed up till today. Since its launch in 2001, Channel News Asia’s growth in its regional footprint has plateaued, as other Asian regional broadcasters are also vying for the same transnational Asian audiences – most notably China’s CCTV, Japan’s NHK, and South Korea’s Ariang TV.

As a result of state-directed language policy, MediaCorp also offers limited Chinese dialect content on radio and TV to serve older Chinese Singaporeans who are not reached by the official Mandarin language channels. MediaCorp's programming is constrained by the Speak
Mandarin campaign and language policy state objectives. This campaign promotes Mandarin as the primary and only official Chinese language used on national media. As a result, several production companies have become niche producers of Mandarin-language programming.

However, over the years, MediaCorp’s ‘public service’ content on TV appeared less concerned with engaging audiences’ diverse interests, and more with promoting larger socio-political goals, including bilingualism and multiculturalism, while attempting to commercialise.

During the 1960s to 1970s, Radio Television Singapore (later known as Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS) and then MediaCorp) maintained a narrow PSB selection of TV and radio news and current affairs, supplemented by acquired foreign entertainment programmes. Subsequently, from 1980s to 2000s, MediaCorp saw two major shifts in delivering PSB content, partly state-initiated and partly self-initiated.

Firstly, as SBC was gradually corporatized from 1980 to 1994, it introduced more TV genres into its PSB programming slate. This ranged from children’s and arts programming to more minority-language content, and they launched a third terrestrial TV channel Channel 12 (NLB, 2014). Simultaneously, SBC (later TCS) also commercialised into producing and co-producing dramas and telemovies that were exported in the late 1980s to 1990s (see Curtin, 2007). MediaCorp’s PSB content, including many of its local dramas, often articulated the Singapore government’s and its citizenry’s anxieties of post-colonial independence, embracing cultural policies of bilingualism and multiculturalism to strengthen citizens’ sense of national identity.

Secondly, from 1999 to 2008, MediaCorp entered a phase of content and channel expansion, partly spurred by local media competition, cultural policy shifts, and maintaining its PSB remit of ensuring content diversity. For example, MediaCorp embarked on a number of ambitious moves to set up niche channels, attempting to tackle local and regional media competition. This included the ill-fated SportCity channel set up in 2000 (Wong, 2015), and a more successful venture into a 24-hour Asian news channel established in 1999, Channel NewsAsia. During this period, audiences had access to a greater variety of content as
MediaCorp and SPH MediaWorks competed in early 2000s, although advertising revenues suffered as a result (OECD Global Competition Forum, 2013).

With the economic push towards promoting the media sector as part of Singapore’s creative industries in 2003-2007 as articulated in the Media 21 development blueprint that set out MDA’s masterplan for developing Singapore’s media sector, some of the PSB funded content served the dual purpose of promoting national identity and promoting media productions and Singapore talents internationally (see MDA, 2008). This approach continued into the next phase of developing the creative industries under the Singapore Media Fusion Plan (see Lee, 2016).

Throughout 2000 to 2010, MediaCorp tried to balance programming of what would be deemed commercially-successful PSB-funded content with public interest content. For instance, MediaCorp had flexibility to tap on PSB funding to produce programmes like The Little Nyonya, a highly commercially successful TV drama in 2009-2010. They also received funding to secure telecast rights for key events in the World Cup (Han, 2014).

Since 2013, without any resolution to the dual purpose of PSB-funded content, MediaCorp began shifting towards delivering its PSB remit in a PSM manner, implementing state-endorsed recommendations proposed by the PSB Review Panel in 2011. With its Toggle.Sg on-demand service launched in 2013, MediaCorp operates closer to a PSM model. Toggle.sg has become an internet platform for, and selectively curates content from, its seven free-to-air TV channels. It also premieres Toggle.sg originals, that eventually shift over to its terrestrial TV channels (Today, 2016). The industry was also introduced a more inclusive PSM monitoring service – SG-TAM, launched in 2016 by GfK Media. It attempts to re-value and measure audience engagement on both traditional and digital platforms. This metrics service was commissioned by the regulator IMDA (IMDA, 2017).

