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AT THE 40TH WORLD CONGRESS OF NEWSPAPER PUBLISHERS
ON 26 MAY 87, HELSINKI

WHEN THE PRESS MISINFORMS

INTRODUCTION

The press plays a major role in the life of every nation, whether developed or developing. But the roles differ in crucial ways, because the societies too differ. Misunderstanding or neglect of these differences is a main cause of conflict between the Western media and governments of developing countries.

THE PRESS IN THE WEST

In the developed world, the norms and tone are led by the practices and standards of the US. There the press has a dominant role as the fourth estate in the body politic. It has an untrammelled right to criticise, even unjustly, and publish whatever newspaper publishers and TV editors think fit. The press not only markets ideas, but also exerts influence. It wields raw power.

Indeed the press would not deny this. Its self-image is not just to be a humble bearer of tidings good and bad, but to be the fearless guardian of the public weal. It feels a self-conscious sense of responsibility not only for

reporting events accurately, but even for influencing events favourably. That is why after the US arms sales to Iran were uncovered, columnists published sanctimonious mea culpa articles, that the media was to be blamed for the Irancontra affair. If the press had been diligent, they aver, they would have uncovered the scandal earlier.

This role of the press has evolved gradually in the two hundred years since the Bill of Rights was drafted. In recent times, after Watergate, Woodward and Bernstein became the idols of every cub reporter, and the press grew even more loath to accept any form of restraint.

Press privileges have also been enlarged by US Supreme Court decisions such as the doctrine of "actual malice", which governs the law of libel when the press attacks government officials and public personalities. The plaintiff has to prove that the defendant either believed the disputed statements to be false, or acted in reckless disregard of whether they were true or not. Even if the words published are found to be both false and defamatory, as in the case of Gen. Ariel Sharon against Time magazine, the actual state of mind of the defendant when he published these words must still be established. Otherwise the libel suit fails. This is such a stringent test that the practical effect of the doctrine has been to render the media immune to libel suits, and to remove a further restraint on irresponsible media reporting.

THE RIGHT OF REPLY

The Americans interpret the doctrine of press freedom to mean the right of editors and publishers not only to print what they choose, but also to refuse to print what they do not choose. Thus while the press can criticise and attack anything and anyone it wishes, those who feel themselves wronged have no automatic right to

reply in the pages of the same journal which attacked them. This is unlike the broadcast media, where a right of reply has long been provided under the "fairness doctrine".

Although the fairness doctrine has not been extended to printed journalism, many Western scholars argue that it should be. Often the only way for the opposing view to reach the same readership as the original article is to publish it with equal prominence in the pages of the same journal. This particularly applies if the dispute is between a developing country and a foreign journal with regional or global circulation.

It is not for me to pronounce judgement on the ideal balance between freedom and responsibility of the press in the developed West. My point is simply that the right of newspapers not to publish a reply can hardly be deemed a fundamental one. It is this right of reply which is in contention in the Singapore Government's disputes with TIME magazine and the Asian Wall Street Journal.

THE FOREIGN PRESS IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

The situation in developing countries is different. The de facto licence which the Western press enjoys at home, participating as domestic players in the public and political life of their own countries, leads them to expect, even to demand, the same role and privileges when they operate elsewhere, even though they are there as foreign media, as guests in a host country. When their expectation is not fulfilled, they become bewildered and fractious.

Their expectation cannot be met because the overriding responsibility of every government, especially an elected government, is not to preserve the prerogatives of the foreign press, but to fulfil the aspirations of its

people, and accomplish the goals they have set for themselves. It must do this within the ambit and the circumstances which a country finds itself in, including the traditions of law and government which it has inherited. Cultures, racial compositions, external dangers, maturity of nationhood, all influence what is feasible. Value systems or political structures cannot be transplanted from different societies, take root in a totally different environment, and solve problems for which they had never been designed. No single system of government can suit every nation, and no single model of the press can serve the purposes of every society.

SINGAPORE

Singapore's own circumstances are unique. A tiny island nation of 2.6 million people, it has always made its living as an international junction of air, sea, and telecommunications traffic. Its population is a multi-racial, multi-religious mix, 75% Chinese, 15% Malays, and 10% Indians and other minorities, all descended from immigrants. After being a British colony for almost 150 years, we became a state in the Federation of Malaysia for 2 years, then in 1965 we were summarily expelled from Malaysia to fend for ourself as an independent republic.

