



Report on IPS Seminar

“New Media Challenges for Old Media: From Behind the Battle Lines”

Mr P N Balji, formerly Editorial Director at *Today*

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Ambassador Ong Keng Yong, IPS Director, opened the session with his opening remarks and introduced the speaker, Mr P N Balji who is Director, Asia Journalism Fellowship at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University and was the Editorial Director at Mediacorp's newspaper *Today* until October this year. There were about forty participants.

Mr Balji prefaced the talk by noting that the topic of the seminar -- “New Media Challenges from Old Media: From Behind the Battle Lines” -- was actually very broad in scope, and noted that even media professionals are unsure as to how this ‘battle’ might eventually pan out. Although print media has suffered tremendously in the United States, with established players like the *New York Times* selling its assets and the industry as a whole facing job cuts, he does not see a similar situation unfolding in Singapore in the immediate future. He then went on to describe what he called the possible drivers of change for the Singapore news media in the near to mid-term future: Government, editorial leadership, the Singapore readership and editorial content. The main question underlying his presentation is: where is the change going to come from in Singapore, at least within the next 25 years or so?

For Mr Balji, the Government was, and remains the biggest stakeholder in the survival and prosperity of local media, and is also therefore the foremost driver for change. Historically, the Singapore Government has been highly concerned about the role media plays in the project of nation-building. Recent statements from Government ministers also indicate the continued importance the authorities placed on mass media. In a recent interview for instance, Minister for Foreign Affairs George Yeo was quoted as saying that a “direct line of communication between government and the people” is important, and that traditional media is crucial in keeping the line open. In early December 2008, Dr Lee Boon Yang, Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts stated that the media had a role to play in the calming of nerves, boosting of confidence and rallying of communities in times of crisis. A 12 December report in *The Straits Times* also featured an interview with the leaders of the Young PAP acknowledging the mixed results achieved by *P65*, the blog started by the Members of Parliament born after 1965 as a way to young IT-savvy Singaporeans through new media.

Mr Balji also identified two key factors that would influence the Government to seek media change: a) a threat to its dominance and b) bottom-line pressures on the media. He said it is highly likely that the Government will change its stance on media, especially when it perceives that there will be a

threat to its existing dominance. This is especially true if an opposition figure contesting in an election were to decide to use new media in his or her contest. Second, the genius in the current setup in Singapore's media landscape is that the media companies continue to do well. The two media houses are well-entrenched in terms of financing and cash flow, and unless their bottom-line numbers are threatened he does not see a motivation for change.

The second driver for change is in editorial leadership. Numbers from market research firm AC Nielsen suggest that readership is currently still at a healthy level and advertising revenue remains strong. In this regard, Mr Balji does not see a major change in the next five to ten years. However, he stressed that the real problem, as he put it, was going to come not from the readership but within the editorial leadership itself, who might have become 'dinosaurs'. He observed that there has been no evolution in Singapore reportage in the last decade, with writing styles and news presentation unchanged since he started out in journalism in the 1970s, and noted that there is no real difference in the way broadcast and print media present issues to the public then and now. He attributed the predictability of editorial style and content to the increasing editorial focus on advertising at the cost of editorial work.

The third driver for change, Mr Balji said, is the readership. However, he was not optimistic under current circumstances. The readership is not so perceptive, and do not read the good overseas newspapers, so they lack a benchmark to compare local media against. Local media while competent and professional are not preparing Singaporeans for the big story that is brewing. To take the Lehman Brothers saga for instance: when the story of the bank's collapse first broke on a Friday, the *Financial Times* subsequently covered the issue on Page One for days. Meanwhile, the story was buried in the Money pages of *The Straits Times*. When the story grew in prominence, *The Straits Times* did not carry it on the cover page of its Money section, which instead had a story on how paper diaries are being superseded by their digital cousins. This example shows how Singapore readers cannot be more discerning if "they cannot see what the local media should be doing" in journalistic terms.

Fourth, Mr Balji noted that editorial content in Singapore media is indeed undergoing a change, but he was unsure if current changes bode well for the industry. Content is going downstream, and there is a general trend of sacrificing depth for breadth in terms of content. While "gems" or important information do exist in local reportage, one has to spend some time to ferret these "gems" out as they are not presented as starkly as they should be. An example is the recent announcement from the Energy Market Authority that electricity prices would be revised downwards following the drop in global fuel prices. Buried deep within the news article was a cursory mention of the authority's decision to revise its electricity pricing formula, a factoid that Mr Balji considers to be worthy of more attention. Editorial content also appears to have been tailored to be advertiser-friendly, and there is also a trend downmarket in the types of stories and how they are presented. He cited the examples of *The Straits Times* putting the story of an Austrian man having children with his daughter as front page story, and the overly graphic details of the death of Singapore lawyer Lo Hwei Yen in the recent Mumbai terrorist attacks.

