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Government communication in Singapore

Terence Lee

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

MAUZY & MILNE, 2002, p. 128

Introduction: Singapore media and its political context

On 1 November 2005, Singapore's Senior Minister (SM) and former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong defended criticisms over press freedom in Singapore in a speech to commemorate the fifth anniversary of the free metropolitan tabloid *Today*. In response to a report by Paris-based media watchdog Reporters without Borders (2005), which ranked Singapore 140 out of 167 countries in the 2005 Press Freedom Index, Goh's riposte was that the hypothesized correlation between a free press and democratic freedoms

and, by extension, the guarantee of good governance or economic prosperity, did not hold or cannot be proven. As he noted in his speech,

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

According to Goh, although the four original Association of South East Asian (ASEAN) countries – Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia and the Philippines – were all ranked ahead of Singapore in terms of press freedom, Singapore's economic and societal success proved that the government's media policy of control had worked well. While rejecting the 2005 Press Freedom Index – and indeed, all subsequent media indices – Goh cited Singapore's high rankings in economic freedom (by the Washington DC-based Heritage Foundation) and very low corruption measurement (by Berlin-based Transparency International) to make his point that press freedom did not necessarily translate to 'a clean and efficient government or economic freedom and prosperity' (Peh, 2005). Furthermore, he argued that 'press freedom must be practised with a larger sense of responsibility and the ability to understand what is in or not in [Singapore's] national interests' (Goh, cited in Peh, 2005). Although Singapore's ranking in the Press Freedom Index has since improved slightly to 136 in 2010, the Singapore government's rejection of its understanding of the subject of 'freedom' has had the effect of negating the influence of the Press Freedom Index and indeed, any other socio-cultural global indices.

As a former British Crown colony, the Parliamentary Republic of Singapore inherited much of the Westminster system of government, with citizens tasked with electing their members of parliament and a president with custodial powers over the finances of the state every five and six years respectively. Historically, general elections in Singapore have been non-events, with the incumbent People's Action Party (PAP) government typically returned to power before the polls are even conducted because the overwhelming majority of seats are not contested. As a result, unlike Great Britain, the small city-state of Singapore, inhabited by a mere 5 million strong population (as at 2010), has been ruled as a single-party nation since independence in 1965 by the PAP. Singapore has attracted much global attention since then because it is a shining economic beacon in the Asia-Pacific region and globally, with an unemployment rate of 2.1 per cent (as at June 2011), and an approximate

US\$45,000 per capita gross domestic product (GDP) (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2011).

Even John Kampfner, journalist, author and chief executive of 'Index on Censorship', one of the world's leading organizations that probes abuses of freedom of expression, acknowledges the tremendous success story of Singapore by calling it a 'comfortable model', where citizens seem contented to trade media cum communicative freedom with economic freedom (Kampfner, 2009, p. 17). While questioning Singapore's social and cultural vulnerabilities, especially in the increased clamour for greater cultural and political space from younger and more globally networked Singaporeans, Kampfner is troubled by the extent to which the Singapore model of media and cultural management has become accepted not just by Singaporeans who have grown accustomed to authoritarian rule, but also by others elsewhere. As he rhetoricizes:

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

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

An authoritarian premise for communication

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

harmony in Singapore's fragile multicultural society, the principle of a tame and compliant media has largely been maintained since Singapore attained independence from British rule in 1965 (Lee & Wilnat, 2009, p. 93).

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

Indeed, as Mauzy and Milne (2002) have alluded to (in the opening quote to this chapter), controls to limit political participation, even using a government-controlled media to limit civil and political rights, make Singapore a fascinating case study of government communication. On the one hand, government communication in Singapore could easily be branded as 'authoritarian', as many observers have done, because of the broad absence of alternative viewpoints available in public discourse. On the other hand, the broader Singapore media landscape appears as open as any other Western democratic society, with a plethora of global media choices ranging from broadcast channels to printed material (newspapers and magazines) to mostly open ultra high-speed broadband internet access. The advent of web 2.0 from the mid-2000s, captured most prominently by social media with the rise of the blogosphere and a series of online social networking sites, has further broadened the availability of alternatives and made it more difficult to describe Singapore's degree of media and political openness. While there are vagaries or subtleties to the appearance of openness (such as the structures of ownership of domestic media outlets and tacit controls of the internet space), the real illiberal twist lies in the fact that the Singapore government insists that only elected members of parliament, particularly those who form the government of the day, can be considered the embodiment of democratic expression. With the press neither granted the space nor the freedom to perform watchdog or independent commentary roles that relate to domestic politics, they are limited to reporting daily events and reproducing government messages. This is not just a firm rejection of the principle of the media as the fourth estate, but an endorsement of a government having the first and final word on all matters of national interest. Such is the status of politics – and indeed of political and government communication – in Singapore.

