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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: 128).

CONTEXTUALIZING SINGAPORE

Since independence from British rule in 1965, the political system in Singapore has been shaped by the rule of Senior Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his close associates in the People's Action Party (PAP). Convinced that a purely Western model of democracy would lead to ethnic conflict and social unrest in Singapore's multicultural society, the government has consistently maintained that only a strong and united government can provide the leadership and policies to secure progress and prosperity in the city-state (Vasil 2004). In addition, the ruling PAP claims that Singapore's racial and religious diversity make it necessary to limit the democratic rights and freedoms of Singaporeans—especially during elections, when there is heightened political activity and emotion (Singh 1992; Vasil 2004).

While the fear of ethnic conflict has been used as an argument to limit the role of democracy in Singapore, it is important to realize that 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 effective government” (Vasil 2004: 110). It is also a mechanism for the government to ensure that “irresponsible populist demagogues and adversarial 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: 110). Thus, unlike in liberal democracies, elections in Singapore are not a contest of alternative policies and programs offered by competing political parties, a view underscored by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew when he declared that:

There just is no viable alternative program for an island city state other than what we have empirically worked out in the last 30 years. That is why the able and the talented have not come forward to form a credible alternative team and challenge the PAP. They know PAP is doing the right thing. They are content to thrive and prosper with the present men in charge (cited in Vasil 2004: 110).

Singapore's economic and social achievements have given the PAP a high level of credibility and legitimacy, and it is no surprise that a large majority of Singaporeans have come to accept the PAP's right to act as custodian of the nation. As a result, while most Singaporeans wish for a stronger opposition in the parliament, few of them have genuinely pushed for an alternative government (Vasil 2004; Singh 1992). Hence all opposition parties since independence have been extremely weak and fragmented, and consequently, attracted limited public support (Vasil 2004). PAP's efforts to portray opposition parties as deflections of national development and progress have also helped to diminish public support (Singh, 1992). In fact, many Singaporeans have been led to believe that opposition leaders are irresponsible opportunists, or lightweights with flawed characters, who lack the credibility and skills to manage a modern Singapore (Vasil 2004; da Cunha 1997). Such tactics, of course, have come under fire from opinion leaders and representatives from opposition parties who blame the ruling party for their failure to be seriously considered by the electorate. They maintain that the PAP government's brand of authoritarianism has made it impossible for them to function politically because of repressive policies and restrictions it imposes on them and on the media (Vasil 2004; Singh 1992).

In their extensive study on *Singapore Politics under the People's Action Party*, Mauzy and Milne (2002) identify a range of "draconian laws" and restrictions that determine Singapore's status as an authoritarian state. Laws such as the infamous Internal Security Act, instituted during British rule to counter Communist insurgents and used by the PAP to detain political opponents, and the Societies Act of 1967 (amended in 1988), which requires most organizations of more than ten people to be registered, are commonly cited by Singapore observers as authoritarian and politically motivated. In addition, many believe that Singapore's judicial system is politically compliant, despite its high international ratings for efficiency, innovation and fairness. However, very few, if any, would publicly articulate such sentiments for fear of being arraigned on charges of libel or defamation.

The PAP government's inherent hostility towards opposition parties is illustrated by their strict control of all forms of mass media, which has enabled them to execute effective propaganda against its political opponents (Gomez 2000; Singh 1992). Moreover, the PAP's monopolistic control has not only resulted in direct censorship but subsequently created a culture of self-censorship among media practitioners who, in their role as gatekeepers of information to the

public, manage and control the coverage opposition parties receive (Seow 1998; Gomez 2000). For example, political parties are finding it difficult to secure advertisements for their publications from would-be advertisers. Most potential sponsors fear that their business would suffer if they took out an advertisement in an opposition newspaper or even expose their sympathy to the opposition cause (Gomez 2001).

While Singapore's political and legal structures are worthy of further research, this chapter focuses on another aspect of Singapore's authoritarianism: the political control of the media. We seek to identify the tactics and strategies employed by the Singapore government to manage the media's ability to engage in political communication, which McNair (1995: 4) describes as "purposeful communication about politics." With this broad and inclusive definition of political communication, which effectively links the study of the media with politics, the section that follows will provide a summary of recent research on political communication research in Singapore and will consider why there is a perpetual dearth of critical studies on this subject. The chapter will then look at the mechanisms of media control in Singapore, beginning with traditional media and followed by digital media control.