Mr Balji cautioned that the trend of favouring editorial breadth over depth

will hasten the “desertion” of younger readers who are already spending less and less time on local news publications. One example of lack of depth in coverage is a story of great local interest about a group of Hong Kong investors taking banks -- including the Development Bank of Singapore (DBS) -- to court over the sale of structured notes was found only on A6 of *The Straits Times*. The impression generated, which may or may not be the case, is that the paper was not playing hardball with this story as a Government-linked corporation is involved. While readers will continue to read *The Straits Times* for its coverage of local developments, any “desertion” on the part of younger and tech-savvy younger readers could be a driver of change.

In summing up his talk, Mr Balji did not appear to be very optimistic about change in the Singapore media landscape. While there were ‘pockets’ within the journalistic community that is dedicated to better reportage, this is not widespread enough to constitute a trend.

Question and answer session

Mr Peter Lim, a media consultant and former Editor-In-Chief of Singapore Press Holdings’ English and Malay Newspapers Division, commented that he was more optimistic about the prospect of changes in the mainstream media than Mr Balji. He noted that Mr Balji was in a position of great influence at Mediacorp Press, which owns *Today*, and asked what institutional, personnel and political difficulties prevented Mr Balji from bringing about the changes that he felt were needed. In reply, Mr Balji, who succeeded Mr Lim as editor of *The New Paper* and then went on to be the first editor of *Today*, talked about his experience in the early stages of *The New Paper*. At that time, conditions were different as online media was non-existent. The real problems, he felt, came from the journalists themselves, who were accustomed to doing their work in certain ways. Fellow journalists let on openly on their distaste at the New Paper’s brand of journalism, as the paper was being launched. He quoted media mogul Rupert Murdoch in noting that the “sins” of journalism are committed by journalists themselves, and suggested that a lot could be done if there were no sense of fear within the mainstream media.

At *Today*, Mr Balji did not encounter as many problems with the Government (which he characterised as being very sophisticated in its dealings with the media) as he did with advertisers. With stories dealing with the Government, he said, senior journalists sometimes already had certain arguments “at the back of their heads” as they edited stories. On the other hand, he sometimes faced threats from advertisers who took umbrage at the way their products were covered, and who demanded that such coverage be tempered lest their accounts were withdrawn.

Still on the subject of journalistic restraints, Mr Balji emphasised that there actually is still a fair bit of room for journalists to push the envelope. Upon his return to *Today* as an opinion columnist, he had published three strongly-worded columns on the Mas Selamat escape, one of which openly called for the Government to drop its “bunker mentality” with regards to the way in which information on the escape was not released to the media and public in a timely fashion compared to the Laju Incident of 1973. After the article was published, he received word that the MHA was going to send a formal response, a

development which worried him slightly. When the MHA response arrived, however, Mr Balji found himself “very very surprised with the tone of the letter.” As far as Mr Balji knows, there was no response at all to the other two. His conclusion was that it is indeed possible for journalists themselves to write on such topics, and reiterated his view that journalists constitute the “biggest threat” to their work.

Mr Balji added that the key to a newspaper’s survival is in its revenue model. He had been trying to work out a business plan for a full-blown Internet paper with a friend, but found that the numbers were not promising. Two websites in the United States, the *Huffington Post* and *The Daily Beast* are examples of quality online outlets that do not appear to be profitable. Unless a viable business model is found, he said, a direct challenge to mainstream media from new media is unlikely.

Blogger Mr Alex Au had three questions for Mr Balji. He asked why Singapore newspapers are moving towards breadth over depth in terms of content. On Mr Balji’s point about the importance of a viable business model for an Internet newspaper, he asked if we might be trying to apply present business models to a situation where niche products are likely to replace mass market products such as newspapers. He also asked whether Singapore’s mass media strategy of providing products that appeal to a wide a market segment as possible might be doomed to fail given current developments towards niche products. In response, Mr Balji elaborated on the exploratory project he was undertaking. While more ‘niche’ presentations were also considered, he and his friend found that costs remained too high and that there were no possible investors. He agreed with Mr Au that the future for mainstream mass media is rather bleak, and niche products are the way forward. However, there is the obstacle of advertisers and ad agencies. He noted that they relied very much on numbers from marketing research firms such as AC Nielsen, and were rather unfamiliar with the specifics of the market. It is also easier for ad agencies to stick with the tried and tested, and both ad agencies and advertisers need to change their mindsets before niche products can take off.

