



**Terence Lee**  
Asia Research Centre

## **Recalibrating Government Communication in Singapore: A Post-Election Analysis**

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## Abstract

This paper considers the contemporary mechanics of government communication in Singapore under the Lee Hsien Loong administration (from 2005 to the present). It examines the Singapore government's use of contemporary tools, the co-employment of 'spin' and substance in the 'Great Casino Debate' of 2004-05, and the management of its official feedback channel 'REACH' to mediate its messages to the people. It then analyses the successes and failures of government communication evidenced at and by the watershed General Election of May 2011, and thus offers a timely rethink of what government communication in Singapore might look like post-elections 2011. It will argue and conclude that while an increasingly sophisticated citizenry and generational change has altered the government communication landscape in Singapore, the regime is nonetheless keenly aware that the *raison d'être* for supremacy both in governmental control and communication requires constant updating and modification. Whether the PAP government is up to the task of dealing with demands for change, or not, would make the vital difference.

## Biography

Terence Lee, PhD, is Associate Professor, Deputy Dean and Chair of Communication and Media Studies in the School of Media Communication & Culture at Murdoch University, Western Australia. He is also a Research Fellow of the Asia Research Centre based at Murdoch. He has also published books, articles and chapters on various aspects of media, culture and politics in Singapore as well as on Asia more broadly. His published books include: *The Media, Cultural Control and Government in Singapore* (Routledge, 2010); *Voting in Change: Politics of Singapore's 2011 General Election* (co-edited with Kevin YL Tan, Ethos Books, 2011); and *Political Regimes and the Media in Asia* (co-edited with Krishna Sen, Routledge, 2008).

## **INTRODUCTION: SINGAPORE MEDIA AND ITS POLITICAL CONTEXT**

Singapore has most of the trappings of democracy – parliamentary system of government with, additionally, an elected president; regular, free and accurately counted elections, and universal suffrage. However, certain draconian laws, controls on political participation, and measures limiting civil and political rights and freedom of the press, mean that Singapore is, to some extent – critics vary on the degree – an authoritarian state.

(Mauzy & Milne, 2002, p. 128).

[H]aving our media play the role as the fourth estate cannot be the starting point for building a stable, secure, incorrupt and prosperous Singapore. The starting point is how to put in place a good government to run a clean, just and efficient system [...] Even though Singapore is now more developed and our population better educated, it remains crucial for Singapore to maintain our unique and tested system of political governance and media model. They have worked well. (Goh Chok Tong, cited in Peh, 2005).

On 1 November 2005, Singapore's Senior Minister (SM) and former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong defended criticisms over press freedom in Singapore at speech to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the free metropolitan tabloid *Today*. In response to a report by Paris-based media watchdog Reporters Without Borders (2005), which ranked Singapore 140 out of 167 countries in the 2005 Press Freedom Index, Goh's riposte was that the hypothesized correlation between a free press and democratic freedoms – and by extension, the guarantee of good governance or economic prosperity – did not hold or cannot be proven. According to Goh, although the four original ASEAN countries – Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines – were all ranked ahead of Singapore in terms of press freedom, Singapore's economic and societal success proved that the government's media policy of control had worked well. Whilst rejecting the 2005 Press Freedom Index – and indeed, all subsequent media indexes – Goh cited Singapore's high rankings in economic freedom (by the

Washington DC-based Heritage Foundation) and very low corruption measurement (by Berlin-based Transparency International) to make his point that press freedom did not necessarily translate to “a clean and efficient government or economic freedom and prosperity” (Peh, 2005). Furthermore, he argued that “press freedom must be practised with a larger sense of responsibility and the ability to understand what is in or not in [Singapore’s] national interests” (Goh, cited in Peh, 2005). Although Singapore’s ranking in the Press Freedom Index has since improved slightly to 136 in 2010, the Singapore government’s rejection of its take on the subject of ‘freedom’ has had the effect of negating the influence of the Press Freedom Index – and indeed, any other socio-cultural global indexes – both in Singapore and internationally.

