

INSIGHT

Free to serve

Cheong Yip Seng tells how Lee Kuan Yew, who saw the press as subordinate to the nation's needs, made sure that only he and his government could set the agenda for Singapore

One November evening in 1999, Lee Kuan Yew telephoned: He was troubled by a new information phenomenon, which was threatening to overwhelm the traditional media industry. In America, the markets were rapidly coming to the conclusion that there was no future in print newspapers, whose eyeballs were migrating to cyberspace.

How would this information revolution impact the Singapore media? He was anxious to find a response that would enable the mainstream media to keep its eyeballs. He wanted us at Singapore Press Holdings to think about the way forward.

For him, the media was one of three institutions in Singapore he told an aide he needed to control in order to govern effectively. The other two were the Treasury and the armed forces.

His relations with the media had been rocky at the start of his political career. While he was in the opposition, not everyone in the press had sympathy for his political goals. The Malaysian Malay media, which could then circulate in Singapore, was hostile.

My first editor-in-chief, Leslie Hoffman, had a furious row with him over press freedom that blazed across the front pages of *The Straits Times*, and went all the way to the International Press Institute (IPI) annual assembly in 1959 in Berlin.

Once in office, Lee set out to change the rules of the game: he and his government, not the press, would set the agenda for the country. They wanted command of the national narrative.

What did he want of the press in Singapore? He put it best in 1971 when he went to another IPI conference following another bitter confrontation with the Singapore media: "The mass media can help to present Singapore's problems simply and clearly, and then explain how if they support certain programmes and policies, these problems can be solved."

"More important, we want the mass media to reinforce, not undermine, the cultural values and social attitudes being inculcated in our schools and universities... The freedom of the press must be subordinated to the integrity of Singapore and the primacy of purpose of an elected government."

He wanted the press to help him if it thought his policies deserved support. The operative word was "if". He did not want blind support. A sycophantic press would be worthless to him, he would tell us on more than one occasion. It would have no credibility. In truth, most of his policies made sense.



The list is long. Robust multinational corporation-led growth wiped out double-digit unemployment, widespread in the early years following independence. Affordable public housing was easily available, made possible by large-scale land acquisition at below-market rates and use of the Central Provident Fund. An overhaul of the education system reduced once unacceptably high drop-out rates in schools so everyone could realise his full potential. Tough laws were introduced to ensure safety in the streets. Good house-keeping by never living beyond our means meant a debt-free state, crucial for a sound economy.

One reality he had to accept was this: as Singapore developed, he had to abandon his knuckleduster ways

These and many more. That might well be, but the pitfalls for us were many even though he and our editors shared broadly similar goals: we both wanted what was best for a young nation and we believed in a credible press at the same time.

For example, land acquisition unsettled many thousands of people who had to be forcibly moved. How do we report this massive exercise without reflecting the angst as well? Or, in the case of education, we could not avoid reporting the very adverse reactions to streaming and bilin-

gualism. But in the process, we opened ourselves up to strong suspicions that we were undermining those initiatives.

Lee did not believe a Western-style media was in Singapore's best interest. He wanted a media like the BBC, whose objectivity he valued. He was impressed with the Japanese press. He believed its agenda was driven by what would best serve Japanese interests.

We went to Japan to find out more. But they are a different society in so many different ways. They operated press clubs in every ministry and journalists at the clubs work at the ministry every day in a largely symbiotic relationship. It would not be workable here.

How did he translate into practice his vision of the kind of journalism he wanted? I can only answer for the time I was at *The Straits Times*, from 1963 to 2006. Put simply, in the early years, he used the hard line, with what he called knuckledusters, to press his point of view, whenever he was dissatisfied with the way we covered the challenges Singapore faced.

He believed that Singaporeans had deeply embedded Asian values they should not dilute without serious consequences. Hence, he went all out to protect the strength of the family unit. So, coverage of lifestyles that could weaken the family was a constant bone of contention. It proved tricky for the newsroom, so exposed were we to Western cultural influences and fads.

He always reminded us how the world worked. He would send us articles he had read or shared with editors his experiences over the occasional lunch or dinner. They were mostly about developments elsewhere that had an impact on Singapore. He was always looking over the hori-

zon, studying what trends would affect us and what new strategies were needed to either take advantage of them or minimise their adverse effects.

His goal was to educate his people and one way was through the mass media. The purpose was simple: unless Singaporeans understood the realities of having to live off a small, resource-poor tropical island in an ever-changing world, they would not understand, and hopefully support, his tough policies.

Over time, one reality he had to accept was this: as Singapore developed, he had to abandon his knuckleduster ways; they were ill-suited to a more educated electorate wanting more political space.

Closing down newspapers and detaining journalists, actions that traumatised us in our newsrooms in the early 1970s, were no longer options.

In his closing years as prime minister, he took a more sophisticated and persuasive approach, stepping up his contact with the media to explain the issues in person, to convince and to cajole.