With regards to the breadth versus depth issue, Mr Balji expressed doubts that Singapore media has the talent who can both understand issues and write well. He does not see the kind of talent needed to write the “crisp” work that he sees in *The Financial Times*, and young journalists are not being trained in this area. Again, given that readership numbers are still high, there is no real business pressure to produce content with depth, which requires more time and effort and also presents the possibility of the journalists concerned getting into trouble. On why *The Straits Times* is going down-market, Mr Balji noted that he was not privy to the decision-making process at *The Straits Times*, but he could see certain forms of pressure coming from advertisers. Another reason could be that *The New Paper* became a direct competitor to *The Straits Times* when it began morning circulation, and the former might have felt a need to fight to keep its readership from switching newspapers.

Mr Raoul Le Blond, a public relations professional, wanted to know about netizens’ reactions to Mr Balji’s Mas Selamat pieces in *Today*. Also, he wanted to know about Mr Balji’s opinions on online discourse in Singapore. Might online discourse develop to such an extent that a national newspaper would not be

needed anymore? Mr Balji replied that Singapore websites show three distinct phenomena. On one end of the spectrum, he sees a lot of “ranting and railing”, which he regards as being counter-productive. On the other end of the spectrum, mainstream media has also been entering cyberspace, although their “old baggage” and style are still quite salient. However, he sees promise in the ‘middle space’, where think pieces on Singapore current affairs are being disseminated. He cited *Yawningbread* and *The Online Citizen*, for which he writes, as belonging to this middle category, and said that it is this middle ground that needs more development.

Mr Gabriel Seah, a blogger, pointed to what he termed as a contradiction in Mr Balji’s presentation. While Mr Balji cautioned that mainstream media may be in danger of a desertion by younger readers, he was also not in favour of content ‘down-streaming’, which may help to keep readers, such as in the case of the tiger attack at the Singapore Zoo which was covered graphically by *The Straits Times* and the *New Paper*. Mr Seah suggested that the mainstream media may have to choose between keeping its readership and journalistic integrity. In reply, Mr Balji said the question is really about what readers really want in their media. He does not think that readers want more tabloid-style pieces, and noted that *The New Paper’s* circulation has been sliding in the last six months. He suggested that readers are not looking for the ‘what’ of the news (i.e. the details of the event) but the ‘why’ of the news (i.e. analysis and commentary), and also stated that in Singapore media, the gems or important information are hidden so well that readers may not find it worthwhile to plough through news articles to get to them.

Ambassador Ong noted that he had noticed young people reading only the lifestyle and financial pages of a newspaper, and commented that the Life! section in *The Straits Times* is actually quite “transnational” in that it carries entertainment news from Hong Kong and Bollywood. He also said that his relatives who return from overseas often say they actually miss certain sections of *The Straits Times*. He agreed with Mr Alex Au that *The Straits Times* is trying to appeal to as wide a cross-section of people as possible, but suggested that the real reason for people being bored with the broadsheet is the very mundane nature of reading the same publication on an everyday basis. The utility in comparing a publication like *The Financial Times* with *The Straits Times*, he said, is in the new perspective that comes with noting the additions and omissions across a local report and an overseas report of the same issue.

IPS Senior Research Fellow Tan Tarn How said that new media’s threat to old media is that with new media, it is now much harder to suppress issues permanently, such as in the case of Malaysian politics, where corruption issues and pictures of the Prime Minister napping at meetings were spread quickly in cyberspace. In Singapore, old media has also had to contend with new media in several instances. He cited the 2006 general elections, the Mas Selamat escape and the issue of commando dunking deaths as topics which new media kept alive in lieu of old media coverage. In the run-up to the 2006 general elections, Alex Au of *Yawningbread* bucked a long-standing policy of mainstream media of not publishing wide-angle pictures of crowds at political rallies so as not to show the number of people in attendance at such events. *Yawningbread’s* picture showing the thousands at an opposition rally forced *The Straits Times* to also use photographs shot in a wide angle. With the Mas Selamat escape, rumblings on

the ground persisted to such an extent that *The Straits Times'* Political Editor Chua Lee Hoong finally responded to online chatter with her column titled "That escape: Crucial issues aplenty, let's move on" two months after the event. The Government has also had to address Internet conversations, albeit indirectly: rumours of commandos who died after being dunked in water during training led to a full accounting by Government in Parliament.