As a former British Crown colony, the Parliamentary Republic of Singapore inherited much of the Westminster system of government, with citizens compulsorily electing their members of parliament and a custodial President every five and six years respectively. Historically, General Elections in Singapore have been non-events, with the incumbent People’s Action Party (PAP) government typically returned to power on Nomination Day because of non-contestations in the overwhelming majority of seats. As a result, unlike Great Britain the small city-state of Singapore, inhabited by a mere 5 million strong population (as at 2010), has been ruled as a single-party nation since independence in 1965 by the PAP. Singapore has attracted much global attention since then because it is a shining economic beacon in the Asia-Pacific region and globally, with an unemployment rate of 2.1 per cent (as at June 2011), and an approximate US\$45,000 per capita gross domestic product (GDP) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2011).

Even John Kampfner, journalist, author and chief executive of ‘Index on Censorship’, one of the world’s leading organisations that probes abuses of freedom of expression, acknowledges the tremendous success story of Singapore by calling it a ‘comfortable model’,

where citizens seem contented to trade media cum communicative freedom with economic freedom (Kampfner, 2009, p. 17). Whilst questioning Singapore's social and cultural vulnerabilities, especially in the increased clamour for greater cultural and political space among younger and more globally networked Singaporeans, Kampfner is troubled by the extent to which the Singapore model of media and cultural has become accepted not just by Singaporeans who have grown accustomed to authoritarian rule, but also by others elsewhere.

As he rhetoricizes:

Most people – Singapore citizens, international businesses, foreign governments – had a vested interest in preserving the status quo. [...] Even more horrifying is the thought that plenty more people around the world, irrespective of their political culture, have also been contentedly anaesthetised. Singapore may be the home of the trade-off in its purest forms, but are we all more Singaporean than we realise? (Kampfner, 2009, p. 39).

While Kampfner's analysis is premised broadly on the notion and meaning of freedom and liberty in the postmodern world, his description of Singapore as 'the home of trade-offs in its purest form' provides a rather provocative point of departure for this chapter, which analyses government communication in Singapore.

The view that the media should subscribe to what the government perceives as its national interests is an immediate consequence of what has been described by many observers as the authoritarian style of Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew, who sagaciously consolidated various independent and political party-based press outlets into a single press conglomerate, the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH). SPH is listed on the Singapore Stock Exchange, but majority owned and controlled by the government's investment arm Temasek Holdings. Lee Kuan Yew declared back in the 1960s that 'no one is free to use the Singapore press to sabotage or thwart the primacy of purpose of an elected government' (Lee Kuan Yew, cited in Seow 1998: 27). Convinced that a purely Western model of democracy would undermine ethnic and social harmony in Singapore's fragile multicultural society, the principle of a tame and compliant media has largely been

maintained since Singapore attained independence from British rule in 1965 (Lee and Wilnat, 2009, p. 93). Further drawing on Singapore's racial and religious diversity, the early leaders determined that the democratic rights and freedoms of Singaporeans must be restricted, especially during general elections, to avoid heightening political activity and emotion (ibid.). After all, elections in Singapore are not held to determine who is to rule the country, but 'to bring together in the institution a body consisting of the most gifted, innovative, well-educated and experienced men and women, who can offer Singapore a good, achievement-oriented and efficient government' (Vasil, 2004, p. 110). The corollary is that those deemed irresponsible and adversarial, including politicians who have 'little compunction in inciting racial and religious hatred, confrontation and conflict for political gains are kept out of parliament as far as possible' (Vasil, 2004, p. 110).

Indeed, as Mauzy and Milne (2002) have alluded to (in the opening quote to this chapter), controls to limit political participation, even using a government-controlled media to limit civil and political rights, makes Singapore a fascinating case study of government communication. On the one hand, government communication in Singapore could easily be branded as 'authoritarian', as many observers have done, because of the broad absence of alternative viewpoints available in public discourse. On the other hand, the broader Singapore media landscape appears as open as any other Western democratic city or society, with a plethora of global media choices ranging from broadcast channels to printed material (newspapers and magazines) to mostly open ultra high-speed broadband internet access. The advent of web2.0 from the mid-2000s, captured most prominently by social media with the rise of the blogosphere and a series of online social networking sites, has further broaden the availability of alternatives and made it more difficult to describe Singapore's degree of media and political openness. While there are vagaries or subtleties to the appearance of openness (such as the structures of ownership of domestic media outlets and tacit controls of the

Internet space), the real illiberal twist lies in the fact that the Singapore government insists that only elected members of parliament, particularly those who form the government of the day, can be the embodiment of democratic expressions. The press and the media have not been and can never be elected into any watchdog or commentary role, and are therefore limited to reporting daily events and reproducing government messages for the proscribed benefit of the people. This is not just a firm rejection of the principles of the media as the fourth estate, but an endorsement of a government having the first and final word on all matters of national interest. Such is the status of politics – and indeed of political and government communication – in Singapore.

