CONSTRUCTING SINGAPORE'S CULTURAL AND POLITICAL NARRATIVES: A STUDY ON LEE KUAN YEW'S CONTROL OF THE MEDIA TO BUILD SINGAPORE[1]

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Abstract: There are several ways how to understand culture - and also politics - in one country. One way is to look at the media that become the backbone of communication between the state and the people. The powerful media can be used to form people's understanding on "narratives" created by the state. The narratives on politics, freedom of the press, development, and economy are constructed in such a way that people cannot but accept what are presented through the media. Singapore's founding father Lee Kuan Yew - and also his successors - understood the powerful media could bring about for Singapore's culture and politics. That is why Lee - and his successors - used the media to build and form Singapore's culture in the first place. Singapore's ethnic and cultural diversities - which

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consist of the Chinese, Indians, and Malays - are regarded as a potential conflict if the state fails to set up a "common denominator" for all Singaporeans. Based on this ground, Lee and his successors figured out what to do to cope with this problem. Lee and his successors came to a conclusion that Singapore government should make use of the media to spread the idea of Singapore culture of which characteristics are pluralistic, cosmopolitan, and meritocratic. The media have contributed to spread the so-called rujak *language - or widely known as Singlish - a unique Singaporean English blended with Chinese, Malay and Indian. Singapore's broadcast media policy - radio and television - are deeply influenced by Lee Kuan Yew's vision of the city state. The media have been used to construct good narratives on Singapore's culture and politics.*

Key words: *culture, politics, media, Lee Kuan Yew, Singapore, Singlish*

INTRODUCTION

Lee Kuan Yew has become an iconoclast in Singapore history for his role in bringing the country to its modern style by prioritizing trade as the primary sector of its economy. When Singapore separated from Malaysia, Lee, uncontested, became the first Prime Minister. Upon his premiership, Lee's developmental idea dominantly colored Singapore's style of governance. He told people what to do and not to do. He acted as the sole agent of the country's policy-making with his party, People's Action Party (PAP), being used as his prime instrument. He was dubbed an "authoritarian" leader, but he adamantly implemented his own words and ideas in the name of economic development and growth.

There was almost no space for dissent in Singapore as there was no channel to send that different voice. The media have experienced great suffering from Lee's authoritarianism. It is true that there is an opposition party in Singapore, but it can be said that its role is insignificant in creating the "checks and balances" conditions. Arguably, the most contributing factor to this governance stalemate is Lee's repressive approach to the freedom of speech - a central pillar for democracy. He shut down the possibility of people criticizing the government. The free media were regarded as a threat to the sovereignty of the newly built state following its separation from Malaysia and the British rule.

For Lee, it seemed that he deliberately chose a *quid pro quo* condition, a simplified approach in coping with the complexity of governance, by buying economic development at the expense of freedom of speech and democracy. Lee's paradigm of development is not exclusively his own, as this style of governance has been prominent in Southeast Asian development discourse. Malaysia's former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and Indonesian former President Soeharto are also included in this category. Within this governance framework, polity faces a serious challenge of how to survive and accomplish the path to democracy.

In this paper, I will discuss how the Singapore broadcasting system specifically, and the media in general, is dominantly shaped by Lee Kuan Yew's developmental ideas. The impact of his approach on culture, politics (democracy) and economy will follow the discussion. Sources are obtained from interview, a number of books, and Internet sites.

SINGAPORE, FOUNDING FATHER LEE KUAN YEW, AND BROADCASTING

It was Lee Kuan Yew who spearheaded the city state's separation from Malaysia on August 6, 1965, following his objections over the unresolved conflict between the Chinese PAP (People's Action Party) and the Malay UMNO (United Malay National Organization), two major ethnic-based parties. Singapore's enjoying greater autonomy by its inclusion since 1963 into the Malaysia Federation was not enough to merge the two conflicting interests permanently (McDaniel 1994:164-65). However, prior to the merger, in 1959 PAP under Lee formed a self-government following his victory in the first general election (Seow 1998:1).