Mr Tan then asked for the specific details surrounding Mr Lee Kin Mun's (of "mrbrown" fame) departure from *Today* following his reprimand from the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) after he criticised the Government in an opinion column ("Singaporeans are fed, up with progress!"). He also asked if the Mr mrbrown incident bore any implications for new media's challenge to old media.

Mr Balji stated that he was not with *Today* when Mr Lee left the paper, but had put together a "jigsaw puzzle" of clues. He felt that the incident "should have ended" with the Government's reprimand of Mr Lee, but a decision was made somewhere to stop Mr Lee from writing. Given that in the official response from the paper it was stated that Mr Lee's departure was a collective decision made by the "editors", he did not think that the Government had a say in this incident. The unfortunate part of this incident from a media point of view, said Mr Balji, was that *Today* did not report Mr Lee's departure from the paper, a fact that was however picked up by *The Straits Times*. Similarly, when a group of individuals decided to protest in favour of mrbrown at City Hall, it was *The Straits Times*, and not *Today* which reported the incident. It would appear that *Today* did not fulfil its journalistic duties by choosing not to report on an issue that has both public and professional interest, especially one that did not show it in a good light. Such a failure undermines *Today* as it would be hard put to explain to newspapers why they should answer questions which did not reflect well on them when *Today* had ignored unfavourable news about itself.

With regards to Mr Tan's earlier point, Mr Balji said that he doesn't see a site similar to independent news site *Malaysiakini* developing in the near future, as current conditions are not the same as they were in Malaysia with the media being in bad shape. With the commando dunking and 2006 election rally photos, Mr Balji believes that these are rare moments where the Government or media responded, but only because that things were going out of hand. He also believes that the Government will stick to its present position of not addressing online media directly, but this would change if online media continues to grow.

Mr Andrew Loh, an editor of the website *The Online Citizen*, commented that perhaps the sense of fear and self-censorship is a symptom of Singapore society in general rather than simply an organisational malaise in Singapore media. He pointed to the recent controversy in Nanyang Technological University, where journalism students writing in a school paper were disallowed from publishing an article on a campus visit by Singapore Democratic Party Secretary-General Dr Chee Soon Juan. In this case, the fear was clearly present on the part of school administrators as well. Mr Balji replied that he agreed with Mr Loh's point that there is generally a sense of fear amongst Singaporeans. He recalled moments where his friends were literally looking over their shoulders when they criticised the Government. Journalists, said Mr Balji, "cannot be ordinary persons" and "must be better than" those who are afraid to tackle

political topics.

Mr Clement Mesenas, Director of Editorial and Media Advisory of the agency Bang Public Relations, referred to Mr Balji's point on the possible desertion of mainstream media by readers, and noted that the Government has an investment in keeping *The Straits Times* alive as it is an important conduit for the Government to transmit its messages to the public. As such, if *The Straits Times* were to start losing its readership, it would be bad news for the Government. Will the Government eventually be forced to step in? Mr Balji responded by saying that the Government also has a stake in keeping the mainstream media the way it is for the longest possible period of time. He said that there were two pressure points on mainstream media, with the economic issue of utmost priority. Advertising revenues have stagnated since the year 2000, as major advertisers such as SingTel and Asia Pacific Breweries have grown to become multinational corporations. As these corporations now derive a huge portion of their revenue from outside Singapore, there is no need to maintain the same level of advertising commitment within Singapore.

Mr Balji also suggested that another round of media consolidation may help mainstream media to survive before they are eliminated by the market entirely. He noted that of all the media products that exist today the Government has a particular interest in keeping *The Straits Times*, Channel NewsAsia and *Lianhe Zaobao* in operation, and there is nothing to stop the Government from merging all three under one roof. Ambassador Ong disagreed, saying that such a consolidation is a thing of the past and does not make much sense today. Instead, he said, the market may be better served by the proliferation of smaller niche players.

Referring to Mr Balji's point that a viable revenue model is necessary to the success of new media news ventures, Mr Coleman Yee [[what is he he is in some company called pebble... not sure what position]] noted that the motivations of Mr Alex Au in setting up and maintaining *Yawningbread* is intrinsic in that that he wants to make a contribution rather than extrinsic or motivated by profit. He suggested that perhaps intrinsic motivations are enough in challenging old media. However, Mr Balji said he remained convinced that a good business model is necessary before a challenge to mainstream media could be mounted. Mr Alex Au himself concurred, noting that he has been critical of certain parties in the Singapore blogosphere who operate without business models. He noted that news sites by definition required legwork in order to get news stories, and capital is needed before legwork can happen. The elements of business, marketing and leadership must be present before such a venture can work.

