

**ADDRESS ON “THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA: SINGAPORE’S PERSPECTIVE” BY MINISTER FOR HOME AFFAIRS AND MINISTER FOR LAW MR K SHANMUGAM AT THE INAUGURAL FORUM “A FREE PRESS FOR A GLOBAL SOCIETY” AT COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY LOW MEMORIAL LIBRARY ROTUNDA ON 4 NOVEMBER 2010 AT 1200 HR**

---

President of Columbia University, Professor Lee Bollinger  
Distinguished panellists and speakers  
Ladies and Gentlemen

**I. Introduction**

1. I would like to thank you, President Bollinger and Columbia University, for inviting me to share and explain our perspective on the role of the media in Singapore.
2. There are, as you said, diverse views on the roles that the media should or can play in a free society, and our views often draw fairly strong reactions.

**II. Political context is important when considering the role of the media**

3. The question of what role the media can play in a society, has to be considered in the context of how that society has structured its political framework – the media does not operate in a vacuum.
4. And I will emphasise that point quite strongly.
5. My comments in this respect are obviously restricted to societies which have – in the first instance – been able to freely choose their political framework.
6. I will:-
  - (1) First deal with the political framework in Singapore; and then
  - (2) Set out what we see as the role to be played by the media in Singapore, in that context.

**III. The political context in Singapore, and the development of Singapore**

7. Before I speak about Singapore and its specific context, let me make a few points clear. I believe that most people, regardless of race, religion or culture will want to live in societies:-
  - (1) Which promote individual liberty and freedom, including the right of free speech;
  - (2) Where people are given the opportunity to achieve their maximum potential;

- (3) Where people have the right to elect a Government of their choice; and
  - (4) Where the Government is accountable to the people.
8. Having said that, one question that most societies have to deal with in organising their polity – is to find the right balance between individual freedom and liberty on the one hand, and the interests of society on the other. How that balance is structured will impact on a variety of areas, including the media.
9. Western commentators usually start with how the balance has been struck in the US and some other countries in the developed world. The rest of the world is then judged by reference to that standard.
10. Often, there is an assumption that political systems can be transposed across countries, without adaptation.
11. Whatever may be the theory, in practice, attempts at such transposition, without due regard to different levels of development and culture, have usually come to grief.
12. The post-WW II period saw a large number of countries become independent, free from colonialism.
  - (1) Most of them started out with extremely well written Constitutions, noble ideals on separation of powers, Parliaments, Courts, political parties and so on.
  - (2) But these processes and institutions were in most cases debased and corrupted, fairly quickly.
  - (3) The underlying society was not hospitable for a real democratic tradition to grow: the people were poor and illiterate, often divided along ethnic, tribal, religious lines; crooks, charlatans and gangsters found it easy to get into power, using money and muscle.
  - (4) The people's lives never improved.
13. As I say this, let me make another one point clear. I am not for a moment suggesting that dictatorships deliver a superior record. In the developing world, generally both dictatorships and democracies have delivered equally sorry outcomes.
14. Turning to Singapore, specifically, we were a British colony following our modern founding in 1819. We obtained self government in 1959. We became part of the Malaysian Federation in 1963. We had independence thrust upon us in 1965 when we had to exit the Federation in acrimonious circumstances.

15. Singapore is a city state. In 1965, its land area was about 225 square miles, smaller than New York City. Its population was 1.9 million people. It does not fit the traditional description of a country. It is one of the 20 smallest states in the world – a micro state.
16. In the 1950s and 1960s, there were many fashionable trends among newly independent countries.
17. Practicality and common sense required us to, ignore most of these trends. We had to adapt our political and economic system to our internal and external circumstances. I ask you to bear with me as I spend some time on this point – these experiences in our short history were important in shaping our views on many aspects, including the role of the media.
18. What were these circumstances?
  - (1) I've spoken about size.
  - (2) Natural resources – none whatsoever except a deepwater port.
  - (3) People - our literacy rate in 1965 was low; a very small number had higher education.
  - (4) Economy – per capita GDP was about US\$500. There was very little local industry, and the economy was dependent on the British bases, which provided 20% of the GDP, and on entrepot trade, which depended on goods coming from other countries. It was not an international financial centre. Unemployment was in the double-digits.
  - (5) Institutions were not well developed, and there was no substantive middle class.
  - (6) Standards of healthcare, infrastructure, housing – these were all at very low levels, as was the case with many developing countries then.
  - (7) We had no capability to defend ourselves, and very limited internal security capabilities.
19. There was also no notion of nationhood or national identity. People had come to Singapore as immigrant workers to make money, and then return to their homelands. Society was deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines, which had been exploited to provoke riots and bloodshed. The very idea of Singapore as an independent state was laughable. Many did not think Singapore would survive for long, when it became independent, in 1965.
20. Our regional situation was not any more promising.
  - (1) The region was ravaged by continuous warfare after WW II