RESEARCH ON POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

In a recent issue of the *Asian Journal of Communication* (September 2004), Singapore-based academic Randolph Kluver observed that:

[T]he paucity of literature on Asian experiences and frameworks means that most of the theory-building that happens within the field of political communication is derivative from the Western experience, which presumes that the Western model of politics and communication is or should be normative for the rest of the world. This lack of critical engagement with other global perspectives establishes a *de facto* situation in which only Western theories, Western experiences, and Western contexts are used to generate analysis (Kluver 2004: 118).

While Kluver's advice about the need for non-Western perspectives is worth considering, its application is problematic in the case of Singapore because, as in all aspects of everyday life in Singapore, the media have been turned into 'depoliticised' entities (Mauzy & Milne 2002). In other words, the media's role is primarily to inform, educate and entertain Singaporeans for the purposes of communitarian nation building, while staying more or less clear from sensitive

political issues (Birch 1993; Tan 1990). This entrenched view of Singapore's media as apolitical is a direct result of Lee Kuan Yew's disdain for the Western model of the media as the 'Fourth Estate.' As Lee himself made clear in 1971, "politics are only for professional politicians, and no person or group of persons, organizations or associations may comment on national policies without first joining or forming a political party" (cited in Seow 1998: 27). The government, with the relatively recent addition of the elected presidency in Singapore, thus becomes the only institution in Singapore that is 'permitted' to embody democratic expressions (George 2002).

Within the framework of political communication studies, Singapore's media are positioned as a neutral and moral information-bearer to and for the Singaporean public (Birch 1993). Consequently, political communication in Singapore should be nothing more than official government communication to the public on its own prescribed terms (Maarek 2003). This position is, of course, naïve and ignores the fact that there are, and will always be, resistances, oppositions and alternatives to the status quo. Before investigating recent alternatives, we turn our attention to recent research on political communication in Singapore.

The rejection of the democratic role of the media in Singapore has severe implications for academic research on political communication. In his review of communication research in Singapore, Kuo (1991) notes that "communication research in Singapore has been carried out by researchers from various academic backgrounds without the support of a strong institutional base, and without an established research tradition" (p. 120). This in turn has led to a dominance of descriptive rather than theoretical or critical studies that are typically conducted on ad hoc bases. Kuo concludes that "communication research in Singapore is lagging both in quality and quantity" (p. 121). In addition, it is likely that political communication research has been suppressed by Singapore's tight social and political controls, and the fact that the parameters for acceptable political debates (known in Singapore as 'out-of-bounds markers') are shrouded in ambiguity. Thus, it is no surprise that very few academics dare to test the boundaries of political deliberation in Singapore (Lee 2005).

One of the first critical studies of political communication in Singapore is David Birch's (1993) seminal monograph *Singapore Media: Communication Strategies and Practices*, which identified Singapore's media strategies and policies as a "measured ideological framework of a

domestic and regional postcolonial politics of nation-building” (1993: vii). In the following years, Singapore’s communication policies were discussed more often with reference to a particular policy issue pertaining to a specific medium—particularly the press (George 2002; Rodan 2000) and the Internet (Gomez 2002; Lee, T. 2002; 2003; 2005; Sussman 2003). These studies concentrate on particular aspects of media regulation, such as censorship (Yeo & Mahizhnan 1998; Gomez 2000), ownership and political control (Rodan 2000; 2004), and the state of Singapore’s civil society as reflected in the media (George & Pillay 1998; Rodan 2000; 2004; Lee forthcoming).

The official adoption of the development press model by the Singapore government allowed a select group of media researchers to conduct a number of carefully phrased studies focusing on press performance. Based on a content analysis of letters to the editor in the national newspaper *The Straits Times*, Ramaprasad and Ong (1990) conclude that ‘the salience of the national development themes seems to have been successfully transferred by government into the minds of the people and publishers’ (p. 53). The study points out, however, that in contrast to the demands of the traditional Development Press model, some of the letters, although focusing on development issues, were rather critical in tone. Indeed, the letters to the editor in the *Straits Times* have since become the de facto site for public feedback and limited political discussion in Singapore (Lee 2005).

Similarly, Choi’s (1999) content analysis of news coverage of juvenile delinquency examines how Singapore’s newspapers were able to play a nation-building role while maintaining their individuality throughout the 1990s. The study concludes that the “Singapore press plays a nation-building role by propagating public campaigns initiated and managed by the government.” Especially the leading Chinese newspaper, so Choi, emphasized the government policies, while other newspapers simply covered cases and events of juvenile delinquency or remained neutral.