The Cambridge-educated lawyer Harry Lee Kuan Yew served his premiership until he stepped down in 1990 and was replaced by his cadre, Goh Chok Tong. Although Lee was no longer at the helm, he still served an "odd" post, the so-called "Senior Minister" - a tool for him to maintain his grip in order that the new country's leader would still follow his inherited policy track. His influence over the new government remained prevalent.

Lee's legal literacy was beneficial in maintaining his power. Victimization and campaigns of fear had been effective tools to threaten his political adversaries from undermining his post. As Seow (1998:1) puts it,

> Skillfully exploiting the boggy of communism and the Malayan fear of Singapore being "another Cuba," Lee caused the arrest of and detention of numerous opposition political leaders and sympathizers, the most infamous of which was then Operation Cold Store.

The co-opting of the media was a must to shut down different voices. Lee's influential heritage still can be seen in the media laws and regulations passed in 1998 (Ang and Yeo 1998). Meanwhile, according to McDaniel, from 1963 to 1980 broadcasting in Singapore was regulated under the Broadcasting and Television Act of 1963 (McDaniel 1994:166).

Different from the print media, which started operation in the era of Thomas Stamford Raffles - Singapore founder - by the publication of the first newspaper *Singapore Chronicle* in 1819, broadcasting began in the 1940s when it became a single organization along with that of Malaysia's Radio Malaya. This was caused by the fact that the printing press was invented earlier than radio telecommunication. McDaniel (1994:165) divides Singapore's broadcasting chronology into several sections as follows:

February 15, 1942	Singapore falls to Japanese forces.
August 15, 1945	World War II ends with Japanese surrender, Radio Malaya resumes broadcasting shortly afterward.
April 1, 1946	British Military Administration ends in Malaya.
February, 1948	Malayan Emergency begins, ending in 1960.
January 1, 1959	Singapore achieves internal self-government.
June 3, 1959	Singapore achieves internal self-government.

February 15, 1963	Television broadcasting started in Singapore.
September 16, 1963	Malaysia founded incorporating Malaya, Singapore, Sabah, Sarawak. Broadcasting organizations in each territory were united.
August 9, 1965	Singapore leaves Malaysia to become fully independent state.
February 1, 1980	Statutory board of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) takes over functions of Radio Television Singapore.

From the chronology, it can be said that Lee's influence over the country's broadcasting system can not be ignored, given Lee assumed power in 1959, while radio broadcasting started operation in 1936 and television in 1963 (Tan and Soh 1994:62-63). He was the first Prime Minister who formulated the "blueprint" of the country's foundation, including the broadcasting system.

In 1994 Singaporeans enjoyed 13 radio stations with the state-run Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC)[3] becoming the dominant broadcaster which ran nine stations: four channels in English, two in Malay, two in Mandarin, and one in Tamil (Tan and Soh 1994:62).

The government has also controlled the print media through ownership (Tsan Kuo:1999). According to the Singapore Broadcasting Act of 1979, the SBC's functions are:

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[3]   SBC became the Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS) in 1994, and then MediaCorp in 2001. MediaCorp specializes mainly in television and radio broadcasting, but to a lesser extent it also deals with periodicals and newspaper publishing (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MediaCorp, retrieved on Nov. 9, 2007). Now there are six television channels and 14 radio channels managed by MediaCorp. MediaCorp is the largest media broadcaster and provider in Singapore which has monopoly in free-to-air TV (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singapore_Broadcasting_Corporation, retrieved on Nov. 9, 2007)

(i) To provide television and sound broadcasting services for disseminating information, education and entertainment.

(ii) *To exercise licensing and regulatory functions in respect of the sale and use of television receivers and broadcasting-receiving apparatus* (emphasis mine); and

(iii) To act internationally as the national authority or representative of Singapore in respect of matters relating to broadcasting (Tan and Soh 1994:69).

The second function of the SBC, according to the Act, is "to exercise licensing and regulatory functions," an authority mandated by the state to control the media. This article was used by Lee to steer where information was to go. As Tsan-Kuo puts it, "The function of the mass media in Singapore is more informative than inquisitive... The dominant thinking is that the mass media should work for, and not against, government policies." (Tsan Kuo 1999).