There was the Korean War, followed by the Vietnam War. And there was the communist threat – an actual conflict in which thousands of lives were lost in Malaya (including in Singapore), in a vicious and bitter fight with the communists from the 1950s through the 1960s. Victory against the communists was far from certain – as you would know from your experiences in the region.

- (2) Malaysia, our neighbour to the north - the split resulting in our exit from the Federation was based on differences on how racial issues should be approached.
- (3) To the south, Indonesia - was in low level conflict with us, threatening our very existence at the time of our independence. Saboteurs were sent over to plant bombs in Singapore.

21. You can see that there were serious external and internal risks. One other factor: Singapore is probably the only country in the world that depends on another country for a daily necessity – water, which we get from Malaysia.

22. It might help you understand our perspective if I were to suggest some geographical changes to the North American continent (I have used this analogy before):-

- (1) Assume the US is shrunk to the size of Connecticut, and with a population of about 20 million;
- (2) To the North, replace benign Canada with Russia; and
- (3) To the South, replace Mexico with China.  
→ Both with their current populations
- (4) And assume you have to get water everyday from Russia
- (5) If you want some additional factors to consider: Assume that the majority population both in the north and the south are the same, and are Muslim, which is different from the religion of the majority in the US. That will give you a perspective.
- (6) As I give you this analogy, I would add that we now have good relationships with our neighbours.

23. In the face of this internal and external situation, we adopted the British Parliamentary System. We made changes along the way. We wanted to ensure that:-

- (1) There were regular elections with secret ballot; and
- (2) Once elected, the Government should be able to function effectively and efficiently, and there should be political stability. There are thus less institutional checks and balances on Executive action in Singapore compared with the US – and that is deliberately so. In a small city state, the Government has to move quickly to react to internal and external situations. Voters can judge the Government during the elections. Gridlock would be

disastrous for us. Political confrontation through extra constitutional means, street protests and so on was minimised, through law.

24. There were a number of other steps taken, but time does not permit me to go into them.
25. We were successful in our objectives. As a result, today, our situation is a little different from when we started out in 1965. (The reason I go through this, is not to tell you that we have done well – that you can see from yourself. The point is to show how we have progressed; and, perhaps, uniquely among developing countries who gained independence in the 1960s, we were able to achieve this. It is to explain how the political system, including the media, plays an important role in that transformation.)
  - (1) In military terms, we have a strong citizen army, and no one doubts our ability to protect ourselves.
  - (2) Our economy - the per capita GDP is about US\$41,000 (up from US\$512 in 1965). We are one of the leading financial centres in the world, with an open, free economy. The Heritage Foundation ranks us as the second most open economy in the world.
  - (3) We are stable.
  - (4) We have social peace.
  - (5) We are safe and secure internally:-
    - (a) We have a relatively small police force. For example, we have 247 officers per 100,000 population, compared to 426 per 100,000 in New York City.
    - (b) But we also have one of the lowest crime rates in the world. There were 661 crimes per 100,000 people in 2009, a quarter of New York City's. We also have much lower rates of violent crimes compared with New York.
    - (c) Anyone can walk along most streets in Singapore, day or night. Any child can take public transport, and many do – parents will not have to worry too much.
  - (6) Healthcare – in 2008, Singapore spent about 4% of its GDP on healthcare. But our health outcomes are comparable to countries that spend much more, including the US.
  - (7) Education system:-
    - (a) Recognised as first rate. Shortly after taking office, President Obama said that in 8<sup>th</sup> grade math, Singapore's middle-schoolers outperformed their American counterparts three to one.
    - (b) Today, 70% of each cohort now gets some form of post-secondary education.
    - (c) Our top students go to the top universities in the world and do well.
  - (8) Housing: More than 90% of our population now own their homes.