The first truly empirical ‘media and election’ study conducted in Singapore is Kuo, Holaday, and Peck’s (1993) analysis of the role the media played during the 1991 General Election. The study, which is based on a quota sample of 435 Singapore residents, found that the electorate relied heavily on the mass media for information about the election but perceived the election coverage to have low credibility and to be skewed heavily toward the ruling party. The authors showed,

for example, that 59% of the election stories presented in the television evening news were about the PAP, while only 34.5% were about any of the opposition parties. Moreover, PAP stories were usually produced with edited footage and soundbites that contained prerecorded soundtracks spoken by journalist describing the event, while news stories concerning opposition parties were much simpler, such as those of the news anchor speaking without visual illustration or with a single continuous shot of the candidate concerned. Likewise, the PAP appears to be the party with the greatest number of items in the newspapers with 34.7% of election-related articles reported, as compared to the 16.9% about opposition parties..

Similarly, Hao's (1996) analysis of data obtained in a telephone poll of 570 randomly selected Singapore residents found that although people in Singapore are basically satisfied with the overall performance of the local press, they also question its credibility, especially with regard to news coverage on domestic politics and government affairs (see also Tan 1990). Hao warns that an increasingly younger, better educated, and critical public would eventually begin to question the fundamental credibility of Singapore's press.

In recent years, a growing number of studies focusing on public opinion in Singapore have been published. Chang (1999), for example, examines the form and content of public opinion reporting in Singapore's news media to determine their social implications for public policy decision making. The findings show that "public opinion surveys in Singapore are fraught with theoretical and methodological problems and that their reporting in the news media leaves much to be desired" (Chang 1999: 11). The author pointedly concludes that the frequent but incompetent reporting of polls in Singapore's media might lead to the illusion of a responsive government and political complacency in the public.

Gunther and Ang's (1996) analysis of the third-person effect hypothesis examines public opinion about television censorship in Singapore. Data for this study come from face-to-face interviews with 506 randomly selected Singaporeans who evaluated 10 categories of "sensitive" television content. The authors not only found a substantial perceptual bias in all content categories (people feeling that "sensitive" television content influenced others more negatively than themselves), but also strong opinions favoring censorship of television content. According to the authors, the

significant relationship between these two factors suggests that people may support censorship of media in part because of a tendency to overestimate its negative influence.

A study by Willnat, Lee, and Detenber (2002) provides partial support for the spiral of silence hypothesis in Singapore. Based on a representative telephone poll of 668 Singaporeans, the study tests the assumption that political outspokenness is largely a function of people's perception of the dominant opinion climate, their perceived importance of critical issues, and other psychological predispositions. As predicted, the findings indicate that respondents who perceived a trend in public opinion against their own beliefs and who considered the tested issues important were less likely to express their opinions on these issues in public. The study also shows that political outspokenness in Singapore is associated with respondents' self-concept of interdependence, fear of social isolation, and general communication apprehension.

Overall, the here discussed political communication studies clearly suggest that the media in Singapore is tightly managed and controlled. Various reasons have been cited—both officially and unofficially—for placing the media on a tight leash, but they generally point to the desire and the professed need by the PAP government to maintain power for the good of the nation. As Birch (1993) concludes in his landmark study of the Singapore media:

This is a legitimating strategy for keeping the PAP in power: it requires a compliant media to stage the myths, generated by government, in order to manipulate and control social consciousness. All societies and cultures do this to some extent. What makes Singapore different from most is that it admits to what it is doing, and legitimates it within a postcolonial discourse of nation-building (p. 74).

The next section expands on this trajectory of thought by considering how such a mode of what McNair (1995) refers to as 'media management' is conducted in Singapore.

Singapore's Mediascape: Management and Control

Arjun Appadurai (1996) famously coined the term 'mediascape' as one of five dimensional 'scapes' intended to explicate differences and disjuncture in the global cultural economy. According to Appadurai (1996: 35), the term refers to the production and dissemination of mediated information via traditional and electronic means to form political and ideological

“images of the world.” Singapore’s mediascape operates in much the same manner in that management and control of the mass media are intended to keep the PAP government in absolute power. According to McNair (1995: 135), this mode of political communication can be understood as ‘media management’, where governments seek to “control, manipulate or influence media organizations in ways which correspond to their political objectives.” This section provides an abbreviated background of Singapore’s media and suggests how the exercise of media management in Singapore has been largely successful due to a combination of regulatory instruments as well as more subtle strategies like co-optation and auto-regulation (Lee 2002; 2005; Rodan 2002; 2004).