Mr Tan Tarn How suggested that a compromise, based on the non-governmental organisation (NGO) model and running on a semi-profitable basis may be possible. He cited the cases of *Malaysiakini* and Ohmynews as examples of this possibility. In the case of the former, the founder of *Malaysiakini* moved to a subscription-based model when he found that advertising alone did not work. The outfit now generates enough revenue to pay approximately forty people, who are paid reasonably but below market rate for their commitment to the venture. The difficulty in Singapore, he stated, is that the majority of the readership does not really need alternatives to mainstream media, for the

Government's spin on issues may not be immediately obvious in the mainstream media. But the danger is that once people move away from mainstream media, it is unlikely that they will return, as in the case of Malaysia and Mediacorp's Channel Five. In the future, if the people were to feel out that they are not getting the truth from mainstream media, then the media may lose them for good.

In response, Mr Balji said that *Malaysiakini* came out of a specific set of circumstances in Malaysia from a political and industry point of view. Singapore media does in fact have a level of professionalism; it is just that truths are not presented as starkly as they should be. The Government is quite sophisticated in its management of the media as it has an interest in mainstream media's survival and professionalism. However, he also notes that there are some quarters in Government that seek more control over the media, while others actually are in favour of some form of relaxation of the rules.

Mr Alex Au, in response to Mr Balji's point on advertisers going regional, commented that in this scenario advertisers would advertise in media products such as the same geographical reach with their markets, such as *Time* magazine. He wondered if the founding of Channel NewsAsia was one response to such a development, and if "editorial failure" was behind its less-than-successful foray into the region. Mr Au suggested that in the case of Channel NewsAsia, a "more robust" editorial policy would have helped its efforts to go regional.

Mr Balji replied by saying that he had a sense that Singapore Airlines' local advertising has decreased as it has become a global company and not just a Singapore one. Such moves would become an even bigger trend in future. To compound the problem caused by local companies going multinational, the bulk of new businesses coming into Singapore and setting up their regional headquarters here do not need to advertise locally as most of their profits are made overseas. This creates a "double whammy" for media here. He pointed out, however, that Channel NewsAsia does not operate on an advertiser-driven model, for it was originally set up to replace the other news services operating in the region and to provide an Asian media perspective on Asia. A revenue-driven model, he said, would have resulted in a different station from the one that exists at present. Outside of Singapore, said Mr Balji, Channel NewsAsia is actually regarded as a Singapore Government operation.

Ambassador Ong noted that local telecasts by Channel NewsAsia actually differ from telecasts in overseas markets, and Singapore is hardly covered in the latter markets. He said that Channel NewsAsia is now a legitimate competitor to BBC Asia in Southeast Asia markets as the latter is now focused on South Asia in its reportage. He also told the audience that it was with some difficulty that Channel NewsAsia was granted access to the China and Indonesia markets due to the perception that the station is a "Singapore propaganda machine".

Mr Pritam Singh of OpinionAsia.org said that the timing and choice of articles about the recent US presidential elections in *The Straits Times* might make some think that it was simply a mouthpiece for Government. He wondered if *The Straits Times* could woo its readership back with a "more inclusive agenda", rather than one that supported one side over the other. Mr

Balji did not think that *The Straits Times* is in any imminent threat, for it is “not a bad newspaper”. He has the sense that it is only a small group of individuals who are looking for the coverage of issues in a way that is not driven by Government. While the Singapore Government has historically been pro-Republican, he also noticed some pro-Obama articles in the *Straits Times*.

Ambassador Ong invited final comments from the participants. Mr Peter Lim stated that the change in the local media scene is inevitable, and media players, Government insiders and influential insiders are all thinking of what would happen when the economic and political change drivers are finally in motion. The greatest fear, he said, is of the Government “losing its nerve” and “overreacting to what it cannot react against.”

Ambassador Ong expressed concern over the way in which the term “Government” may be conflated with the acts of certain individuals, and suggested that commentators be more discerning when thinking and speaking about Government actions. Singapore’s decision-makers, he said, operate in a collegial fashion that does not single out an individual for blame when mistakes are made. Having said this, he does recognise that there is a tendency for newsrooms to opt for the most convenient course of action in their work, and media has to work beyond simply writing up talking points that have been prepared for them. He said that Singaporeans are becoming more sophisticated as the country develops, and in the same vein critics must also be more careful, differentiated and balanced in when they talk about ‘the Government’.

Notes taken by Tan Simin, IPS Research Assistant