In the 1950s, Singapore was a hotbed of Communist agitation and unrest. In the early 1960s, communalists in Malaysia tried to threaten and intimidate our population and cow it into submission. In the middle 1960s, Singaporeans found ourself a nation which had never asked to be independent on its own. We had to strive mightily to overcome the dangers of high unemployment and economic collapse. Today Singapore is a stable cosmopolitan city, one of the newly industrialising countries, whose modest success in development only makes us more acutely aware of how improbable this happy outcome had been, and how quickly and disastrously things can still go wrong.

In Singapore our first goal is nation building - creating one nation, one people, out of different races, worshipping different gods, our common destiny is a historical accident - our ancestors happened to come to live together under British rule. We have to maintain inter-communal tolerance as the basis for political stability, which fortunately we have enjoyed except for two tragic episodes of race riots in the 1960s, a fair record compared to other developing countries. We must generate economic growth - which depends on political stability - so that our people can enjoy higher standards of living. We want to develop the talents and potential of our people to the fullest, so that Singaporeans can live fulfilling and satisfying lives.

Like every other developing country, Singapore will have to find its own way to achieve these goals. Yet it must also assimilate and cope with ideas and developments from outside. It cannot cut out the rest of the world. Only a completely closed, totalitarian society can do that, and even then at great cost. China, historically one of the most self-sufficient of economies and indeed of civilisation, has under Deng Xiaoping come to this conclusion, and has embarked irreversibly on its open door policy. Therefore how much more is this the case for a country as tiny and open as Singapore.

FREE FLOW OF INFORMATION

Singapore accepts that an almost total exposure to foreign ideas and influences is a fact of life. We welcome a free flow of objective information from the rest of the world. It keeps us abreast of developments overseas, and is vital for the conduct of business in the modern economy of a global city state.

That is why we allow 3,700 foreign publications to circulate in Singapore. Singapore plays host to the main BBC short-wave relay station for Asia and Oceania. Furthermore, at the specific request of the Singapore Government, the BBC World Service is available in Singapore on FM 24 hours a day.

This was the result of history and of the Singapore Government's stand on information and objective reporting. When British forces were stationed in Singapore, they ran their own FM British Forces Broadcasting Service (BFBS), which used to rebroadcast certain BBC programmes. In 1971, the British forces withdrew. The Singapore Government requested the British Government not to dismantle the station, but instead use it to rebroadcast BBC to local listeners. Starting with a few evening hours, broadcasting hours lengthened till they now extend round the clock.

No other country in the world does this. Even Radio and Television Hong Kong in a British colony only rebroadcasts BBC World Service plus selected news bulletins for a few hours each day. Singapore's arrangements are so unusual that they merited a special mention in a House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee Report last year.

UNRESTRICTED REPORTING FOR FOREIGN HOME AUDIENCES

Singapore also does not object to foreign correspondents reporting about us in any way they choose to foreign audiences, provided they get their facts right. When important facts and conclusions are wrong, we write to correct them. Their ideological biases or political slants do not matter to us. 96 accredited journalists, photographers and cameramen work for 60 foreign news organisations in Singapore. That includes correspondents for TASS and Xinhua news agencies. All operate without let or hindrance.

NO INVOLVEMENT IN DOMESTIC POLITICS

But when foreign based journals with significant circulations in Singapore start to report on Singapore for a Singapore audience, the Government has to take care. We do not want such foreign journals to take sides on domestic political issues, whether to increase their circulation in Singapore, or to campaign for a particular outcome they prefer. The foreign press have no part to play in what should be a purely domestic political process.

The Singapore Government is not shy of open debate. Whatever our policy, we are ready to defend it publicly, including our policy on the foreign press. We are prepared to face our critics, and meet their arguments. But if a foreign newspaper publishes biased one-sided reports and distorts its facts, and the Government is unable to compel it to acknowledge errors in its coverage, it can build up unchallenged a skewed view of reality which will sway opinions and shape events in Singapore. That is why the Government considers refusal to publish corrections and rebuttals to be an interference in Singapore's domestic politics. And when a newspaper becomes involved in domestic politics, the Government will move to curb it.

The problem arises mostly with regional news journals based in Hong Kong, such as the Far Eastern Economic Review (FEER) and the Asian Wall Street Journal (AWSJ). Although Singapore's population is small, it is English educated, and forms an important market for these journals. Singapore is the second largest country market for both the FEER, after Malaysia, and the AWSJ, after Hong Kong. We account for 13%-14% of their total circulation.

TIME magazine is not one of these regional journals. Singapore is not a significant market for TIME. TIME got involved because it came to the defence of the regional

publications, and took on the Singapore Government. When it did, the Singapore Government had to act against it.

THE DANGERS OF THE MEDIA

The reason Singapore is so concerned about foreign press involvement in domestic politics is that we have seen how the media may bring in undesirable values, how newspapers can be used to carry out covert subversion, and how inflammatory reporting can lead to racial riots. These are not theoretical dangers, but painful setbacks in Singapore's recent history.