For Lee, the vision of broadcasting should be the "guide" for the people, mainly regarding ethnic harmony and relations while at the same time avoiding politics. Singaporeans who are comprised of multiethnic and multicultural societies will no longer be able to live side by side unless a "common denominator" in the form of a sense of nationalism exists. He seemed to learn from Malaysia's May 13, 1969 incident where ethnic Chinese became the target of social unrest, triggered by, among other things, the wide economic gap between ethnic Chinese and Malaysian indigenous people - or the *bumiputra*. The Prime Minister also wanted to see the growth of a new Singaporean state with its own characteristics, a state independent from Britain and the Malaysia Federation. He dreamt of building Singapore with economic growth and without the existence of problematic political instability. Lee's vision of a harmonious Singapore can still be seen today. An Interview[4] with a Singaporean student shows that the problem of ethnic harmony is central to the philosophy of building a Singaporean national identity.

Chinhong Lim Chang, a Singaporean Ph.D. student at the School of Comparative Arts, Ohio University, contended that the broadcasting

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[4] This interview is part of a project at Ohio University's Graduate Studies.

programs are created by the government, one purpose of which is to build "a sense of nationalism" in the multiethnic and multicultural societies. The government has major interest in "creating" the so-called "Singaporean culture" in a bid to pursue national identity. With this national identity it is hoped that harmony will exist and ethnic tensions can be avoided. This worry is reasonable given the May 1969 ethnic riot.

These senses of nationalism and national identity are important, Chinhong said, because Singapore is a "young state" which received independence in 1965. The idea of nationality and nationalism should be built upon cultural and linguistic differences, and diversity. Broadcasting is in four languages, namely Mandarin, Malay, and Tamil and English.

Mandarin is spoken by the Chinese who constitute 76.1 percent of the population, Malay by the Malays who constitute 15 percent, Tamil by the Indians who constitute 6.5 percent, while English is spoken by all people. Today's Singapore population is estimated at 4.5 million. English, the language of its former rulers, the British, seems to be the most popular language among people. This mainly occurred after it became the business lingua-franca and was widely used in international communities. Due to its inclination toward the English language mixed with local cultures, Singaporeans have generated what is called *rujak*[5] language. *Rujak* language is a linguistic genre that makes Singaporean English exclusively its own, an English language which is in some parts different from the standard English spoken in the U.K., U.S. and Australia. A wide number of Malay, Chinese and Indian vocabularies are hybridized with English which might not be understood by the British, Americans or Australians.

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[5] *Rujak* is a mixed food of several various fruits and vegetables. *Rujak* is also the terms to refer to the combination of various different things. Other terms to refer to *rujak* language is Singlish, Singaporean English.

Chinhong gave examples of this *rujak* language. A common expression in Singapore if one wants to buy bread is, "I want to buy *roti*"[6] This kind of language can be found in any media, such as in television, radio and newspapers[7]. Based on Chinhong's explanation that the government has played a big role in "creating" the Singaporean culture, it seems that the use of the *rujak* language is "preserved" to bear characteristics of the local English dialect[8]. And this is also part of an attempt to create the Singaporean culture.

Based on this fact, Chinhong said, what the government emphasized in the media is how to grow Singaporean culture rather than politics. Singaporean culture, to some extent, is the dialectics of the government's "intervention" and that which grows from the civil society. But it can be said that, for the government controls the media, while the media are used to spread the "creation of the culture," the Singaporean culture might be

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[6] Here are some more examples of Singlish: 1) *a bit the*, a Singlish phrase meaning 'very', always said in a clearly sarcastic tone: "Wah, you a bit the late, hor!", "Piang eh, your shirt a bit the short, man!", 2) *abourit*, sloppy pronunciation of "about it": "Aiyah, this kind of small thing, don' worrage abourit", 3) *agak tarek*, a Malay phrase literally broken down as 'estimate' (agak) and 'pull' (tarek). It means to "hold back" or "be charitable" or "not to go too far": "Don't talk so bad about him. Agak tarek a bit and give him some face, lah", 4) *kena arrow*, to delegate somebody to perform a task. Generally used only if the task is unpleasant or boring. Derives from the Army or civil service practice of stamping a tiny arrow next to the name of the person in official documents: "I don' know why I always kena arrow by the Inche to wash the jamban." 5) *gone case*, someone or something beyond help; a lost cause: "We tried to help, but he oreddy gone case", "If you continue like this, you sure gone case." (http://www.talkingcock.com, retrieved on Nov. 7, 2007). For more information about Singlish, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singlish.