26. If you look up international rankings on:-
- (1) Living environment
  - (2) Our judiciary
  - (3) How corruption free the society is;
  - (4) You will find us ranked at or near the top.
27. Not bad for a small city state that started out in the most unpromising of circumstances.

#### IV. **Media**

28. Where does the media fit in, in this picture?
29. The traditional liberal theory of media is that:-
- (1) It will represent different points of view. That will encourage open discussion. As a result, there will be better outcomes for society.
  - (2) The media will also play the role of the Fourth Estate, checking the Government, and keeping it honest – that will strengthen democracy. The assumption was that the media would be judicious, fair and independent.
30. In these ways, the media is seen as essential for proper functioning of the democratic process.
31. That is the theory. The reality is a little different. Let me set out some of the differences as we see them:
- (1) Journalists, like the rest of us, are human, and subject to the same influences and vices. They can be biased, unfair and prejudiced, as much as any of us can be.
  - (2) Media companies are often profit-driven, like other commercial entities. It is not uncommon for journalistic values to be sacrificed in pursuit of profit.
  - (3) Media companies and journalists, like other entities and people, can be bought, suborned and corrupted – particularly in developing countries.
  - (4) Competition and the need for the advertising dollar can compromise ethics.
  - (5) There has also been a trend towards tabloidization to appeal to the lowest common denominator.
  - (6) The media can have tremendous influence in the political process. It can set the agenda for discussion, it can shape public opinion

about Government and government policies, and it can make or break politicians. As the Fourth Estate, it is an active participant in the political process. Yet it is the only institution in the political process that is often not subject to any checks or balances. The answer that the public provides the check and balance is really a non answer.

32. Former British Prime Minister Tony Blair put it in these terms, when describing the consequences of the modern realities and pressures on the media:

*“The result is a media that increasingly and to a dangerous degree is driven by “impact”. Impact is what matters. It is all that can distinguish, can rise above the clamour, can get noticed.*

*“The audience needs to be arrested, held and their emotions engaged. Something that is interesting is less powerful than something that makes you angry or shocked. The consequences of this are acute:*

*“First, scandal or controversy beats ordinary reporting hands down. News is rarely news unless it generates heat as much as or more than light.*

*“Second, attacking motive is far more potent than attacking judgment. It is not enough for someone to make an error. It has to be venal. Conspiratorial.*

*“Third, the fear of missing out means today’s media, more than ever before, hunts in a pack. In these modes it is like a feral beast, just tearing people and reputations to bits. But no-one dares miss out.*

*“Fourth, rather than just report news, even if sensational or controversial, the new technique is commentary on the news being as, if not more important than the news itself.*

*“This leads to the fifth point: the confusion of news and commentary. Comment is a perfectly respectable part of journalism. But it is supposed to be separate. Opinion and fact should be clearly divisible. The truth is that a large part of the media today not merely elides the two but does so now as a matter of course.*

*“The final consequence of all of this is that it is rare today to find balance in the media.”*

33. I am not saying that this reality is good or bad. My point is that these are facts and they should be acknowledged frankly, before there can be a sensible discussion on the role that the media can play in any particular

society – rather than having a discussion based on an idealised notion of the media, which is divorced from reality.

**V. Approaches to the Media**

34. The media in America has a wider and freer role than in almost any other country in the world.
35. That this approach can cause some harm to American society has long been recognised. The view that has prevailed, however, is that the risk is nevertheless a price worth paying. The other risk, that the media may be shut out from dealing with legitimate issues –thereby weakening American democracy, is seen as the greater harm.
36. There is a fundamental assumption underlying this reasoning – that American society is strong enough to withstand the possible harmful consequences arising from such an approach.
37. If however that fundamental assumption changes, then there has to be a different calculus. That, precisely, is Singapore’s position.
38. Our view is that our small society, with a short common shared history, enclosed within a small island, cannot withstand the harm that can be caused by giving our media the role that the US media has. By the time we have some light, after all the heat, irreparable harm may have been caused - or at least a level of harm that we as a society are not prepared to accept. For example, the fault lines in our society, along racial and religious lines can easily be exploited.
39. To use an analogy, the US is an aircraft carrier. We are a little skiff. A lot of things that can happen in an aircraft carrier will not be possible in a skiff.
40. Our view on the role of the media therefore is as follows:
  - (1) It should be a neutral medium for conveying news – with commentary clearly separate from news;
  - (2) It should report fully and fairly what goes on. It can probe, ask inconvenient questions, and expose wrong-doing;
  - (3) But it should not join the political fray and become a political actor. It should not campaign for or against a policy position. The media can and should convey the views of opposing political actors – and people can judge for themselves the validity of any particular point of view. If a journalist or a newspaper owner wants to take part in the political process, then he or she should