(Re)defining government communication

While the term 'political communication' broadly refers to 'purposeful communication about politics' (McNair, 1995, p. 4), the term 'government communication' is more precise as it deals with the way(s) in which the executive arms of governments communicate with its people (Canel & Sanders, 2012). In the case of Singapore, government communication deals primarily with how the PAP government's core team – comprising the incumbent prime minister and his Cabinet – communicates its central messages to its people. Although the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) is the official mouthpiece of the government by virtue of its name and mission to inform and communicate to all Singaporeans, central government communication often emanates directly from the prime minister's office, often via an official press release or sometimes via the prime minister's personal press secretary. Many other key messages are delegated to individual government ministries, departments and statutory bodies, to be announced to the media by full ministers or junior ministers, known as ministers of State in Singapore.

In this regard, government communication in Singapore is direct and straightforward, sticking largely to the standard transmission model of communication where messages are sent from sender to receiver via a medium (or the media). Noises or interruptions to message transfers are typically either absent or are obscured from the mainstream audience, which comprises the majority in Singapore. Where it gets hazy and problematic, however, is at the conceptual or ideological level. This is because the media system in Singapore is itself a function of political communication and cultural control with most, if not all, domestic media outlets controlled directly (or indirectly) by the political masters so that government communication is enhanced and enabled by mostly compliant or non-obstructive reporting of government messages (Lee, 2010). As this chapter will go on to elucidate, compliant and one-sided reporting was the order of the day during Singapore's 2006 and 2011 general elections, despite the growing influence and impact of online and social media. Government communication in Singapore is maintained and enhanced by the fact that the flagship daily newspaper in Singapore, the SPH-owned *Straits Times* (ST) English language daily, has dominated public discourse and carried the beacon of government messages in a top-down and tightly controlled manner since the 1960s. Messages from the PMO and the various ministries are largely delivered unfiltered or unadulterated as ST reporters, journalists and editors dutifully paraphrase and spin government press releases and ministerial comments without the presence of opposing voices. This same practice is emulated by the mainstream broadcast media led by Singapore's MediaCorp television and radio broadcaster. The fact that

Singapore's mainstream media outlets, led by the ST and the MediaCorp group, constantly and consistently echo the government's messages is no longer considered remarkable. Most Singaporeans have simply come to accept this as a fact of life (Lee, 2011, p. 134).

This chapter examines some of the contemporary mechanics of government communication in Singapore under the Lee Hsien Loong administration (from 2005 to the present). It looks not only at the contemporary tools utilised by the Singapore government to mediate its messages to the people via the use of feedback mechanisms such as its own in-house Feedback Unit,¹ it also considers recent challenges to its approaches brought about by the new media (such as the most popular social networking site Facebook as well as other citizen journalism blogs). While most previous studies on politics and the media in Singapore have centred on the tightness of the Singapore government's control over the flow of communication and its increasingly sophisticated and subtle way of controlling not just the media, but also broader public discourse, there is a need to reassess where governing communication in Singapore is headed following political changes, especially after the general election of May 2011.

Great Singapore spin or substance?

As early as 2001, Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (elected prime minister in 2011) embarked on what could be seen as a 'charm offensive' strategy by fleshing out some of his ideas – and ideals – in public speeches. In doing so, he demonstrated an awareness that a new approach towards governmental communication was needed in Singapore. In a speech that argued for the importance of a global as well as a regional perspective on policy making, Lee articulated his admiration for the 'Great Communicator', late former US President Ronald Reagan who was well known for using one-liners to persuade the public instead of spelling out policy details (Gibbs, 2004, p. 39). Lee also echoed the former British PM Tony Blair's strategy of having 'a series of eye-catching initiatives' to keep him positively placed in the public eye (Blair cited in Stephens, 2004, p. 135). And, again in January 2004, several months before he took up the office of prime minister, Lee Hsien Loong gave a preview of his premiership by declaring that Singapore will 'open up further' by promoting 'further civic participation' (Lee, 2004a). This 'promise' of a more open Singapore was made at the Thirty-Fifth Anniversary Dinner of the Harvard Club in Singapore in January 2004 and arguably has a strong bearing on the subsequent shape and form of government communication in Singapore. At the time, Lee's speech seemed long on rhetoric but short on content, highlighting the paradox between building a dynamic society and

the state's desire to micromanage citizen participation on a broad range of issues. However, with the benefit of hindsight, especially following the 2011 general election, Lee's promise could be said to have gradually materialized over the course of seven years up to 2011 during his prime ministership. This process of change, however, was by no means a smooth path, with twists and turns along the way and with technological shifts playing a major role in the rethinking of how communication can and should be governed in Singapore.