[7] See Mohan Srilal "Quick Quick: 'Singlish' is out in re-education campaign" at http://www.atimes.com/se-asia/AH28Ae05.html, Hwee Hwee Tan, "A War of Words Over 'Singlish'" *Time* magazine online, Monday, July 22, 2002, at http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,322685,00.html, and http:// en. wik ipedia. org/ wiki/Singlish, retrieved on Nov. 7, 2007.

[8] Parts of Singaporean society like to speak Singlish although the government discourages it. To counter the use of Singlish, Singapore government launched Speak Good English Movement. For more information, see http://en.wikipedia .org/wiki/Singlish

formed by the government's ambition to "create" a Singapore that consists of diverse ethnic groups. The government's effort to campaign the creation of the Singaporean culture can be interpreted as its effort to divert the people's attention of not talking about politics and other issues that can undermine the government's power.

The building of national identity while maintaining high economic growth had been Lee Kuan Yew's main concern. But the question is, how to cope with this problem. Lee saw that freedom of speech and wider space for political aspiration could turn the development to an end, while he wanted to see Singapore becoming a state as modern as other developed countries in the world.

The freedom of speech and wider political aspiration are two sides of the same coin. There will be no freedom of speech without political aspiration, and there will be no space for political aspiration if freedom of speech is muted. For Lee, Singapore remained vulnerable for the promotion of wider openness. It was deemed detrimental which could impact economic development.

Singapore's repressed media is one indicator showing how freedom of speech in the country fails to exist. With the absence of the freedom of speech, it is hard to call Singapore a democratic country. It is true that there is an opposition party in Singapore, but it cannot effectively contend the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). The opposition party cannot function as the critic of the government which will create "checks and balances" atmosphere. The media are tightly controlled not to cover and report the activities and criticisms voiced by the opposition party.

Once the media are liberalized, nobody can control which issues can be covered and which ones cannot. Debate will arise on which issues are categorized "sensitive" and which ones are not. What will be the basis of criteria for whether an issue is called "sensitive"? The laws which might be created by the government to regulate the media liberalization will only deal with general definitions that people can interpret according to their own interests. Thus, the safest, cheapest and simplest way to deal with such a complicated problem is to control the media. Democracy is victimized at the pursuit of the economic progress.

Based upon the reason that the impact of the media in politics is unavoidable, Singaporean government takes a repressive approach. Research by Meyrowitz on Americans who become more "involved" in politics finds it is partly caused by access to information (Meyrowitz 1985:167). The media enable people to know their surroundings. With the knowledge, different views of discourse may arise in public, and the media are the effective tools to deliver it.

Politics, thus, no longer becomes a "mystery" or regarded as "sacred" which only a few people can deal with. With the media the world becomes transparent:

> Through electronic coverage, politicians' freedom to isolate themselves from their audiences is being limited. In the process, politicians are not only losing aspects of their privacy - a complaint we often hear - but, more important, they are simultaneously losing their ability to play many facets of the high and mighty roles of traditional leaders. For when actors lose parts of their rehearsal time, their performances naturally move toward the extemporaneous (Meyrowitz 1985:271).

Chinhong cited an example of the government's control over the media: the news program might experience the most rampant censorship. The news that is planned to be broadcast is said to have to pass several desks where it should be approved by the government-appointed editors. As a result, what is widely broadcast on television and radio stations is the government's activities, mainly its "success" of creating economic prosperity for the people and its effort to create a sense of Singaporean nationalism. "For some people it might be very boring," Chinhong said.

COMPETING DISCOURSES: ECONOMY OR DEMOCRACY?

The impact of Lee's repressive approach to the media is a paradox and *quid pro quo*. Democracy fails to exist in the country, while at the same time economy has grown dramatically becoming the best in the region. Thus, a hypothesis that argues that development cannot be done in the absence of democracy does not apply in Singapore.