As seen above, the dual purpose of PSB-funded content comes with its own challenges as there is lack of directive whether commercial success of PSB-funded content outweighs the importance of the public interest nature of the content. The original PSB remit is about public engagement which is best measured by qualitative audience feedback. On the other hand, a commercially-driven motive would be to acquire advertising revenues which is a function of achieving TV ratings (Debrett 2010). Furthermore, scholars have observed that some
European public service broadcasters (e.g. Poland and Italy) rely on TV advertising revenues to subsidise their services (Sehl, Cornia and Neilsen, 2016), and their metrics used were more suited to price advertising revenues than measure public engagement. Similarly, MediaCorp have some reliance on advertising revenues (MediaCorp 2014, 2016) and is accountable for its performance on delivering PSB content, based on both quantitative ratings and qualitative feedback from ACCESS and other Programme Advisory Committee (PAC) reports.

MediaCorp has to serve dual roles as a national broadcaster (funded by IMDA) and an entity with fiduciary responsibilities to its principal shareholder Temasek Holdings. These roles present a set of conflicting obligations. While MediaCorp must provide quality news, consistent with the normative values of a PSB service (see Jakubowicz, 2007; Debrett, 2009), it also has to satisfy its role as a state broadcaster for nation building, public education and others. Over and above these obligations, it must yield commercial returns that satisfy Temasek Holdings. Negotiating the complex state-media-politics nexus has necessitated the use of ‘OB Markers’ (a term in Singapore that Cheong (2012) refer to as topics which are ‘out-of-bound’ for public debate by the media) to prevent coverage of what is perceived to be sensitive (Lee, 2002). However, in recent years there is a call to reduce the boundaries of these markers and publicly discuss socially relevant yet sensitive issues (Tham, 2015).

Against the dual purpose nature of PSB-funded content and the roles expected of MediaCorp, the entity is a ‘hybrid’ PSB operator while attempting to transform into Singapore’s PSM. While the social role of PSB operators are often clearly supported by policymakers in Europe (Moe and Syvertsen, 2009) and some parts of Asia (see Banerjee and Seneviratne, 2008), many Asian PSB operators, like in Singapore, are also state broadcasters and lack autonomy which can weaken their legitimacy in performing an important public service that activates citizen participation (Raboy, 1997).

**Conclusion**

As national audiences are increasingly fragmented and de-territorialised, the ‘PSB crisis’ that public service media need to address are also about creating shared media experiences amongst an increasingly wide spectrum of audiences who are into niche-viewing, binge-watching, and time-shifting in their media use. While these audiences may have some
‘mediated public connection’ to their distinctively national older PSB or newer PSM media channels (Couldry, Livingstone and Markham, 2007), what kind of policy adjustments and institutional re-arrangements will be needed to strengthen public trust in PSM’s legitimacy as public media that builds a vibrant public sphere or multiple spheres that inform citizens and guide public conversation.

‘Disruptive’ platforms like YouTube and Twitter cannibalise public media audiences to amplify their services (van Dijck and Poell, 2015; Larsen, 2014). The rising popularity of these platforms challenges the legitimacy of traditional PSB operators who are supposed to unify audiences and promote national cultures (Larsen, 2014), be an instrument to champion the voice of minority groups, ‘inform, educate, and entertain’, and provide a platform free of vested interests (Brett, 2010). Putting public interest higher than individual wants and tastes, public service content could continue to maintain a valuable role in unifying audiences back into publics and caring communities.

Moreover, this disruption demands a paradigm shift in treatment of what counts as PSB. In several ways, Singapore’s recent policy responses to these disruptions need to be reconsidered to help MediaCorp meaningfully transform itself into an effective PSM that engages interactive Singaporean audiences.