The early period of Lee's premiership from August 2004 was typified by the employment of spin, or the use creative or propagandistic styles of communication, in Singapore's government–people relations. This emphasis on style over substance can be observed by the increased use of rhetoric during the early years of his premiership. The Harvard Club speech itself, littered with phrases such as 'open up further' and 'further civic participation', was itself a case in point. As I have elucidated in an earlier analysis of the space and discourse of civil society in Singapore, Lee employed 'gestural politics' in his early premiership years to paint an enlightened and democratic picture of Singapore to appeal to its two key constituents, the Singaporean voter and global foreign investors (Lee, T., 2005). Gestural politics is characterized by the use of populist terms like 'openness' and 'inclusiveness' to display the 'liberal' gestures of an otherwise illiberal regime (Lee, T., 2005, p. 135). Not unlike the 'catchy' slogans of Blairite's 'New Labour', Lee's reign and his approach to government communication up until the 2006 general election were characterized by gestural politics and 'spin'. His further talk of engendering an 'open and inclusive Singapore' during his 'swearing in' as prime minister on 12 August 2004 (Lee, 2004b), the entitling of his 2005 Budget speech as 'Singapore, a land of opportunity' (2005 Budget speech) and his 2005 National Rally speech, 'A Vibrant Global City Called Home', became the early hallmarks of his premiership (see Lee, H. L., 2004b, 2005a and 2005b). By marrying his oratorical skills with spin via the repetition of key political buzz-words, PM Lee was able to finesse political rhetoric into everyday public discourse (Lee, T., 2005, p. 150). The *Straits Times*' columnist, Ignatius Low, observed this same phenomenon when he pondered:

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

By normalizing such words in everyday discourse, PM Lee's premiership between 2004 to 2006 provided Singaporeans with the sense and perception that there was indeed a new message, with a new style of leadership and

communication to come. Whether or not there was something new was often moot.

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

On 18 April 2005, despite the fact that the casino debate had become deeply polarizing with an almost even split between those for and against, PM Lee announced his government's approval for building not one casino, but two mega-size 'Integrated Resorts' in Singapore, lifting the ban on casinos in an unexpectedly emphatic manner (Lee, 2008, p. 179). The first and larger resort would be built in Marina Bay, and the second on the southern resort island of Sentosa. Measures introduced include a high entrance fee of S\$100 per day or \$2,000 per year for Singaporeans and a ban on gambling on credit (Lee, 2008, p. 179). The announcement of a decision – that many believed to have been determined prior to the consultation process – was well calibrated and designed to extract maximum media coverage and political mileage (see da Cunha 2010). It would demonstrate the PM's decisiveness and resoluteness in decision making while generating a feel-good outcome for Singapore's economy and boost the city-state's global image (Lee, 2008, p. 180). But more significantly, it was an excellent demonstration of the effects – and indeed, the defects – of government communication in Singapore in that the final decision would be one without any real consensus (and therefore seen as

'authoritarian'), but one that has been derived from some degree of open debate and consultation (and therefore presented as 'democratic'). The positive 'spin' to the 'Great Casino Debate' was PM Lee's conclusion that Singaporeans were able to have a rational and constructive public debate on controversial and serious issues (Lee, H. L., 2005b). The 'Great Casino Debate' – described as 'the mother of all consultations' by the Feedback Unit (2005, p. 65) – thus became the new showpiece for government communication as it began to lay claims about how it communicated, initiated and facilitated an open forum on a major national issue. The Feedback Unit's 2005 Year Book, titled *Shaping Our Home: Turning Ideas into Reality* commended Singaporeans for participating in the debate in a rational and constructive fashion, declaring 'the fact that so many Singaporeans had responded so actively to the idea of a casino was perhaps more significant than the final result' (Feedback Unit, 2005, p. 65). While this may be true, nowhere was it highlighted that the final decision was ultimately made on 'gut feeling' rather than on rationality. As the prime minister himself admitted: 'This is a judgement, not a mathematical calculation. We see the trends and feel the need to move' (Lee, H. L., 2005b cited in Lee, 2008, p. 181).