This standpoint is argued, among others, by Claude Ake (1996) while discussing development in Africa. Lee has demonstrated that what has been dubbed by political and social scientists as "semi-democratic," "quasi democratic," and "soft authoritarian" - to refer to a government which is led under such a style - has effectively brought about "big pies" enjoyed by Singaporeans. As Hachten (1987) puts it,

> While Lee maintained rigid authoritarian control in the political sphere, he allowed a large degree of freedom in the city-state's economic sector, which has made spectacular gains under his freetrade policies. Thus Singapore has not followed the liberal model of national development, but that of a corporate state with government managing the economy while utilizing multi-national corporations and free-trade opportunities. This government-guided economy - "Singapore, Incorporated" - has produced impressive results. As the only prime minister Singapore has ever known, Lee is the CEO of Singapore, Inc., and has personally intervened in most aspects of Singaporean life, especially the press.

Singaporeans are proud of being Singaporeans, mainly because they are more prosperous than their neighbors in Southeast Asian countries. They are aware that Singapore has been designated as the model of economic success. A throng of workers, from those who sell their brawn to those who depend on their brain, come to Singapore to earn a better life. A whopping number of both legal and illegal migrant workers flock to Singapore, with competition getting harsher day by day. Indonesian professionals are among others who seek fortune in the city state.

Chinhong is one who sees Singapore as a better place to live compared to other countries in the region. From the way she told about Singapore's economic success, it can be said that she has been "satisfied" with what she received so far. Some interviewees in an SBC radio program[9] are in line with Chinhong's satisfaction. The program shows the awareness of almost all interviewees that Singapore is a "good" country with high "economic growth" as it is dealing with the "trading" sector. It has been achieved, according to the interviewees, because of "hard work" and

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[9]   The materials of this radio program analysis are taken from undated SBC program

"efficiency." Minister Osman Wok said, "We are a very good government, (and have) a very good team" (undated interview with SBC).

As a trading country, Singapore has the second highest income per capita in Asia after Japan. It has become a commercial center in the region along with Hong Kong. Several world leading media publishers used to intend to open their bureaus in Singapore for its economic achievement and modern facilities, but the plan was canceled given that the country was not friendly with freedom of the press. Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew during his tenure as the Prime Minister adamantly said that the foreign press could not interfere in Singapore domestic politics. Even, there was conflict between the PM with the press when his administration decided to cut the number of circulations of those several publications.

Singapore seems to be able to escape the Asian economic crisis, while its neighbors, including Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand, tumbled down and are now having difficulties bouncing back. Malaysia managed to handle the crisis after turning down financial aid from IMF. This economic factor may have been the most reasonable motive why Singaporeans are reluctant to change from the current state of *status quo*. Chinhong confirmed this argument. She said that only a few people will support the idea for change: "In my opinion, nobody will buy the idea. If you change, nobody will guarantee that you will get similar economic gains," she said.

Lee stepped down in 1990 and replaced by his predecessors, Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong (Lee Kuan Yew's son), who practically continued the "Lee's way." It means that Singapore has been under the same governance style for 48 years (if it is counted from 1959 when Lee formed self government under the ruling party PAP)[10].

Interestingly, Singapore is still able to maintain the *status quo*. It seems that Huntington's thesis that "economic development itself is a highly destabilizing process and that the very changes which are needed to satisfy aspirations in fact tend to exacerbate those aspirations" (Huntington 1968:49) does not apply so far in Singapore. Some may argue that change is

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[10] For more information about Lee Kuan Yew, see http://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/Lee_Kuan_Yew.

on the way, but it is worth noting that the political succession from Lee Kuan Yew to Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong has been running for 17 years but the change seems to be very slow[11]. This assumption is based on the comparison with other countries in the region such as the Philippines and Indonesia.