The mediascape in Singapore can be divided into three broad categories: broadcast media, print media and the Internet (which will be looked at in greater detail in the next section of the chapter). All three categories are required to serve as handmaidens to the nation’s economic development effort. Until 1980, the government ran all television and radio stations under the charge of a government department, Radio and Television Singapore. This department was then turned into a statutory body, the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, through an Act of Parliament before it was corporatized to become Singapore International Media (SIM) in 1994 (Ang 2000). Although no longer a statutory board, SIM is a private company wholly owned by the government through its state investment agency Temasek Holdings. As part of the process of gearing-up for prospective competition in the domestic and global media industries, SIM was subsequently restructured and renamed as the Media Corporation of Singapore (MediaCorp).

At first glance, Singapore appears to house a thriving local print media environment—with strong circulation numbers for its main English and Chinese language newspapers and relatively vibrant Malay and Tamil language newspapers despite its small readership base—that exists alongside wide access to international news and titles (Bokhorst-Heng 2002). However, a pattern of mergers and (politically motivated) closures of various newspaper companies which began in the mid-1980s have resulted not only in fewer mainstream newspapers (as compared to the 1970s and 1980s), but also in the formation of the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), essentially a government-linked print media monopoly. As Bokhorst-Heng (2002: 564) notes, ‘With all English, Chinese, Malay, and since early 1996, Tamil, newspapers under one SPH umbrella, the mergers created a virtual controlled newspaper monopoly.’

Although the creation of SPH through mergers was seen as commercially successful, it led to a reduction in alternative voices and venues as home news about Singaporean political affairs became ‘centralized’ and ‘mainstreamed.’ In an article which proposes an interesting delineation of the media in Singapore as either ‘mainstream’ or ‘marginal,’ former *Straits Times* journalist Cherian George (2002: 175) describes the prevailing press system in Singapore as one that facilitates “the government’s freedom from the press” as opposed to the liberal democratic model of freedom of the press from government. The government is able to achieve this ‘ideal’ situation of not having *real* political opponents partly via a panoply of legal and regulatory controls. These include, among other things, licenses to publish newspapers, the aforementioned Internal Security Act, and the Official Secrets Act, which deters journalists from being on the receiving end of political leaks. As George (2002) details with cogency, not only are these laws designed to protect the political establishment, they have actually been invoked between 1970s and the 1990s to bring local editors and journalists to task. Journalists and news editors in Singapore are therefore mindful of the inherent risks of their trade as they go about their daily practice.

The key legislation governing the print media is the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (NPPA). Enacted in 1974, and amended several times thereafter to tighten its juridical reach, the NPPA empowers the government to determine the composition of a newspaper company’s board of directors. With the NPPA’s structure and mechanism in place, George (2002: 177) argues that “the government needs neither to post its officials directly into top newsroom positions, not to nationalize the press.” Instead, the control of the press is much more subtle as it relies on a combination of political co-optation and auto-regulation, both of which have been tried and tested, and found to work very effectively in Singapore (Rodan 1996; Lee 2005). While the former aims to win over formidable and outspoken critics by roping them into the ‘inner circle’ of political management, the latter seeks to regulate and police criticisms by ensuring that they are articulated via government-mediated channels or are preemptively quashed even before they are raised (Rodan 1996; Lee 2005). In the case of the press, George (2002) reveals that:

Contrary to folklore, the newsroom does not receive daily instructions about what to publish, and sensitive articles are not submitted to government officials for vetting. Like all major newsmakers, government officials try to influence coverage of their particular portfolios through a mix of persuasive tactics, from offering the inducement of greater access to dangling the veiled threat of legal

action. [...] The most senior figures in the leadership prefer to have editors who *independently* come to the right conclusions—even if they occasionally do not – than to replace them with mere functionaries. As members of the establishment, newspaper editors are expected to have an instinctive grasp of Singapore’s national interests and how to protect them (p. 177-178; emphasis in original).

While the invocation of ‘national interest’ as a reason for clamping down on alternative voices is a common strategy for contemporary media management and control, Singapore’s approach is extremely ingenious as it utilizes a potent combination of legislative and auto-regulatory mechanisms. This ideology of control has been the key driver of media control and policy since the nation’s independence in 1965.