While the term ‘political communication’ broadly refers to the ‘purposeful communication about politics’ (McNair, 1995, p. 4), the term ‘government communication’ is more precise as it deals with the way(s) in which the executive arms of governments communicate with its people. In the case of Singapore, government communication deals primarily with how the PAP government’s core team – comprising the incumbent Prime Minister and his Cabinet – communicates its central messages to its people. Although the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) is the official mouthpiece of the government by virtue of its name and mission to inform and communicate to all Singaporeans,<sup>1</sup> central government communication often emanates directly from the Prime Minister’s Office, often via an official press release or sometimes via the Prime Minister’s personal press secretary.<sup>2</sup> Many other key messages are delegated to individual government ministries, departments and statutory bodies, to be announced to the media by full ministers or junior ministers, known as Ministers of State in Singapore.

In this regard, government communication or transmission in Singapore is rather direct and straightforward, sticking largely to the standard transmission model of communication where messages are sent from sender to receiver via a medium (or the

media). Noises or interruptions to message transfers are typically either absent or are obscured from the mainstream audience, which comprises the majority in Singapore. Where it gets hazy and problematic, however, is at the conceptual or ideological level. This is because the media system in Singapore is itself a function of political communication and cultural control, with most if not all domestic media outlets controlled directly (or indirectly) by the political masters, and where government communication is enhanced and enabled by mostly compliant or non-obstructive reporting of government messages (Lee, 2010). As this paper will go on to elucidate, compliant and one-sided reporting was clearly the order of the day at Singapore's 2006 - and more recently at the 2011 - General Election, despite the growing influence and impact of online and social media at these events. Government communication in Singapore is maintained and enhanced by the fact that the flagship daily newspaper in Singapore, the SPH-owned *Straits Times* (ST) English-language daily, has dominated public discourse and carried the beacon of government messages in a top-down and tightly-controlled manner since the 1960s. Message transfers from the PMO and the various ministries would largely be unfiltered or unadulterated as ST reporters, journalists and editors would dutifully paraphrase and spin government press releases and ministerial comments 'without fear or favour' of opposing voices. This same practice is also emulated by the mainstream broadcast media led by Singapore's MediaCorp television and radio broadcaster. That Singapore's mainstream media outlets, led by the prime flag-bearing ST and the MediaCorp group, would constantly and consistently echo the government's messages is no longer remarkable. Most Singaporeans have simply come to accept this as a fact of life (Lee, 2011, p. 134).

This paper examines some of the contemporary mechanics of government communication in Singapore under the Lee Hsien Loong administration (from 2005 to the present). It will look not only at the contemporary tools utilized by the Singapore government



to mediate its messages to the people via the use of feedback mechanisms such as its own in-house Feedback Unit,<sup>3</sup> it will also consider recent challenges to its approaches brought about by the new media (such as the most popular social networking site facebook as well as other citizen journalism blogs). While most previous studies on politics and the media in Singapore have centered on the tightness of the Singapore government's control over the flow and passage of communication and its increasingly sophisticated and subtle way of controlling not just the media, but also broader public discourse, this chapter will offer a new take on the subject. It will analyze the successes and failures of government communication evidenced at and by the General Election of May 2011, and will thus offer a timely rethink of what government communication in Singapore might look like post-elections 2011. It will argue and conclude that while an increasingly sophisticated citizenry and generational change has altered the government communication landscape in Singapore, the regime is nonetheless keenly aware that the *raison d'être* for supremacy both in governmental control and communication requires constant updating and modification. Whether the PAP government is up to the task of dealing with demands for change, or not, would remain key.

### **Great Singapore Spin or Substance?**

First, we have to be on top of issues. But, beyond that, we also have to be conscious of the media angle and to reach out over the noise to get people to pay attention and listen to us and accept what we say. Which is one talent which Ronald Reagan had. He didn't have all the policy details in his head but he knew how to look into the camera and talk to people, and cause the rest of the objections to become less significant

(Lee Hsien Loong, cited in Ng 2001: 2).