How should we explain this condition? One important factor that is worth counting is Singapore's demographics. The country is the smallest in the region with population estimated at around 4.5 million, one third of Jakarta's population[12]. This small community is relatively easy to manage compared to Indonesia's 220 million people inhabiting more than 13 thousand islands. The dialectics of political discourse in Singapore is under simple control with its dynamics never becoming a serious threat to the state. For its tiny land and small population, as Hachten suggests, the country can be likened to a company with Lee becoming its CEO.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

In this paper I argue that what is still happening in Singapore today, a governance carried out under a developmentalist regime, is the product of global economy and politics which is campaigned and trumpeted throughout the media. However, the fact that the Singaporean government is still reluctant to change to a more democratic society is still awaiting momentum. Hachten (1999) has learned that the world view has been shaped by news spreading globally in minutes due to technological advances. The world's "epistemology" is created by the authority of the media's ideology. Hachten (1999:180-183) identifies a number of impacts of the global news, they are:

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[11] Le Hsien Loong, also known as BG Lee, is the son of Lee Kuan Yew. After Goh Chok Tong stepped down from power in 2004, BG Lee became the new Prime Minister. I was in Singapore in August 2004 when BG Lee delivered his first speech after becoming Prime Minister. He promised to open wider freedom of expression but after more than three years in power the media are still under state control.

[12] The U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) estimates Singapore population at 4,553,009 (July 2007 est.) (https://www.cia.gov, retrieved on 7 November 2007).

1)the triumph of Western journalism, 2) the acceptance of mass culture, 3) the impact on Cold War, 4) the growth of global audiences, 5) vast audiences for global events, 6) the speeding-up of history, 7) "the whole world watching," 8) the change of diplomacy, 9) the loss control of the autocrats, 10) the revolution by personalized media, 11) surrogate media for fetter ed people, 12) the reporting of the pariah states, 13) "copycat" effects, 14) profit-driven media, 14) the globalization of advertising and public relations.

If capitalistic economy is deemed the product and impact of the global media campaign, the question is why Singapore's autocratic regime has not changed by opening the freedom of speech through the media. Why is it that economic ideology does not come side by side with political ideology - namely democracy? Indonesia's *reformasi*, the Philippine's "people's power," and the fall of the Soviet Union as well as the Berlin Wall have become the iconoclastic exemplary model of democratic changes. Singaporean government's tight control over the media has distorted the information which people deserve to access. But the global media can no longer be censored - thanks to the invention of the Internet. Indonesia's *reformasi* happened when Soeharto's New Order regime repressed the media - although to some extent some say the era of openness (*keterbukaan*) was on the way. However, the Indonesian media, political activists, and pro-democracy movements make use of cyber-information to access up-to-date reports of the country's condition. CNN reported the event live on the spot. These things were beyond the political authorities' control.

Based on the argument that the power of information can "brainwash" people's view and ideology, this era marks the epoch of "no sense of place" to hide, to use Meyrowitz's phrase. Everything is transparent. People, sooner or later, will know what the government is doing for them, what the meaning of freedom and human rights is, and what sort of thing is trumpeted by the democratic model of governance. Within this framework, I argue that Singapore, sooner or later, will arrive at the same path to a democratic regime.

This argument is suggested not because democracy, or liberal democracy, has become the "highest human civilization" per se as argued by Francis Fukuyama in his *magnum opus The End of History and the Last Man*

(1992), but because a "place to hide" from information no longer exists. Thus, competing discourses between economy and democracy in Singapore will culminate in the people's consciousness that democracy is something embedded to capitalism and liberalism.

The change in Singapore, again I argue, will follow the contradictory scenario. If, in several countries the opening of the media has begun the era of political participation which ends with political reforms, in Singapore the government will not deregulate its policy. Thus, the change will be affected by global media which will be followed by the reforms in Singapore media regulations, including its broadcasting system. This argument is based on the fact that Singapore, even under Goh Chok Tong and Lee Hsien Loong (BG Lee), still regard the old laws on the media as still being relevant in today's Singapore. The laws which enable restriction on the media are everywhere draconian to support the repressive regime.

Founding father Lee Kuan Yew's legacy on Singapore's media restriction is on the way to its decay by the prevalence of global information. Slowly, the people begin to "peep" this alternative source of information. And once they find the new and different "episteme" on this new source, it will become the beginning of the unpredictable demand era. Although Singapore has its own history to follow, but History (with H in capital letter)[13] sometimes have common similarities. And the common similarities are that information has changed people in many aspects of life, including the way they understand the relationship between their economic success and political reforms materialized in democracy.

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[13]   History (with H in capital letter) is the history in a more conceptual and general terms, while history (in lower case) is the history in particular terms, such as the history of Singapore, the history of ethnic Chinese, and so on.

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