UNDESIRABLE VALUES

The media exert a powerful influence on opinions and attitudes. At a subliminal level, messages conveyed on entertainment programmes, TV soap operas, even song lyrics may legitimise and glamourise values and life-styles, many of which are irrelevant to Singapore and inimical to our efforts of nation building and economic development.

During the Cultural Revolution, in China, Red Guards went on the rampage wielding Mao's Little Red Book. In Singapore the Little Red Book was banned. But members of the Communist open front political party, the Barisan Sosialis, tuned in to Peking radio, copied down Mao's quotations, and circulated them to the Party branches. In October 1966 the party withdrew from Parliament and "took the struggle to the streets". They mounted 75 illegal demonstrations and processions within a year, a bizarre miniature version of the upheavals in China. In the West, Mao's Little Red Book may have been laughable, but in Singapore it caused riots.

In 1970, at the peak of the hippie movement in the West, the Singapore Government had to ban the sale of pop song records which extolled the drug culture, including the

Beatles song "Happiness is a Warm Gun", and the Peter, Paul and Mary song "Puff, the Magic Dragon".

In 1984, when break-dancing was the craze in the West, one movie, "Breakdance", shown in cinemas in Singapore, made it also the instant craze amongst young people in Singapore. That particular frenzy passed, but these episodes demonstrate the influence of external media on impressionable minds.

BLACK OPERATIONS

The press also presents an easy avenue for covert efforts to subvert and destabilise a country. Several such black operations were mounted against Singapore in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

The Eastern Sun was an English language newspaper funded by a Communist intelligence service through its front organisation in Hong Kong. In return for soft loans at the ludicrous interest rate of 0.1%, the newspaper agreed to toe the paymaster's line: on major issues, no opposition to the donor country; on minor issues, a neutral attitude to be adopted; and to be fair in editorial comments and the treatment of news.

The Eastern Sun began publication in 1966, and immediately started losing money heavily. More generous loans were provided. The newspaper finally closed when the Government published details of the black operation in 1971 and the entire editorial staff resigned.

The Singapore Herald was another newspaper which took a virulently anti-Government line, lost money heavily, but continued to be funded from sources which never became clear. Ostensible shareholders and creditors included a former Chief Minister of the state of Sabah in Malaysia, a

hard-headed Hong Kong businesswoman, and a foreign bank, all of whom treated the continued loss of what they claimed were their loans and investments with unaccountable equanimity and casualness. When the Government intervened, the foreign bank decided to foreclose on its loan, and the newspaper closed.

Covert subversion by Singaporean or foreign-owned publications is a danger we have always to guard against.

RACIAL STRIFE

The most straightforward way to destabilise Singapore is to foment racial and religious discord. In a fragile, vulnerable multi-racial society, we can never complacently assume that a free-for-all in the marketplace of ideas will magically lead to truth and enlightenment. More than once in Singapore's experience it has led to riots and mayhem.

The 1950 Maria Hertogh riots caught the then British rulers of Singapore by surprise. Maria Hertogh was a Dutch girl from a Catholic family. During the war, when the Japanese overran South East Asia, she had been looked after by a Malay Muslim foster mother who brought her up as a Muslim. After the war, her natural parents claimed her back. The foster mother disputed the claim. Pending the outcome of the case, the Chief Justice of Singapore, an Englishman, sent the girl to a convent.

Immediately the Malay press published inflammatory articles to present the case as a religious conflict between Islam and Christianity. Newspaper photographs showed Maria in the convent, kneeling before the Virgin Mary. Within a week racial riots broke out. 18 people were killed and 173 more wounded. Nearly all the rioters' victims were Europeans and Eurasians. The Malay policemen ordered into action by British officers just looked on. To stop the riots, the Colonial Government had to recall British troops from neighbouring Peninsular Malaya where they were fighting the Communists.

In 1964, a Malay language newspaper mounted a sustained campaign falsely alleging that Chinese majority were suppression the rights of the Muslim Malay minority. It ended in riots sparked off by a procession to mark Prophet Mohammed's birthday. 36 people were killed.

In May 1969, Malaysian race riots infected Singapore with their madness. There were more racial disturbances.

Because the Singapore Government has been unwavering in pursuing multi-racial policies, and firm in taking action against chauvinist agitators, since 1969 all the races have lived together in peace and harmony. But that does not mean that we can now afford to ignore racial sensitivities. In race we come up against deep, atavistic human instincts which will take generations to overcome. Racial emotions can still be whipped up and passions inflamed by irresponsible rabble rousing. Once blood has been shed, many years of nation building and patient strengthening of inter-racial trust and understanding will come to naught.