As early as 2001, Singapore's current PM Lee Hsien Loong (who was Deputy Prime Minister at the time) embarked on what could be seen as a 'charm offensive' strategy by fleshing out some of his ideas – and ideals – in public speeches. In doing so, he demonstrated awareness

that a new approach towards governmental communication was needed in Singapore. In a speech that argued for the importance of a global cum regional perspective on policy-making, Lee articulated his admiration for the 'Great Communicator' in the form of the late former US President Ronald Reagan who was well-known for using one-liners to persuade the public instead of spelling out policy details (Gibbs, 2004, p. 39). Lee also echoed the former British PM Tony Blair's strategy of having 'a series of eye-catching initiatives' to keep him positively placed in the public eye (Blair, cited in Stephens 2004, p. 135). And again in January 2004, several months before he took on the office of Prime Minister, Lee Hsien Loong gave a preview of his premiership by declaring in January 2004 that Singapore will 'open up further' by promoting 'further civic participation' (Lee, H.L., 2004a). This 'promise' of a more open Singapore was made at the 35th Anniversary Dinner of the Harvard Club in Singapore in January 2004 and arguably has a strong bearing on the shape and form of government communication in Singapore. At the time, Lee's speech seemed long on rhetoric but short on content, highlighting the paradox between building a dynamic society and the state's desire to micromanage citizen participation on a broad range of issue (Jones, 2004). However, with the benefit of hindsight, especially following the recently concluded 2011 General Election, Lee's promise could be said to be gradually materializing over the course of seven years (up to 2011) since he became the prime minister. This process of change, however, was by no means a smooth path, with twists and turns along the way and with technological shifts playing a major role in the rethinking of how communication can and should be governed in Singapore.

The early period of Lee's premiership since August 2004 has thus been typified by the employment of spin in Singapore's government-people relations. This emphasis on style over substance can be observed by the increased use of rhetoric during the early years of his premiership. The Harvard Club speech itself, littered with phrases such as *inter alia* 'open up

further' and 'further civic participation', was itself a case in point. As I have elucidated in an earlier analysis of the space and discourse of civil society in Singapore, the 'new regime' employs 'gestural politics' to paint an enlightened and democratic picture of Singapore to appeal to its two key constituents, the Singaporean voter and global foreign investors (Lee T., 2005). Gestural politics is characterized by the use of populist terms like 'openness' and 'inclusiveness' to display the 'liberal' gestures of an otherwise illiberal regime (Lee T., 2005: 135). Not unlike the 'catchy' slogans of Blairite's 'New Labour', Lee's reign and his approach to government communication up until the 2006 General Election were characterized by gestural politics and 'spin'. His further talk on engendering an 'open and inclusive Singapore' during his 'swearing in' as prime minister on 12 August 2004 (Lee H.L., 2004b), the entitling of his 2005 Budget speech as 'Singapore, a land of opportunity' (2005 Budget speech) and his 2005 National Rally speech, 'A Vibrant Global City Called Home', became the early hallmarks of his premiership (see Lee H.L., 2004b, 2005a and 2005b). By marrying his oratorical skills with spin via the repetition of key political buzzwords, PM Lee was able to sheet home political rhetoric into everyday public discourse (Lee T., 2005, p. 150). The *Straits Times* columnist Ignatius Low observed this same phenomenon when he pondered:

Every now and then, a new buzzword seizes Singapore. In true Singapore fashion, ministers' speeches become peppered with it, it starts appearing in newspaper headlines and the civil service organises entire workshops to discuss it (Low, 2005).

By normalizing such words in everyday discourse, PM Lee's premiership between 2004 to 2006 provided Singaporeans with the sense and perception that there was indeed a new message, with new style of leadership and communication to come. Whether or not there was something new became moot.

The first battle between spin and substance in government communication occurred during this period when the whole of Singapore embarked on what became known as the ‘Great Casino Debate’ between March 2004 and April 2005 (although one could argue that the flow-on discussions, especially for those opposing the opening of casinos in Singapore, continue). The national debate on whether Singapore should lift a longstanding ban on casinos became the major point of contention during Lee’s first year as prime minister, and showcased his thinking on how government communication would be conducted. The possibility of a casino was first raised in March 2004 by former Trade and Industry Minister George Yeo as a proposal to boost Singapore’s lackluster economy. The debate entered into public discourse after PM Lee’s maiden National Day Rally Speech in August 2004. Acknowledging the controversy a casino decision would cause, PM Lee called for Singaporeans to speak up and make their thoughts on the issue known via the government’s official Feedback Unit (now known as REACH). He used his speech on the subject to urge a ‘mindset change’ among Singaporeans and to be more ‘forward-looking’ (Lee H.L., 2004c). Whilst remaining non-committal about the eventual decision, PM Lee announced the government’s ‘Request-For-Concepts’ invitation to interested parties in December 2004 (Lee H.L., 2005b). In the same month, an anti-casino civic group, Families Against the Casino Threat in Singapore (FACTS), launched its website and announced that more than 20,000 people had signed an online petition against having a casino in Singapore (Lee, 2008, p. 178).