Singaporean gatekeepers have long been wary—even paranoid—of foreign media and international broadcasters engaging in Singapore’s domestic politics. Media censorship laws, particularly those relating to foreign publications and screen products, were enacted and quite regularly amended to control the inflow of negative foreign social, cultural and political influences (Seow 1998). In July 1986 for example, the NPPA was amended to enable to government to restrict sales of foreign publications deemed to be interfering with domestic politics (George 2002). Following the passage of this law, many foreign media were taken to task for their reports of unsavory aspects of the PAP system (Chee 2001). Foreign publications falling victim to this aspect of the law include the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *The Economist*, *The Asian Wall Street Journal* and *Asiaweek* (Seow 1998). In addition, over the past 30 years, global media publications including *Newsweek*, *Reuters*, *The Times* (London), *The Star* (Malaysia), *Time*, and *International Herald Tribune* have had their editors and/or journalists arraigned on charges of publishing defamatory or libelous articles (Lee 2005).

The spirit of the NPPA’s systematic muzzling of the foreign media was extended to the global broadcast media in April 2001. After a very brief debate in a one-party dominated Parliament, an amendment to the Singapore Broadcasting Act (2001) was passed. Under this legislation, foreign broadcasters and providers of television news—such as the BBC, CNN and CNBC Asia—which are found to meddle in domestic politics could be slapped with restrictions on the number of households which can receive their broadcasts through the monopoly cable television provider Starhub Cable Vision; or worse, the broadcast channel could be ‘blacked-out’ altogether. If such an action is implemented, advertising and/or subscription revenue of the broadcaster in question

would no doubt be severely affected. Since most of the international media organizations operating in Singapore enjoy a profitable existence, they have learned to be pragmatic enough to avoid commenting or, indeed, communicating about Singapore politics—as well as their politicians (Lee 2002).

Although the introduction of legislations and penalties has seriously eroded both the local and global media's ability to comment freely on Singapore politics, a stable hegemonic state-media relationship has since evolved over the years. The local print and broadcast media are best described as pro-development and hence pro-government in the name of national security and public interest. As such, their role and credibility have been so compromised in the eyes of the public, that many locals have come to identify the mass media with the ruling party (Kuo et al. 1993). Yet, despite a clear lack of political debate occurring in and through the media, Singapore harbors the ambition of becoming the 'global media city' of the Asia-Pacific region in the 21st century (Leo & Lee 2004).

In April 2000, Singapore experimented with limited media liberalization when it introduced competition between the two core local print (SPH) and broadcast media (MediaCorp) players by allowing both companies to cross into each other's turfs. That year, SPH became a two-channel broadcaster while MediaCorp ventured into newspaper publishing. This move to liberalize the media was done in part to support Singapore's 'creative industries' and to prepare the media sector for global expansion. It was recognized that the economic framework of Singapore's media sector had to shift away from a monopolistic structure—at least in appearance—in order for the rest of the world to take its global media city ambitions seriously (Leo & Lee 2004).

However, the plan to inject 'soft competition' was a dismal financial failure as well as a public relations disaster. In November 2003, both Lee Boon Yang, the incumbent Information and Communications Minister, and then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew lamented that media liberalization in Singapore had largely failed. Based on the sizeable losses that both players sustained over the three-year period since the introduction of competition in April 2000, both ministers concluded that a monopolistic set-up was more realistic for Singapore (Lee 2003). Although both SPH and MediaCorp dismissed the possibility of a merger, it was publicly

announced in September 2004 that mass-market television and newspaper operations in Singapore would be rationalized in a move “to stem losses and enhance shareholder value” (Chua 2004: 1). Under the so-called ‘merger’ agreement, MediaCorp would regain its monopoly on broadcasting under a new entity called MediaCorp TV Holdings, which will be 20% owned by SPH. In the newspaper scene, the publication of SPH’s tabloid *Streets* will continue, but its operations will be taken over by MediaCorp Press, which will be 40% owned by SPH and the remaining 60% by MediaCorp. Although the current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong dismissed suggestions that the government had orchestrated the merger, calling it an “adjustment” to market situation (Teo 2004), the pre-ordained outcome was intended to reaffirm the duopolistic structure of mainstream media in Singapore. Political communication and journalistic practices are therefore “subordinate to a common purpose, of which the government is the ultimate oracle” (George 2002: 175).

This section has made the case that traditional media outlets in Singapore are guided by two government-owned or controlled media heavyweights: SPH in the print media and MediaCorp in the broadcast media. They exist alongside a wide array of global media publications and broadcasts that give the impression that Singapore is a socially, culturally, economically and politically open and vibrant society. The reality, however, is that while this model of media management has served the PAP government well in restricting or limiting free expression and political debates, it has blunted the potential of domestic media organizations to compete beyond the confines of Singapore.

The question that remains is whether political communication has been or can be more meaningful on the Internet, especially given that this relatively new medium is widely regarded as the most democratic and autonomous space available for political communication (Vedel 2003). The next section that follows explores this possibility and considers if the Internet has the potential to alter Singapore’s political communication landscape.