join a political party, and not use the privileged access to the media to push a political perspective.

41. The basic point is a simple one. Your society has in-built stability. There can be fringe lunatic behaviour, but mainstream Americans are sensible, rational, and extremist sentiment will not threaten the very fabric of society.
42. In many developing societies, these assumptions don't hold. The glue holding the society together is not as strong. These societies can easily rupture along tribal, ethnic, and religious lines. And you see that happening regularly.

## VI. Reactions to our views

43. What are the reactions to our views? Obviously, our views are not very popular – particularly with the media. And unsurprisingly, Singapore gets some negative attention from the international media.
44. When I look at some of the criticism, I wonder at the objectivity. Let me refer to an example to explain what I mean.
45. An international organisation called Reporters Without Borders (Reporters Sans Frontieres) comes out with an annual ranking of countries on press freedom. (I have made this point elsewhere.) This year they ranked us 136<sup>th</sup>, below Iraq (130<sup>th</sup>), Zimbabwe (123<sup>rd</sup>) – where the BBC was banned from entering until recently, and Guinea (113<sup>th</sup>). That might at first glance be surprising.
46. Guinea in particular is interesting. Last year, the International Herald Tribune ran a story headlined, “Ousting Guinea’s brutal junta.” The first paragraph read:-  
  
*“Over 150 people were gunned down by soldiers in the West Africa country of Guinea. Women were raped on the streets and opposition leaders were locked up. This was the response of a brutal military junta to a group of brave citizens who dared to hold a peaceful pro-democracy rally.”*
47. We are apparently below Guinea in press freedom, and have been since 2003.
48. What is RSF’s methodology? As I understand it, they go to each country and choose some people to ask questions on what they think about press freedom in that country. The scores thus seem to depend entirely on who is chosen to be asked, and how subjective that person is. So it is not the same group of people who assess each country by a defined set of criteria. It is also not clear what weights RSF gives to different criteria.

49. Contrast all of this with a Gallup poll. In 2005 and 2006, Gallup asked residents in 128 countries whether they had confidence in the quality and integrity of their media. 69% of Singaporeans polled answered in the affirmative. That result is consistent with other polls conducted by others internationally as well as in Singapore. Singaporeans trust our media. The figure for the US in the Gallup poll was 32%. People are more cynical about the media in the US.
50. Freedom House also comes out with press freedom rankings. They think we are below Colombia, Guinea, Haiti, Kenya (where there were riots following a disputed election), Pakistan, and so on.
51. I suspect that our rankings are at least partly due to the fact that we take an uncompromising attitude we take on libel – and the fact that we have taken on the almost every major newspaper company. Such audacity that tiny Singapore has.
52. Our approach has been to ignore criticisms that make no sense – and we continue to do better. The people of Singapore also know better. 66% voted for the Government at the last general elections on our policy platform. Mind you – Singaporeans are now well-educated, sophisticated, and know their rights. And as stated earlier, they also trust their media.
53. Could Singapore have done equally well, if our media played the role that the American media plays? Alternatively, given our current level of development, should we change? I will give a couple of reasons why I believe that we should stick to what has worked for us.
54. First, we can look at developing countries that adopted the US model. By reference to these countries we compare more favourably in terms of human development index and stability. And the media behaviour and impact it has in these countries is really not a model we want for Singapore.
55. Second, we can look at the US itself, as the source of ideals in relation to the media. For an outside observer like me (and I am an admirer of many aspects of the US system), it is not so clear any more, that every aspect of the US system will work well, particularly for us. The questions that arise for an observer are - the media here:
- (1) Does it always pursue the truth and seek to enlighten the readers?
  - (2) Do parts of the media act as campaign arms of politicians, peddle half-truths and present very biased perspectives?
  - (3) Do viewers really get to the truth or do they rely on their preferred media, which may often seek to confirm their existing prejudices?