On 18 April 2005, despite the fact that the casino debate had become deeply polarizing with an almost even split between those for and against, PM Lee announced his government’s approval for building not one casino, but two mega-size ‘Integrated Resorts’ in Singapore, lifting the ban on casinos in an unexpectedly emphatic manner (Lee 2008: 179). The first and larger resort would be built in Marina Bay, and the second on the southern resort island of Sentosa.<sup>4</sup> To provide social safeguards, these resorts would come with

casino-cum-gaming components occupying no more than 3 to 5 per cent of the total floor area. Other measures that were introduced include a high entrance fee of S\$100 per day or \$2,000 per year for Singaporeans and a ban on gambling on credit (ibid.). The announcement of a decision (that many still believe to have been determined prior to the consultation process) was well-calibrated and designed to extract maximum media coverage and political mileage (see da Cunha, 2010). It would demonstrate the PM's decisiveness and resoluteness in decision-making whilst generating a feel-good outcome for Singapore's economy and boost the city-state's global image (Lee, 2008, p. 180). But more significantly, it was an excellent demonstration of the effects – and indeed, the defects – of government communication in Singapore in that the final decision would be one without any real consensus (and therefore seen as 'authoritarian'), but one that has been derived from some degree of open debate and consultation (and therefore presented as 'democratic'). The positive 'spin' to the 'Great Casino Debate' was PM Lee's conclusion that Singaporeans were able to have a rational and constructive public debate on controversial and serious issues (Lee H.L., 2005b). The 'Great Casino Debate' – described as 'the mother of all consultations' by the Feedback Unit (2005, p. 65) – thus became the new showpiece for government communication as it began to lay claims about how it communicated, initiated and facilitated an open forum on a major national issue. The Feedback unit's 2005 Year Book, entitled *Shaping Our Home: Turning Ideas into Reality* commended Singaporeans for participating in the debate in a rational and constructive fashion, declaring 'the fact that so many Singaporeans had responded so actively to the idea of a casino was perhaps more significant than the final result' (Feedback Unit, 2005, p. 65). While this may be true, nowhere was it highlighted that the final decision was ultimately made on 'gut feel' rather than on rationality. As the prime minister himself admitted: 'This is a judgement, not a mathematical calculation. We see the trends and feel the need to move' (Lee H.L., 2005, in Lee, 2008, p. 181).

The 'Great Casino Debate' exposed major contradictions between Lee's call for greater consultation and the role that public feedback actually had in the final decision-making process. The government did not disclose 'how much weight public opinion was given in the final decision' (Geh 2005). If so, it would have shown how the government mediated between the competing tensions of a citizenry deeply polarized over the decision. It would have been difficult, if not downright impossible, to qualify or quantify how much of feedback factored into the decision-making process. In addition, the rejection of various other approaches that might involve the increased participation of the citizenry – for instance, a referendum – denies any form of government communication that would embody 'active citizenship' or genuine feedback (see da Cunha, 2010). In short, such contradictions reveal the government's reluctance to genuinely build consensus with the community. One could even argue that government communication actually means the imposition of the predetermined government point of view that goes through the organized gestures of a public debate.

The government sought to move on from the year-long casino debate by focusing only on the economic positives that would supposedly emerge from it and by indulging in 'self-triumphalism'. As the Feedback Unit's (2005: 66) report concluded, 'the casino debate had demonstrated how the nation-building process and Asian values had combined to give rise to Singaporeans' desire to protect their society'. This bewildering statement alone points to the surfacing and widening gap between spin and substance or rhetoric and reality in the governing of communication in Singapore. According to well-known Singaporean social activist Alex Au, 'the 'open and inclusive' promise, which is closely related to the 'city-with-buzz' slogan that Singapore has adopted, is beginning to reach a point when it tips into ridicule' (Au, cited in Chua M.H., 2005). Instead of moving Singapore forward, the Great Casino Debate of 2004 to 2005 sparked the rise of a new cynicism which I would argue is a

‘natural’ outcome of going through the spin process. Similarly, Singaporean columnist Warren Fernandez observed an increase in public cynicism over what he refers to as growing ‘feedback fatigue’, exacerbated by the feeling that the government is merely paying ‘lip service’ to public comments and views (Fernandez, 2004). Yet, it was not until the 12<sup>th</sup> General Election of May 2011 that Singaporeans found their voices generate sufficient noise to ‘shout down the PAP government’ (George, 2011a), and thus began the process of dismantling and recalibrating the hubristic and top-down approach to government communication in Singapore.