THE INTERNET IN POLITICAL COMMUNICATION

In 1992, the Singapore government proclaimed that Singapore would become the ‘intelligent island-state’ of the Asia-Pacific region by the year 2000 (Lee 2002). Today, with 99% of households and businesses connected to a nationwide broadband network and more than 66% of

the population computer-literate, Singaporeans are considered more tech-savvy than Americans, Britons or Australians (Lee 2002; 2005). With relatively fewer regulatory restraints compared to traditional media, the openness of the Internet has enabled individuals and groups to set up Web sites and weblogs (or blogs) to publicize their own interests and agendas. This unlegislated shift in the media regime has also led to a mushrooming of alternative online media on Singapore (George 2002).

As early as 1994, the online bulletin board soc.culture.singapore surfaced as the first alternative Web site dedicated to open discussions on Singapore politics and current affairs. Although soc.culture.singapore caused a political stir, it was the Singapore Internet Community (Sintercom) Web site, launched in October 1994, which popularized alternative online journalism in Singapore. Although somewhat amateurish in its presentation, Sintercom carried a wide array of ‘contentious’ journalistic reports, including a summary of ‘hot topics’ extracted from the soc.culture.singapore forum that tended to be political in nature, an electronic bulletin board to garner feedback from readers, commentaries on national issues, and publication of well-written letters to the press that had either been rejected or strategically edited by *The Straits Times* (George 2002). Within a short time, Sintercom gained popular appeal and was regarded as the “beacon of civil society” in Singapore (Lee forthcoming). Sintercom was radical not only because it was the first Internet site aimed at engaging Singaporeans in an alternative fashion, it was also the first group to take advantage of the Internet to test political boundaries and circumvent both legal and socio-cultural obstacles (George 2002).

Encouraged by Sintercom’s success in countering PAP’s monopoly of media bandwidth, political parties soon sought out the Internet as an alternative communication tool. The opposition National Solidarity Party was the first to launch a political party Web site in 1995 (Seah 2001). In response to this, the PAP developed a so-called “Young PAP Web site” where young PAP members were given the opportunity to discuss PAP policies and related issues in a web-based discussion board (Gomez 2002). According to the Young PAP (‘Our vision’ 2005), the official goal of such a discussion forum is to ‘help the PAP maintain its position as the mainstream political party of Singapore, by expressing the aspirations of young Singaporeans, and by recruiting supporters, members and leaders for the Party from among young Singaporeans.’ It is interesting to note that all major political parties in Singapore launched their

official Web sites only shortly before the 2001 general election, obviously under the impression that Web sites are relatively unimportant as political campaign tools (Gomez 2002).

Kluver's (2004) content analysis of political party Web sites during the 2001 Singapore general election shows that only four out of 21 political parties in Singapore actually maintained Web sites and that "most of them did not make use of features and content explicitly allowed by the Parliamentary Elections Act Amendment, such as candidate biographies, frequent updates, moderated forums, and multimedia content" (p. 449). Moreover, only a few Web sites offered interactive features such as discussion forums, opportunities for active participation and volunteering, and e-mail addresses to which voters could send their views and comments. Kluver (2004) concludes, "in contrast to a perceived global trend toward the 'Internet-ization' of politics, the 2001 Singapore general election demonstrated that in spite of an advanced technological infrastructure, elections are still won and lost offline" (p. 455).

The potential use of the Internet for alternative discourse, political communication and campaigning, however, was neutralized by a series of legislations and self-regulatory codes aimed at controlling or limiting the political use of the Internet. To a large extent, the innovativeness of alternative Web sites like Sintercom turned it into a regulatory 'guinea pig' as the government was able to witness the political threat of an un(der)regulated Internet (Lee forthcoming). As early as 1996, the authorities introduced a raft of regulatory guidelines to ensure that online 'prohibited material'—defined as "material that is objectionable on the grounds of public interest, public morality, public order, public security, national harmony, or is otherwise prohibited by applicable Singapore laws"—were minimized or restricted (Lee 2002: 11; Sussman 2003: 46). Although such a definition of 'prohibited material' clearly leaves room for discretionary interpretation and should have been queried by the public, there was barely any discussion on the issue in Singapore. Instead, the move that sparked both widespread interest was a decision made in 1997 to block 100 pornographic sites via the proxy servers of mass Internet service providers in Singapore (Lee 2002; 2003; 2005). To quell public disquiet, the government stressed that Singapore was fundamentally 'technology-friendly', and that the online censorship was a moral gesture and not politically-motivated (Lee forthcoming).