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

The government sought to move on from the year-long casino debate by focusing only on the economic positives that would supposedly emerge from it and by indulging in 'self-triumphalism'. As the Feedback Unit's report concluded, 'the casino debate had demonstrated how the nation-building process and Asian values had combined to give rise to Singaporeans' desire to protect their society' (2005, p. 66). This bewildering statement alone points to the surfacing and widening gap between spin and substance or rhetoric and reality in government communication in Singapore. According to well-known

Singaporean social activist Alex Au, 'the "open and inclusive" promise, which is closely related to the "city-with-buzz" slogan that Singapore has adopted, is beginning to reach a point when it tips into ridicule' (Au cited in Chua, 2005). Instead of moving Singapore forward, the Great Casino Debate of 2004 to 2005 sparked the rise of a new cynicism which I would argue is a 'natural' outcome of going through the spin process. Similarly, Singaporean columnist, Warren Fernandez, observed an increase in public cynicism over what he refers to as growing 'feedback fatigue', exacerbated by the feeling that the government is merely paying 'lip service' to public comments and views (Fernandez, 2004). Yet, it was not until the general election of May 2011 that Singaporeans found their voices to generate sufficient noise to 'shout down the PAP government' (George, 2011, p. 145), and thus began the process of dismantling and recalibrating the hubristic and top-down approach to government communication in Singapore.

Recalibrating government communication: General election 2011 and beyond

On 7 May 2011, politics in Singapore surprisingly came of age when a record number of 6 opposition members – out of a total of 97 seats – were elected into parliament at Singapore's twelfth general election since it attained independence in 1965. A 60.1 per cent of voters remained loyal to the PAP government and were happy to see the ruling party maintain its unbroken dominance. However, 39.9 per cent of voters, a record showing for the Opposition, desired alternative voices in parliament (Tan & Lee, 2011). These percentages are not reflected in the eventual parliamentary make-up since the simple plurality or 'first-past-the-post' electoral system – comprising an eclectic mix of multimember candidates known as Group Representation Constituencies (or GRCs) and the basic Single Member Constituencies (SMCs) – allowed the incumbent PAP to capture an overwhelming 81 out of 87 seats. A further three opposition candidates (comprising the best 'losers') enter parliament via Singapore's unique Non-Constituency MP (NCMP) scheme (Lam, 2011, p. 174; Tan, 2011). While the records registered by the Opposition at the election would be deemed irrelevant and unremarkable in any liberal democracy, what was significant at this event was that the Singaporean electorate – known variously until then as an apathetic, frightened and socio-politically disengaged group – 'spoke up' and made their voices heard in virtually all mediated channels possible (see Lee, 2010).

The 2011 election saw record circulation of mainstream newspapers, with the *Straits Times* registering an increase in daily sales of 5.1 per cent

or 17,500 copies over the campaign period (Lee, 2011, p. 141). The websites of the SPH group performed remarkably well with a total of 116 million page views and about 7.9 million video views on its key sites: *straitstimes.com*, *Stomp*, *AsiaOne*, *The Straits Times* RazorTV, *Zaobao.com* and *omy.sg* (Lee, 2011, p. 141). The internet went up another notch at the election with video uploads, more 'tweets' (via Twitter), more Facebook profiles and 'likes', more citizen journalism reports, blog entries, posts and comments and, by the same token, more online vitriol on new candidates (George, 2011). Not only were Singaporeans using, consuming and 'prodUsing' both the traditional and online media in greater depth and degree (George, 2011); they were also attending on-site election rallies in droves (Chong, 2011, pp. 116–17), and publicly articulating their thoughts on a range of personal and national issues.

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

In 2011, however, government communication in Singapore came under unprecedented pressure with the flow of communication disrupted as soon as the election campaign started. Although the mainstream media led by the *Straits Times* continued to echo partisan biases and prescribed agendas in favour of the ruling PAP right up to the Nomination Day (Lee, 2011, p. 142), many Singaporeans diligently sought their versions of 'truth' via the internet and by

communicating about politics at the community/grassroots level. The internet was thus a major factor, not so much in actually transmitting new information, but rather in facilitating the search for corroborating facts and information, and also signifying that there can be an alternative (or alternatives).² This marked a certain shift in political consciousness among the Singapore populace. The general election of 2011 was a 'watershed', paving the way for Singapore to become a 'normal' democracy in which the ruling PAP is forced to heed the people's choices for genuine political consultation and participation, and with genuine alternative voices in parliament (Lam, 2011, p. 175).