On our part, we continued to press the need for more space and diversity of opinions in our pages, or lose credibility. We had to respond to the changing needs of the public who wanted out-of-bounds, or OB, markers for national discourse moved.

It was always a fine balancing act, how to professionally serve our readers without appearing to undermine policy. Regular run-ins with the government were thus par for the course.

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A rough ride

Karin Finkelston says infrastructure planners too often do not take women's needs into account, denying them full access to jobs and resources

Roads mean different things to a man and a woman. Though infrastructure is important to all, most of what we have today, particularly our streets and transit systems, is built to answer a man's needs, rather than a woman's. This often-overlooked fact is critical, given that women make up 40 per cent of the global labour force.

The Asia-Pacific region needs an estimated US\$1 trillion each year to meet its infrastructural needs. Unsafe and inadequate infrastructure stops women from contributing fully to society. Safer and less crowded roads that connect women with marketplaces is one way of making improvements.

A study has found that if women in East Asian economies were given the same access to jobs and productive resources as men, output per worker could rise by between 7 and 18 per cent. Given this, improving the design and delivery of urban and rural infrastructure is a pressing development imperative.

Transport, energy, sanitation and other infrastructure can and should be designed with women in mind. After all, men and women use public transport differently. Studies show that women rank personal security and transport costs higher than men, who rate speed as the No 1 issue. Women make important life choices – Can I work outside the home? Where? Can I get my children to school? – based on security and travel costs. Such decisions can have important economic implications: a woman may pick a lower-paid job over a higher-paid one because she feels safer getting to work with the former.

Gender-smart infrastructure begins with consultation, where women may share their concerns. For the new metro system in Ho Chi Minh City, for example, women's transport needs, patterns and constraints were mapped first. As a result, plans for the metro included gender-sensitive designs such as child seating, storage for prams and appropriate lighting. Making it easier for women to travel around the city will encourage them to make more journeys, thereby helping to boost the economy.

In Asia-Pacific's rural regions, road safety can be a huge issue for women travelling long distances. In one public consultation about a local highway in Papua New Guinea, women were asked about the journeys they made to sell their produce at market.

These trips were often uncomfortable and unprofitable. The women endured hours on mountainous roads, crowded in beside the men in public vehicles. Yet, often, their discomfort was not even rewarded at the end of the day: all women consulted said they had been robbed of their profits, on buses or at the roadside.

Thus, improving the quality of roads and street lighting and providing more buses to ease the crowding would help these women. These are simple solutions that empower women to sell more and return with the profits in their own – not someone else's – pockets.

Improving infrastructure has a disproportionately positive impact on women's life and work. It enhances their safety, renders them more mobile, makes them more productive and hence improves a country's overall development.

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Third runway must not be built based on vague promises on airspace solutions

The Executive Council's hasty decision last week to approve the third runway has triggered a public outcry. Secretary for Housing and Transport Anthony Cheung Bing-leung has scrambled to justify this most expensive infrastructure project in the history of Hong Kong. However, his limited explanations have led to even more doubts.

The most pertinent questions revolve around the city's airspace entitlements. Flights leaving and approaching Chek Lap Kok are barred from crossing into the airspace immediately north of the border. This has severely restricted the number of planes the airport can handle.

Cheung said Macau and the mainland had signed an agreement with Hong Kong to resolve the issues of congested airspace in the region up to 2020. But he refused to disclose details of the agreement, citing national security.

This is ridiculous. Any consensus among the parties needs to be made known to the airlines and international aviation bodies before they can be put into practice. If Hong Kong was promised any concessions, the industry would need to be informed well beforehand, to prepare for the changes.

None of the third parties have been notified. That can only mean the 2007 plan has nothing concrete for Hong Kong. Cheung's secretive approach has only added to speculation that the agreement contains, at best, vague principles.

Besides, whatever was written into the agreement is only meant to be valid until

Albert Cheng says there is no guarantee the mainland will open up its airspace to ensure the success of Hong Kong's airport expansion



2020, well before the third runway becomes operational in the mid-2020s.

There is nothing in black and white that guarantees Hong Kong would be given the necessary air paths to ensure the success of the third runway.

Airport Authority chief executive Fred Lam Tim-fuk said people should trust the Hong Kong and central governments to solve the problem. He is obviously unaware of the latest

There is nothing in black and white that guarantees HK would be given the air paths

findings of the Hong Kong University's public opinion programme released this week. Only 37 per cent of the people asked said they trusted the SAR government, while only 33 per cent said they trusted Beijing. Trust is in short supply when it comes to how Hong Kong people see their political masters.

Lam is entrusted with overseeing the statutory body responsible for the operation and development of the airport.

Taxpayers would have wanted a more prudent chief executive to first resolve the airspace issue before rushing into a bet of HK\$142 billion.

Chief Executive Leung Chun-ying made an even more irrational plea: the public should first support the project, and the technical problems could be solved later, he said. His administration does not have a track record of getting the job done to make his call credible.