## **RECALIBRATING GOVERNMENT COMMUNICATION: GENERAL ELECTION 2011 AND BEYOND**

On 7 May 2011, politics in Singapore surprisingly came of age when a record number of six opposition members – out of a total of 87 seats – were elected into parliament at Singapore’s 12<sup>th</sup> General Election since it attained independence in 1965. Statistically, 60.1% of voters remained loyal to the PAP government and were happy to see the ruling party maintain its unbroken dominance. However, 39.9% of voters, a record showing for the Opposition, desired alternative voices in parliament (Tan and Lee, 2011). These percentages are not reflected in the eventual parliamentary make-up since the simple plurality or ‘first-past-the-post’ electoral system – comprising an eclectic mix of multi-member candidates known as Group Representation Constituencies (or GRCs) and the basic Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) – allowed the incumbent PAP to capture an overwhelming 81 out of 87 seats. A further three opposition candidates (comprising the best ‘losers’) will enter Parliament via Singapore’s unique Non-constituency MP (NCMP) scheme (Lam, 2011, p. 174; Tan, 2011). While the records registered by the Opposition at the election would be deemed irrelevant and unremarkable in any liberal democracy, what was significant at this event was that the Singaporean electorate – known variously until then as an apathetic, frightened and socio-politically

disengaged lot – ‘spoke up’ and made their voices heard in virtually all mediated channels possible (see Lee 2010).

The General Election 2011 saw record circulation of mainstream newspapers, with the *Straits Times* registering an increase in daily sales of 5.1% or 17,500 copies over the campaign period (Lee 2011: 141). The websites of the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) group performed remarkably well with a total of 116 million page views and about 7.9million video views on its key sites: *straitstimes.com*, *Stomp*, *AsiaOne*, *The Straits Times RazorTV*, *Zaobao.com* and *omy.sg* (ibid.). The Internet went up another notch at the election with video uploads, more ‘twits’ (via twitter), more facebook profiles and ‘likes’, more citizen journalism reports, blog entries, posts and comments and, by the same token, more online vitriol on new candidates (George 2011a). Not only were Singaporeans using, consuming and ‘prodUsing’ both the traditional and online media in greater depth and degree (George 2011a); they were also attending on-site election rallies in droves (Chong, 2011, pp. 116-7), and publicly articulating their thoughts on a range of personal and national issues.

Unlike previous elections where municipal issues and self-interests – led most prominently by upgrading and refurbishment of public housing estates that would translate to asset-enhancing benefits for home-owners – dominated, GE2011 had a more nationalistic agenda where government mistakes and mishandling of national issues were top on the list. These were made manifest in issues such as cost of living and an expanding income gap, housing affordability, inadequate national infrastructure and overcrowded public transport, ministerial budget overruns, escape of a terrorist, immigration (mainly increase in foreigner population), all of which were topped off by highly-paid ministers’ lack of accountability (Tan 2011; Barr 2011). While most of these issues have existed in the past – particularly during the elections of 2001 and 2006 – the government could easily sidestep these issues via pork-barreling tactics and promises of discounted or free estate upgrades back then. In addition, the government could employ communication strategies that involved the assiduous management and control of information such that most Singaporeans would never receive the full picture. This was the same strategy employed during the ‘Great Casino Debate’, although the sensitivity of the casino debate left a somewhat bitter after-taste that possibly was not quelled. As mentioned earlier in the paper, the fact that virtually all mainstream media outlets in Singapore could be relied upon to toe the



official line or foreground government achievements, communicating the government's message verbatim, whether rightly or wrongly, was more than assured.