- (4) Is it financially more lucrative for the media to serve up red meat to a secure base of viewers, rather than seek the middle ground?
- (5) To what extent does money affect the traditional theory of a marketplace of ideas? If a particular group can buy more campaign ads, will that group have a clear advantage?
- (6) How does it help democracy and informed choice, if pursuant to the principles of free speech, large groups can play a big financial role in elections – would that not advantage vested interests?
- (7) And, if you add another factor – that campaign contributions can be effectively non-transparent? The Financial Times ran an article a few days ago with a sub-heading saying:  
*“Campaigning for the mid-term elections is being influenced as never before by wealthy but shadowy groups that fund advertising on candidates they dislike.”*
- (8) Can people make informed choices when campaign ads have little relation to the facts or the serious issues? Would not truth be swift boated, as it were and distinguished records tarnished through unfair means?

56. Friedman had a commentary on US politics a few days ago and ended with this sentence:

*“A dysfunctional political system is one that knows the right answers but can’t even discuss them rationally, let alone act on them, and one that devotes far more attention to cable TV preachers than to recommendations by its best scientists and engineers.”*

57. If the marketplace of ideas is working well, then why this lament?

58. Other commentators have made similar points. I refer to these not so much to say they are right, or to intervene, interfere, or criticise the American system. The only point I make is that serious people say this, they are knowledgeable, and these do not appear to be extreme or fringe views – and, we outside of America must consider them, when considering if the system will can be transposed in total for us. I don’t seek to prescribe for the US, and I cannot do so. But if you look at a cross-section of views, from people like Carl Bernstein, George Stephanopoulos, they say:

- (1) News has been reduced to gossip;
- (2) Sensationalism has been used to turn attention from the real conditions of society;
- (3) An idiot culture has been created in the news by providing nonsense to the readers.

- (4) The American press has become adversarial to the point that it does not contribute to the understanding of national issues, while complex issues are made into personality clashes;
- (5) The press has lost its credibility because journalists have become cynical about everything, in search of the dramatic.

59. I am not saying I agree with these comments. I am just saying we have to think carefully, before we consider adopting the American system. Even from a larger perspective, moving beyond the media, there can be serious questions whether American style democracy can work for everyone outside America. From an observer's perspective, we see:

- (1) The legislative process, the earmarks and bargaining;
- (2) The role of lobbies and vested interests;
- (3) The amount of money needed for elections, and the need for congressmen to spend a large part of their time networking and raising money;
- (4) The deep political divides, and the time it takes for policy issues to be resolved;
- (5) The general aversion of candidates to deal with serious issues in their campaigns.

60. These give food for thought. The system works for America. This is a great country and will remain so. But can the rest of us adopt its system? My own view is that the system that the US has will impose costs which a large, rich country like the US can afford – the cost will be too high for some of us.

61. We believe that our system works for us, and we don't shut out the world. In terms of openness to ideas:

- (1) We have more than 5,500 foreign newspapers and publications in circulation in Singapore. There are close to 100 TV channels carried on our cable networks. Nearly 200 correspondents from 72 foreign media organisations are based in Singapore.
- (2) Household broadband penetration is more than 100%;
- (3) Our population is English-educated and Internet-savvy;
- (4) Singaporeans rank among the world's most travelled population – in 2008, we had nearly 7 million passenger trips – more than the number of Singapore residents.