Firstly, following from the PSB Review Panel 2011’s recommendations, the state encouraged MediaCorp to engage Singapore’s online viewing audiences on digital platforms. However, initial PSM efforts to respond to these disruptions are not adequate because creating Toggle.sg to extend PSB content delivery of existing TV channels online does not equate to actively engaging the online audience. MediaCorp Singapore will need to shift away from the ‘scarcity’ and ‘single facility’ model for PSB provision, towards greater collaboration with online niche producers that have growing communities to get the attention of a highly individualised, fragmented TV-viewing publics (eg. Nightowl Cinematics, WahBanana on YouTube). These niche digital media providers offer better value through product differentiation and focus, against the strong waves of global Hollywood and pan-Asian media content (like Korean pop culture) that compete for local viewership. Incumbent PSM broadcasters will have to change their dominant mindsets to adopt more collaborative platforms and partnership models.
Secondly, policy changes that encourage the separation of national broadcaster role from commercial obligations may bring PSM operators like MediaCorp back to an original purpose of delivering good quality PSB services in news, documentaries and factual content that is relevant to Singapore and other Asian viewers. This would disentangle MediaCorp from a complex institutional structure of funding (see Figure 1), conflicting roles and obligations as PSB operator, national broadcaster, and commercialising media asset.

Thirdly, the state signalled a strong commitment to funding PSM services in Singapore in years to come, recognising the need to invest in new digital assets and content that is au fait with the rapidly changing social media landscapes. With this larger public funding, the state could include a PSB ‘ex-ante public value test’ to assess the merits of further digital innovations. Cultural policies that support PSM services should include funding criteria such as ‘whether the proposed new service delivers adequate “public value” in addressing social and cultural needs of its society, and the possible market impact of these PSM services before they launch new services that compete with commercial operators (see Donders and Hållvard, 2011; Brevini, 2013).

In a highly digitised and commercialised media environment, PSM is still relevant in the 21st century of disruptive platforms and diversified content if it addresses shared public interests of digitally-engaged audiences, and upholds ‘Reithian’ ideals of quality PSB content. In order for Singapore to have an effective delivery of PSM, it is paramount that MediaCorp or whichever entities that are assigned to take on the role of PSM have full clarity that the PSM interest be given the top most priority amongst competing roles.

While the old PSB model worked to develop MediaCorp Singapore into a strong national media broadcaster in the 1980s to early 2000s, it will not help it transition effectively into a PSM for the 21st-century with competing digital media players. PSM must partner closely with trusted and innovative social media players that audiences engage with. Today, the entities that have the strongest engagement with audiences are largely transnational media players, especially digital players such as Google, Facebook, and others. Given this shift in power to engage audiences, the question is whether the key drivers of PSM will be determined by transnational information-technology-driven media players in the future.
Notes

1. In recent years, some PSB funding has gone to newer stakeholders like Starhub through schemes such as the PSB Contestable Fund. However, few innovations have emerged on Starhub’s free TV channels. MediaCorp attempted to gauge viewer interest with new content offering different multi-media, handheld devices through its ‘Test Tube TV’ programming belt from 2011 to 2013 with its MediaCorp Content Innovation Fund, to engage audiences to vote for their favourite concept ideas. See Telecoms Asia 2011 news report at https://www.telecomasia.net/content/mediacorp-launch-5m-content-innovation-fund (accessed 11 March 2017).

2. The PACE, ACCESS and PACs are advisory committees who represent a cross-section of Singapore audiences to give annual feedback to the media regulator, IMDA, about local TV content quality, content codes and guidelines. These committee reports are shared publicly on IMDA’s website. See https://www.imda.gov.sg/regulations-licensing-and-consultations/content-standards-and-classification/committee-report.

3. Since 2016, MDA became part of a newly converged regulator and industry promoter of the information technologies and media industries, known as InfoComms Media Development Authority (or IMDA) of Singapore. PSB fees are based on an annual tax of SGD 110 collected from every TV viewing household and SGD 27 per vehicle radio.

4. These are: (i) providing universal coverage as a basis to form a public sphere; (ii) provision of quality, impartial news and current affairs that provides resources to encourage an informed and active citizenship diversity; (iii) serving minority interests; (iv) reflecting national culture and identity; (v) provision of innovative content; (vi) direct funding of one broadcasters by a body of users; (vii) competition to offer good programming rather than focusing on audience ratings; and (viii) giving programmers flexible content guidelines.

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