In 2011, however, government communication in Singapore came under unprecedented pressure with the flow of communication disrupted as soon as the election campaign started. Although the mainstream media led by the *Straits Times* continued to echo partisan biases and prescribed agendas in favor of the ruling PAP right up to the Nomination Day (Lee 2011: 142), many Singaporeans diligently sought their versions of 'truth' via the internet and by communicating about politics at the community/grassroots level. The Internet was thus a major factor, not so much in actually transmitting new information, but rather in facilitating the search for corroborating facts and information, and also signifying that there can be an alternative (or alternatives).<sup>5</sup> This marked a certain shift in political consciousness among the Singapore populace. The General Election of 2011 thus became a 'watershed', paving the way for Singapore to become a 'normal' democracy in which the ruling PAP is forced to heed the people's choices for genuine political consultation and participation, and with genuine alternative voices in Parliament (Lam, 2011, p. 175).

The impact of the election on government communication in Singapore was seismic by both Singaporean and global standards – and still is. Barely one week after the polls, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, aged 87 and 70 respectively, resigned from the Cabinet. MM Lee, recognized as the founding father of modern Singapore stepped down after 52 years in Cabinet. Often compared to a towering Banyan Tree in Singapore politics, and known for his decisive, uncompromising and authoritarian brand of leadership which underpinned the country's rapid economic development and affluence, his retirement marked a new dawn in Singapore politics (Lam, 2011, p. 177). Shortly after the resignation of MM Lee and SM Goh, PM Lee retired three of the most unpopular ministers from his Cabinet: Raymond Lim, Mah Bow Tan and Wong Kan Seng who were responsible for missteps over public transportation, public housing and home security respectively. All three polled less than the PAP's national average of 60.1% in their constituencies. Acknowledging that the weaker poll results were the motivating factor, PM Lee acted decisively in heeding the voters' voice by boldly getting rid of the weakest links in his Cabinet, and giving it a complete overhaul by bringing in two fresh faces: Heng Swee Kiat as Education Minister; and, Major-

General Chan Chun Sing as Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports (CDYS) and Minister of State for Information, Communication and the Arts.

As Lam Peng Er, a Singaporean political scientist, argues more cogently in his analysis of the implications of the May 2011 election:

GE2011 is significant for our understanding of political theory and practice beyond Singapore's shores. Social science literature on political change anticipates the democratization of a country after it attains affluence and has built up a burgeoning middle class. Right up till GE2011, Singapore has been considered an anomaly because it is a de-facto one-party state with uncompetitive elections and few opposition members of Parliament. GE2011 may pave the way to a more 'normal' democracy in Singapore in which there is greater representation of alternative voices in Parliament, and where the people fearlessly articulate and assert their preferences in policy formulation and implementation (Lam, 2011, p. 178).

I would add that the social, cultural and political shifts that the 2011 election wrought has kick-started a recalibration of government communication in Singapore. In the preceding weeks of the polls, newly-minted ministers were reported to be actively, even desperately, seeking feedback on issues ranging from construction of new housing apartments (housing), stresses and pressures of school-going children (education) to a prospective revision of ministerial salaries, among others. The new transport minister Lui Tuck Yew, for instance, was featured on mainstream, online and mobile media taking public buses and trains to better understand commuters' woes.<sup>6</sup> While the PAP government has clearly set in motion new strategies to recalibrate its approach to government communication into one that is able to connect and relay key messages to Singaporeans whilst demonstrating its ability to take on board criticisms and feedback, it needs to ensure that it does not buy (back) into privileging spin over substance. The overexposure of transport minister Lui and extensive blogging by PAP leaders could easily tip the balance over and negate attempts by the government to claw back electoral support via a more organized mode of government communication. The government would do well to improve, recalibrate and manage its communication more consistently and sagaciously.

## **CONCLUSION**

Just about every scholar who has analyzed the state of the media, culture and politics in Singapore would make the conclusion that the nation will come under pressure to liberalize and embrace more democratic practices in the future. The reasons typically range from increased globalization to advances in communication technologies to the porous nature of the Internet, all of which effectively weakens the grip of paternalism and authoritarianism in a society that is ironically one of the most economically and socially open in the world (Lee and Willnat, 2009, pp. 107-8). The advent of mass public Internet access in the mid-1990 started the ball rolling, and the arrival of personal blogs and social networks (known collectively as web 2.0) in the mid-2000s has hastened this process far more quickly than these scholars, and the government, could have imagined.