The government's attempt to exercise political control over Internet content was unmistakable when it passed further regulations that required content providers with 'political messages' or 'political advertising' to register with the Internet regulator, the Media Development Authority (MDA) (formerly the Singapore Broadcasting Authority) (George 2002; Sussman 2003). Sintercom managed to sidestep this directive by convincing the authorities that it was not a political site, but a civic organization. But in July 2001, notice was issued to Sintercom's founder Tan Chong Kee to register as a site "engaged in the propagation, promotion or discussion of political issues relating to Singapore" (Goh 2001). Tan responded by announcing that the arbitrariness of regulatory terms, especially in the definition of "political issues," meant that he had no choice but to shut down. He then lamented that civil society in Singapore was a "lost cause" (Tan 2001).

Determined to control online materials, especially those that could spark anti-government sentiments, the government passed new anti-electioneering laws prior to the 2001 general elections (Tan 2003). As a pre-emptive measure, new communication tools like short messaging services over mobile phones were also outlawed (Lee 2002). Political parties, candidates standing for election, and non-party political Web sites are required to be registered with the MDA, and had to observe the Internet campaigning rules in accordance with the 2001 Parliamentary Elections Act (PEA) and the 2001 Parliamentary Elections Regulations. While the SBA rules set down broad political and moral markers that must be followed at all times, the changes made to the Parliamentary Elections Act are narrower in scope. For one, they come into effect only during an election—between the time an election is formally announced by a writ and the time the polls close. For another, the new rules, while allowing Internet campaigning for the first time, also set limits on its form and who can provide it (Tan 2001).

The PEA states that although private sites are not allowed to support any party or candidate, the Web sites of political parties are allowed to post their manifestos, posters, candidate profiles and photos, newsletters, event announcements, advertisements to recruit volunteers, political party supporters or newsletter subscribers, and to hold online discussions and forums (Singapore Elections Department 2001). However, parties must appoint moderators for chatrooms and discussion forums during the election and keep logs of all messages (Tsang 2001a). These moderators are also to regulate and remove any messages that are deemed to be against public

interest, public order or national harmony, or which offend good taste or decency (Tsang 2001a). Any other Internet campaigning materials such as transaction services, announcements or notices referring to the sale of political merchandise and other fund-raising activities are restricted (Singapore Elections Department 2001). The publication of opinion polls during election and exit polls during polling day are also forbidden under the bill (Tan 2001). While these regulations may seem highly restrictive, the MDA continues to insist that they do not pre-censor content of political sites since its sole objective is to ensure that those who run Web sites and engage in the discussion of domestic politics will be accountable and responsible for that content (Tsang 2001b). This was met with protests by some content managers, owners and editors of online forums and Web sites who are now accountable for libelous information posted on their sites—even if such posts were from anonymous contributors (Gomez 2002). As Sussman explains, this “wide range of laws proscribing speech is intentionally vague so as to have the most chilling effect on political discussion held outside the gates of PAP-controlled channels” (2003: 46).

In addition to the above regulatory measures, the government has also ‘authorized’ the Singapore police and other state agencies to conduct regular checks on ISP accounts of public users. Since 1994, the year the Internet was introduced to the Singaporean public, several reports of police conducting mass scanning of subscribers’ emails and Internet accounts have appeared in *The Straits Times* (Lee 2002). Although official explanations for these clandestine activities typically pertain to law enforcement and technical or systems security, the fear that Internet ‘snooping’ and general surveillance are common in Singapore makes it necessary for all Singaporeans, including journalists and civil society activists, to toe the official line by self-regulating and self-censoring (Gomez 2000). The result is that any online space that can be used for democratic political communication in Singapore has been ‘nipped in the bud’ by the government.

The government further demonstrated its control capabilities and regulatory reach in the new media environment by tackling an online publication in 2002—the same way it has done in the past with traditional print media. On August 4, 2002, the international news agency Bloomberg published an article by its US-based columnist Patrick Smith that described as nepotism the appointment of Ho Ching, the daughter-in-law of former Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and wife of current Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, as Executive Director of Temasek Holdings,

the powerful government-owned corporation that controls most of the government-linked companies in Singapore (Lee 2005). This article was published on Bloomberg's Web site, and appeared in print only in Malaysia's *The New Sunday Times* on August 11, 2002. Upon knowledge of a possible defamation suit, Bloomberg retracted its article, apologized to the Senior Minister, the Prime Minister as well as his Deputy Lee Hsien Loong, and offered damages amounting to S\$595,000. The apology and compensation were accepted and the case was settled promptly in three weeks (Lee 2005). Bloomberg's quick settlement demonstrates a pragmatic understanding of political constraints of both media operations and Internet use in Singapore, and that the Singapore government has no intention of relinquishing its control of all facets of political communication in the Internet era.