NO AUTOMATIC RIGHT OF CIRCULATION

Given these dangers, to describe the influence of the press in Singapore as innocuously contributing to the marketplace of ideas is simplistic. Any elected government of Singapore which adopted a laissez faire attitude to the foreign press would be in grave dereliction of its duty.

To start from first principles: foreign newspapers have no right to circulate in Singapore. Journals like Izvestia and Renmin Ribao simply do not do so. No Western newspaper has ever expressed its outrage at this particular infringement of the freedom of the press. Many Western newspapers and magazines do circulate in Singapore, but not as of right. For example, Playboy and Penthouse do not.

Circulation is a privilege we grant on terms. One term is that they will publish our corrections and rebuttals. Foreign publications may naturally refuse these terms, in which case they can either not circulate here, or have their circulations restricted.

THE LEGAL FRAMEWORK

Singapore law supports this position. We recognise no First Amendment right to freedom of the press. We do not aim to approximate US practice as an ideal. Our legal system is based on the British model as modified by the British for the colonies. Our constitutional right to the freedom of speech and expression is subject to certain restrictions. For one, it is explicitly confined to citizens of Singapore, as are other "political" rights, such as the freedom to assemble peaceably or to form associations.

This is not an exotic idea. Other Asian Commonwealth countries do the same. It also occurs in the European Convention on Human Rights (1953), which having provided for freedom of expression regardless of frontiers, then explicitly allows the Contracting Parties to impose restrictions on the political activity of aliens.

PRESS ACT TO RESTRICT CIRCULATION

When the Government amended the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act last year, to empower it to restrict the circulation of foreign publications deemed to have engaged in the domestic politics of Singapore, it was not a question of fundamental liberties being compromised. It was a question of fitting the penalty to the offence. The Government has always had the right to ban all foreign publications it considers undesirable. But why should it do so in every case?

In some cases, restricting the circulation of the journal is a sufficient countermeasure. This hurts its sales and advertising revenues, but does not deprive Singaporeans of access to information. Libraries will have copies of the restricted journal, and articles can be photocopied. Economists would call it an exercise in revealed preference - a practical test of whether the journal is more interested in sales and advertising revenues, or in defending the freedom of information.

TIME AND ASIAN WALL STREET JOURNAL

In the recent cases of *TIME* and *Asian Wall Street Journal*, the Western media has widely but wrongly portrayed the issue to be the freedom of the press. In fact, only the right of reply is in question. It takeschutzpah for a newspaper to claim the right to refuse to publish Government rebuttals, and then complain that the Government has no right to retaliate tit-for-tat by restricting its circulation.

The facts of the dispute are documented in the pamphlet I have distributed. Briefly, both *TIME* and the *AWSJ* published articles on Singapore which contained errors of fact. The Singapore Government replied to correct these errors. The newspapers disputed the corrections, and refused to print them, even when they were invited to publish further rejoinders to demolish the Singapore Government's letters. After extended wrangling, both newspapers had their circulations restricted.

TIME has subsequently printed the Singapore Government letter, and conceded all the errors which had been in dispute. The *AWSJ* has not done so. Its initial reason for refusing was that the letter defamed its correspondent. Yet now that the Singapore Government has itself published the letter, the Journal's correspondent

has not followed up this allegation by suing us for defamation. What is the difficulty of publishing both sides of the story, so that readers can judge for themselves the merits of the cases? In such instances, who is restricting the freedom of speech?

Perhaps the Editor Emeritus of the Wall Street Journal, Mr Vermont Royster, unintentionally cast some light on these cases when he wrote, apropos the libel cases of Gen. Sharon versus TIME and Gen. Westmoreland versus CBS:

"Our craft is quick to correct the misspelling of a name or the wrong outline under a picture. Most papers have a box nearly every day for such corrections.

"Let the complaint be, however, that a story was unfair to someone, that it contained unwarranted invasion of a person's privacy, that it was mistaken in some of its main facts - in those cases a wall of silence is likely to descend on the editorial sanctum. That kind of error is rarely apologized for, or even acknowledged. All too often the attitude is "We stand by the story" no matter what. And that certainly is a kind of arrogance."

CONCLUSION

These two cases have caused a mild international rumpus. We have often been warned that by restricting the press we are acting against our own best interests. We disagree. We are the best judges of our own interests and needs. The Singapore Government is not against the free

flow of information. But it will not allow the foreign press full licence to misinform, subvert, or campaign in Singapore. When that means taking action to restrict the privileges of the foreign press, we have acted, and will continue to act, in the interests of Singapore. The history I have recounted shows how justified this approach has been.

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