This paper effectively extends analyses on the state of Singapore media, communication and politics into the realm of government communication, an area so extensive and of such importance that virtually few have sought to examine. This is ironic in itself, but even more so in the case of Singapore where just about every facet of life revolves around the government to the extent that it has been described as a ‘government-made’ country (Low, 2001). More so than many other contexts, the Singaporean public will never lose its reliance on government communication and information because of this dependency (Graber, 2003, p. 5). While it is impossible to do justice to an entire nation’s approach towards government communication, this chapter has sought to detail the shifts in the broader discourse in Singapore in recent times, particularly under the premiership of Lee Hsien Loong. As I have argued here, the problem in Singapore stems from a government that has gradually lost touch with the needs and aspirations of the people, and as a result, has failed dismally in applying meaningful government communication strategies. This was

demonstrated earlier in the ‘Great Casino Debate’, and more recently, at the 2011 general election. The recalibration of Singapore’s government communication approach(es) has started and is likely to gain momentum in the years ahead (post-2011), especially in the lead up towards the next general election due by 2016. The signs of a communication style that speaks to the individual citizen as a thinking being and one with the rights of a citizen, instead of as a pure political subject, are already starting to show. This would not only improve communication between the government and the people, it would strengthen the nation’s civic life and increase the level of organizational governance.

On 27 August 2011, Singaporeans had the rare opportunity to go to the polls a second time in a year. This time, it was to elect the nation’s head of state, the Elected President. For a position that has been uncontested at the previous two elections, the political ‘long-tail’ of the May 2011 General Election ensured that the presidential election had to run the full gamut of campaigning and vote-casting. As it turned out, it became a fascinating four-horse race. The most prominent candidate, Dr Tony Tan, a former Deputy Prime Minister who eventually became the nation’s seventh president election by a narrow margin, had started his campaign on the right note by inviting the alternative media, represented by a handful of leading bloggers, alongside the mainstream media to his press conference where he announced his candidature (George 2011b). The invitation was not tokenistic as these bloggers could pose questions freely at the press conference; and in return, the alternative media players honored the embargo on the news and did not publish the information of Tony Tan’s intended tilt at the Presidency until the next day (ibid.). To an extent, this small but positive encounter offers an important reminder that the broader media system in Singapore would need to be recalibrated with an eye towards encouraging and engendering a more civil, diverse and pluralistic media – both in terms of ownership and content.

While the ‘Tony Tan Campaign for President’ episode is by no means conclusive nor exclusive, it does signal that the Singapore government will have to change its approach to government communication into a two-way praxis, simply because an increasingly sophisticated citizenry and the coming-of-age of a new generation will demand it. In truth, they have already called for it at the 2011 general election. In any case, the *raison d’être* for supremacy both in governmental control and communication requires constant updating, (re)calibration and/or modification. In the case of Singapore, given the real risks of further political ossification at the next election, there is probably no better time than starting right now.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA): <http://www.mica.gov.sg>.

<sup>2</sup> Prime Minister’s Office (PMO): <http://www.pmo.gov.sg>.

<sup>3</sup> In October 2006, the Singapore Government’s Feedback Unit was rebranded ‘REACH’, which stands for “reaching everyone for active citizenry@ home”. This coincided with the restructuring of the Feedback Unit to move beyond gathering public feedback. REACH is now the lead agency for engaging and connecting with citizens. REACH was also appointed as the Singapore Government’s e-engagement platform in January 2009. Available: <http://www.reach.gov.sg/> or on facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/REACHSingapore>.

<sup>4</sup> At the time of completing this chapter (July 2011), the casino component of both resorts were already open to the public, with the full-scale opening of the theme park and entertainment components tipped by 2013.

<sup>5</sup> The potential of the Internet to offer alternative views in a Singapore election was first unveiled by long time gay activist and social commentator on his citizen journalism blog, [www.yawningbread.org](http://www.yawningbread.org). His news-breaking pictures of the massive hordes of Singaporeans participating in opposition election rallies during the 2006 general election became Singapore’s equivalent of ‘Wikileaks’, and caught the blatantly pro-government mainstream media off-guard. The mainstream dailies were subsequently forced to publish more accurate reports on opposition activities. For more details of this episode, see Lee and Kan (2009).

<sup>6</sup> See, for instance, a Yahoo report/blog post (dated 30 May 2011) on “Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew seen taking public transport”. (<http://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/transport-minister-lui-tuck-yew-seen-taking-public-074642807.html>). Since then, there have been several other reports on the minister’s journeys on public transport at various times of the day.

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