There is little doubt that regulatory measures, combined with policing actions that could be construed as tools for social and political intimidation, have worked to rein in oppositional political discourses in the media. Although the Singapore government has a reputation for periodically refining media regulations to suit its own political agenda, and thus keep civil society and political communication under tight strictures (Rodan 2001), alternative Web sites dedicated to critical political engagements continue to appear—and even flourish—on the Internet. As *The Straits Times* columnist Tan Tarn How reported, no less than three “underground political Web sites,” most of which are not directly linked to opposition political parties, were set up in Singapore within the first nine months of 2003 alone (Tan 2003: 15). These include: *The Optical* (an information and newsgroup Web site), *The Void Deck* (a news and commentary site), and *Singapore Review* (an email-based news service provider). Other alternative Web sites that have continued to survive despite ongoing political pressures include: *New Sintercom*, *Think Centre*, *Singapore Window*, *TalkingCock.com* and *Sammyboy*. Although Tan (2003) criticizes the lack of analytical content and journalistic professionalism on most of these Web sites, he acknowledges their growing popularity and potential impact on the media and civil society when he notes that: “Some [commentaries and writings] are ludicrous, but many are also intelligent and serious, evidently not just the musings of bored undergraduate geeks with no social life but people who seem to know what they are talking about” (p. 15).

It is important to realize that many of these alternative Web sites continue to exist for various reasons. Most claim to promote civil society in Singapore, though some are overtly politically-

motivated, while others appear to serve as conduits for candid socio-political discussions. Nevertheless, most editors or web protect themselves by operating under the cloak of anonymity, and many of these sites “inhabit a nebulous region of cyberspace without a fixed location” to avoid falling foul of Singapore laws (Tan 2001: 15). Indeed, none of the alternative sites referenced in this chapter have the geographical ‘sg’ suffix in their Internet addresses. Although it is technically possible for the authorities to track down the identities of operators of these sites and shut them down, such draconian measures are unlikely as they would damage the government’s technology-friendly reputation, and flout its promise to regulate the Internet with a ‘light-touch.’

While the authorities will continue to make it difficult for alternative Web sites to function, by maintaining a tensed climate of fear and by continuing to enact new laws, codes and guidelines or pass further amendments to existing laws, it is likely that the Internet will remain the prime site for democratic articulations and political communication in Singapore simply because it is by far the most malleable of communication mediums to date. The battle over the shape, form and place of the Internet for political communication in Singapore would thus continue to be fought in the foreseeable future.

CONCLUSION

As globalization and advancements in communication technologies take center-stage, political communication in Singapore will be inevitably reshaped by new ways of interacting. The entry of the Internet, new telecommunication devices and services such as video conferencing and wireless computing have given Singaporeans a much greater selection of communication options and the power to interact affordably and easily—despite often tight controls of the mass media. Coupled with the increase in literacy and education level (da Cunha 1997), the state of political communication in Singapore may be set to change as a growing number of young and educated people become more outspoken. In recent years, for example, there has been a more apparent debate on a range of political and social issues which have translated into an increase in the number of opposition votes during elections (Vasil 2004). Furthermore, as technological innovation and creativity become essential components of the future global economy, the Singapore government may be pressured to widen the margins of political participation and communication.

It is important to remember, though, that technology on its own is of no strategic value in terms of expanding political participation as there are limited opportunities and commitment from the people to use and promote them for democratic purposes. Ironically, although Singapore has one of the highest penetration of Internet connectivity, mobile phones and other technologies (Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore 2005; Lee 2002; 2005), the public is generally uncomfortable about using it for political ends (Gomez 2002; Sussman 2003). As such, even if new modes of technology provides a panacea in altering the nation's consensual and submissive political culture, its potential among the wider society would still be muted by deeply-entrenched political beliefs and a conservative value system (Ibrahim 2004; Kuo et al. 2002).

However, the key question is whether the government can continue to ignore the growing vocal minority and adopt their heavily regulated stance on technology to secure its mandate to govern (da Cunha 1997). Perhaps the idealism and empathy of the political opposition may reshape the future of political communication in Singapore, as the educated elite might clamor for more spaces of political articulation and push for a greater degree of political empowerment.

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