## VII. Libel Laws

62. Let me now address the issue of our libel laws – which often excites much interest internationally..

63. Our libel laws are based on English common law. Our principle is very simple.
64. If you make a personal attack of fact against a person's reputation, for example by alleging that he is corrupt, or that he is a liar, or that he embezzled State funds, then you should be prepared to prove it in court. We do not believe that public discourse should degenerate to a base level, by allowing untrue personal attacks.
65. We would like to keep political debate focused on issues. You can attack government policies fiercely. That will not be defamatory. And let the people choose the candidates based on alternative policies.
66. You in America take a different view. We respect that, but deeply disagree that that approach leads to a better debate – and in saying this I am aware of the 'chilling effect' argument.
67. It is also sometimes suggested that our libel laws are used to perpetuate a one-party system in Singapore. As proof, commentators will refer to the fact that the governing party has been in power since independence in 1965 (and actually before that).
68. There are several responses. I will just give one. Remember that Singapore is a city state. There are no great geographical variations, no serious economic differences between regions, no great demographic variations. It is one relatively small city – the comparison should be with similar-sized city politics in the US.
69. If you consider cities in the US, for example San Francisco or Chicago, you also see uninterrupted hold on power by one party for decades. (Although having said that, I wouldn't like Singapore politics to be compared with Chicago politics of some decades ago – I think we are a little different.)
70. So in city politics, it is possible for a party to retain power for a long time – if it delivers results.

## **VIII. Conclusion**

71. Let me now conclude with a couple of remarks.
72. My basic point is that each of us has to choose what works for us. Over a time, it is possible that a set of core values can evolve across countries – but this has to be agreed rather than imposed.

## **IX. Perspectives on China**

73. I had told President Bollinger that I might make some comments about China. In real terms, the influence that Singapore has, or the impact that Singapore has, is commensurate with its size (maybe a little bit more). But we are not the greatest influence in the world.
74. The US has had over 200 years to refine its system. Universal franchise was only obtained in the US in the '60s. Most of the rest of us have had far less time, though as a bragging point, I will add that our people had universal franchise before the US.
75. Second, I see acres of print space in Western media devoted to China's human rights record. My own perspective is that the coverage is often biased and lacks perspective.
76. This is a country that 30 years ago was among the poorest in the world. Within 30 years, several hundred million people have been lifted out of poverty – more than the entire US population. It has made seriously impressive strides in developing the potential of its massive population, and has developed its economy in a way quite unimaginable 30 years ago, to become the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest economy – and the largest external creditor to the US.
77. All of this has been achieved with a broad measure of stability. The governance that has been delivered is quite frankly, exceptional.
78. The media as well as commentators could do more to recognise the true extent of China's astonishing achievements, and ask themselves: is it really clear that the prescriptions being offered, would help China in its continued development? Do we not think that the Chinese leaders know what is good for their country?
79. I will refer to another Friedman quote published in September:

*“Studying China’s ability to invest for the future doesn’t make me feel we have the kind of focus, legitimacy, unity and stick-to-it-iveness to do big things – democratically – that China does autocratically.*

*“We’ve done it before. But we’re not doing it now because too many of our poll-driven, toxically partisan, cable-TV-addicted, money-corrupted political class are more interested in what keeps them in power than what would again make America powerful, more interested in defeating each other than saving the country. [...]*

*“For democracy to be effective and deliver the policies and infrastructure our societies need requires the political centre to be focused, united and energised. That means electing candidates who will do what is right for the country not just for their ideological wing or whoever comes with the biggest bag of money.*

*“For democracies to address big problems – and that’s all we have these days – requires a lot of people pulling in the same direction, and that is precisely what we’re lacking.”*

80. Chinese leaders know that they need the country to pull together. It’s quite clear that you have a highly talented group of leaders in China who will not let anything stand in their way of their goal of making China a great power. China and its leadership:
- (1) Focuses on its short, medium and long term interests;
  - (2) Has in place an effective leadership succession system which ensures that the best people reach the top, to govern the country, and that they leave after a specified period;
  - (3) Has a steely determination to improve the well-being of their people.
81. China is both extremely proud of its past and confident about its future. The Chinese people are among the most productive and hardworking, with a natural aptitude for science and math.
82. China’s leaders have also stated that Western-style liberal democracy or media would hinder the path of growth China is on. They look at what happened in Russia, when *glasnost* preceded *perestroika*.
83. The rest of the world would do well to understand the issues China faces, the results it has achieved and its perspectives, before offering criticisms and prescriptions.
84. And it would be quite unfair to give prominence to one facet, the human rights record, as defined by the liberal democracies, without considering the whole picture – the real human rights record – which is the continued uplifting of millions of people.
85. Thank you.

\* \* \* \*