Leung's remarks are tantamount to admitting that there is no agreement on the third runway. If mainland bureaucrats are so eager to enhance the facility, they would have done so by now.

Who has been standing in the way? It may have been the Shenzhen airport operator, the Guangdong provincial authority, the Civil Aviation Administration of China, the People's Liberation Army, or other interests. Their agendas are very different from ours. Even if we agreed to take a blind leap of faith with Leung, Hong Kong would still be in a weak negotiating position.

Once construction has started on the runway, the Airport Authority will have passed the point of no return. The Chinese interests are well aware of this.

If airspace problems remain unresolved, the project would become a white elephant and the Airport Authority would face deepening financial liability. Our

mainland competitors would be in a good position to demand that Hong Kong give up some of its valuable civil aviation rights in return for access to airspace.

None of our neighbouring Chinese cities can claim to be international aviation hubs. It would be a different story if they could lay claim to part of our rights for bilateral negotiations with other countries. That would spell the end of Hong Kong as a leader in aviation.

It is enshrined in the Basic Law that the Hong Kong government should "take measures for the maintenance of the status of Hong Kong as a centre of international and regional aviation". Yet, in reality, neither the government nor the Airport Authority has any realistic plan to keep Hong Kong ahead of its neighbours.

Instead of relying on an uncertain third runway a decade later, we should take immediate steps. Any stipulations in the 2007 agreement that benefit Hong Kong should be translated into action without delay.

Failing that, we should at least begin to look at other options, such as levelling the hilltop close to Chek Lap Kok, to enable more frequent take-offs. Only such measures can make us less reliant on the mainland and thus in a better position to negotiate.

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Detention of women activists makes mockery of 'rule of law'

Jerome A. Cohen says rights campaigners deserve Beijing's support

Although a veteran observer of Chinese efforts to secure a just and stable legal system, I was surprised when Chinese police formally detained five women opponents of sexual harassment ahead of International Women's Day.

They are being investigated for alleged "provocation and causing a disturbance", in violation of one of the vaguest and most abused provisions of the Chinese criminal code.

It is difficult to determine how these women could have caused a disturbance.

They were detained before they actually distributed any literature, and the literature that they planned to distribute did not challenge the authorities or urge disobedience to the Communist Party. They were merely calling for citizens to comply with Chinese law by not groping their fellow passengers in crowded subways and buses.

Nothing in their message resembled the sort of inflammatory statements that, according to Supreme People's Court interpretations, are the intended targets of the criminal law's notorious Section 293(4).

Chinese law forbids sexual harassment, and Beijing officials have acknowledged that sexual harassment of women on public transport is a problem.

Moreover, Chinese courts have begun to enforce gender protections. A woman recently won a 30,000 yuan (HK\$38,000) landmark settlement of a sexual discrimination lawsuit. Detaining women for urging citizens to obey the law seems really odd. Will police now

detain people for urging citizens to drive safely, help the elderly or pick up litter?

Even worse, police seem to be subjecting at least two of the five detainees to possibly lethal abuse.

They have reportedly not permitted Wu Rongrong to receive hepatitis medication despite her serious liver ailment. Wang Man is said to have suffered a mild heart attack under severe interrogation.

All too often, such mistreatment has proved fatal or gravely harmful to Chinese prisoners.

These events are especially puzzling because the fourth plenum of the 18th party congress last autumn trumpeted a new party commitment to the "rule of law".

Although ambiguous, "rule of law" at a minimum suggests that the government should not persecute those who seek to reasonably support its laws and policies.

Of course, every country's legal system needs to be rooted in local conditions. "Rule of law" in China need not mean precisely what it means in the United States or elsewhere: part of what it means to be a sovereign nation is for that nation to define its own laws, guided by its own values.

Inevitably, "rule of law" in China is currently guided by the pre-eminent importance of ensuring stability and private compliance with public rules. Yet the Chinese government would be dropping a stone on its own foot by prosecuting Wu, Wang and their fellow detainees.

The government, after all, has publicly acknowledged that it needs private assistance to stop official lawlessness.

With this idea in mind, Wang Qishan (王岐山), head of the Central Commission for Discipline Inspection, has created a website for private citizens to report official corruption.

Fewer Chinese citizens, however, will dare assist the government in enforcing its laws when the price for reporting corruption could be official retaliation for "causing a disturbance".

Punishing women for condemning illegal sexual harassment encourages citizens with knowledge of lawless behaviour to keep silent.

This is not a recipe for stability but for even further lawlessness.

Fortunately, prosecutors have not yet approved the formal arrest of the five women activists.

It is not too late for the Chinese government to halt a prosecution that can only undermine its efforts to establish a stable, law-abiding China. Otherwise, later this year, when the party celebrates the 20th anniversary of the famous UN Women's Conference in Beijing, it will be widely and justifiably ridiculed.

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