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

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

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

I would add that the social, cultural and political shifts that the 2011 election wrought have kick-started a recalibration of government communication in Singapore. In the preceding weeks of the polls, newly minted ministers were reported to be actively, even desperately, seeking feedback on issues ranging from construction of new housing apartments (housing), stresses and pressures of school-going children (education) to a prospective revision of ministerial salaries, among others. The new transport minister Lui Tuck Yew, for instance, was featured on mainstream, online and mobile media taking public buses and trains to better understand commuters' woes.³ While the PAP government has clearly set in motion new strategies to recalibrate its approach to government communication into one that is able to connect and relay key messages to Singaporeans while demonstrating its ability to take on board criticisms and feedback, it needs to ensure that it does not buy (back) into privileging spin over substance. The overexposure of transport minister Lui and extensive blogging by PAP leaders could easily tip the balance and negate attempts by the government to claw back electoral support via a more organized mode of government communication. The government would do well to improve, recalibrate and manage its communication more consistently and sagaciously. This would mean consulting with an open mind as well as responding sincerely to public feedback.

Conclusion

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

This chapter effectively extends analyses of the state of Singapore media, communication and politics into the realm of government communication, an area so extensive and of such importance yet not many have sought to examine it. This is ironic in itself, but even more so in the case of Singapore where just about every facet of life revolves around the government to the extent that it has been described as a 'government-made' country (see Low, 2001). More so than many other contexts, the Singaporean public will never

lose its reliance on government communication and information because of this dependency (Graber, 2003, p. 5). While it is impossible to do justice to an entire nation's approach towards government communication, this chapter has sought to detail the shifts in the broader discourse in Singapore in recent times, particularly under the premiership of Lee Hsien Loong. As I have argued here, the problem in Singapore stems from a government that has gradually lost touch with the needs and aspirations of the people. This, I would venture to add, is caused to a large extent by the government's failure to communicate with the people.

The recalibration of Singapore's government communication approach(es) that relies less on spin, tokenism and a docile domestic media has started and is likely to gain momentum in the years ahead (post-2011). The signs of a communication style that speaks to the individual citizen as a thinking being and one with the rights of a citizen, instead of as a pure political subject, are already starting to show. During the week of 17 October 2011, government MPs took turns to address the subject of government–people relations in Singapore during a parliamentary sitting, with the general consensus a concession that the government had failed to communicate. One MP suggested that 'the Government has over the last few decades managed to leach all emotions out of public communications' (Indranee Rajah, cited in Ong, 2011). Indeed, the Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, Yaacob Ibrahim, declared at the conclusion of the week-long debate in no uncertain terms: 'The Government will make a concerted effort to communicate better and reach out to a more diverse populace; it must evolve its communication approach and style' (cited in Ong, 2011). While acknowledging the need for the government to engage with social media platforms and listen to ground sentiments, the minister also emphasized that the key was not about increasing media access, but to enhance the quality of engagement. This message was echoed by the PAP chairman and Housing Minister Khaw Boon Wan at the party's annual convention on 27 November 2011 when he highlighted the need for the government to 'communicate and connect' with the people as one of the urgent issues to address (Khaw, 2011). The prime minister himself weighed in with a promise of a 'new PAP for a new era', one that would improve its 'outreach strategy' and 'consult Singaporeans more actively' (cited in Li, 2011).

In effect, the prime minister, various ministers and backbencher MPs have only recently enunciated what many concerned Singaporeans and Singapore-watchers have criticized and angst over for many years. It has become accepted wisdom that Singaporean authorities will have to change its government communication approach and style into a genuine two-way praxis, simply because an increasingly sophisticated citizenry and the coming-of-age of a new generation will demand it. The government can no

longer seek shelter from the relative safety of compliant citizens who are informed solely by a state-controlled media.

Notes

- 1 In October 2006, the Singapore Government's Feedback Unit was rebranded 'REACH', which stands for 'reaching everyone for active citizenry@ home'. This coincided with the restructuring of the Feedback Unit to move beyond gathering public feedback. REACH is now the lead agency for engaging and connecting with citizens. REACH was also appointed as the Singapore government's e-engagement platform in January 2009. Available at www.reach.gov.sg/ or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/REACHSingapore.
- 2 The potential of the internet to offer alternative views in a Singapore election was first unveiled by a long-time gay activist and social commentator on his citizen journalism blog, www.yawningbread.org. His news-breaking pictures of the massive hordes of Singaporeans participating in opposition election rallies during the 2006 general election became Singapore's equivalent of 'Wikileaks', and caught the blatantly pro-government mainstream media off-guard. The mainstream dailies were subsequently forced to publish more accurate reports on opposition activities. For more details of this episode, see Lee and Kan (2009).
- 3 See, for instance, a Yahoo report/blog post (dated 30 May 2011) on 'Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew seen taking public transport'. (<http://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/transport-minister-lui-tuck-yew-seen-taking-public-074642807.html>). Since then, there have been several other reports on the minister's journeys on public transport at various times of the day.

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