

# Media and Society: A Christian Perspective in the Context of Singapore

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**Rev. Dr. Daniel Koh Kah Soon**

## *Introduction*<sup>1</sup>

The assigned topic, Media and Society, left alone is too broad a subject for any person to deliver in a 40-minute talk. This is complicated by the fact that the term Media, according to Wesley Carr, “notoriously defies precise definition.”<sup>1</sup>

If the subject is indeed complicating and notorious, readers may ask, what credentials do I possess for me to speak on such a subject? It would be farfetched, of course, for me to pretend that I am a “veteran operator” the way, say, the indomitable Malcolm Muggeridge did in his introduction to his highly provocative and contentious London Lectures, now published as *Christ and Media*,<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, if you see, as I do, that the pulpit is an essential medium for communicating God’s word, perhaps I may be allowed a little leeway to claim that I am an old-hand of sort, that is as a pastor-preacher of the Methodist Church in Singapore (MCIS). And if I may make a further claim, long before being an ordained Elder of the MCIS, I had some years of fruitful association with the media world mainly among Christian practitioners in the print media. I also had the privilege of working with and learning from people who are engaged in other media-ministries. I think it is permissible for me to boost my credential by adding that I was the founding Executive Secretary of the now dormant Asia Christian Communications Fellowship which used to provide an Asian-wide forum for Christians in the media and communications business to exchange ideas, encourage one another, and sponsor the Asian Institute of Christian Communications.

But enough about credentials. To help us be more focussed and have a sense of how I am approaching the subject, I have taken liberty to

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<sup>1</sup> Wesley Carr, *Ministry and the Media*, (London: SPCK, 1990), p. 3. Cf. p. 23.

<sup>2</sup> Malcolm Muggeridge, *Christ and the Media*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), p. 11.

adjust the topic to “Media and Society: A Christian Perspective in the Context of Singapore”.

What I propose to do is to survey the media scene in Singapore, raise some questions and give a Christian response to some of the issues which I will surface.

For clarity sake, the term media should encompass what has commonly been referred to as mass media. That is to say, it covers mainly the press, radio, television, and increasingly computers and the information highway. By referring to the mass media, I am not discounting the important roles of other media like the theatres, cinema, music and books.<sup>3</sup> But those media will have to be dealt by others, at another time.

However we may construe media to be, one assumption which we can safely make is that media as a whole do exert a pervasive influence on society. That the media do play an incredibly critical and powerful role in influencing life, shaping society through dissemination of information and propaganda, is recognised by most politicians and power brokers. Notice that whenever there is a coup in a country, one of the first buildings to be occupied and protected would be the television and radio stations.

### ***Media in Singapore***

A comprehensive survey of the media scene in Singapore can be found in a book, *Arts and Media in Singapore*, published by the Ministry of Information and the Arts.<sup>4</sup> There is also a helpful article on the Media in Singapore written by two NTU professors, Eddie Kuo and Ang Peng Hwa, found in Shelton Gunaratne’s *Handbook of the Media in Asia*.<sup>5</sup>

The media were also in the news when this paper was being written. The Straits Times (24.3.2001) carried three pages of essays and news reports commenting on some criticisms directed at the media by some members of parliament who had complained about sensationalism in the

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<sup>3</sup> E.g., D.B. Winter, “Media,” in David J. Atkinson and David H. Field, eds., *New Dictionary of Christian Ethics and Pastoral Theology*, Leicester: IVP, 1995, p. 579, and Carr, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> Koh Siong Ling, et.al., *Arts and Media in Singapore*, (Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000).

<sup>5</sup> Eddie Kuo and Ang Peng Hwa, “Singapore,” in S. Gunaratne, ed., *Handbook of the Media in Asia*, (London: Sage Publications, 2000), pp. 402-428.

press. In a separate development, a number of Singaporeans spearheaded by the former president of AWARE, Mrs. Constance Singam and Dr. Tan Chong Kee, the co-ordinating editor of Singapore Internet Community (SINTERCOM) launched the Singapore MediaWatch Community, an independent media watchdog. The stated aim of MediaWatch is limited. It is more interested in pressing for a redefinition of what's newsworthy. Mrs. Singam complained that the media in Singapore tend to give too much space to news from the government and insufficient coverage of news from members of the larger community.

Let me return to the article written by Kuo and Ang. From what they have written, we may draw up a brief outline of the historical development of the media in Singapore. I shall highlight some pertinent points:

A. Though published by missionaries based in Malacca, the *Chinese Monthly Magazine* was the first Chinese newspaper to circulate in Singapore in 1815 a few years before Raffles planted the British flag on Singapore's shore.

B. Christian missionaries also played a crucial role in publishing the first locally produced English newspaper, the *Commercial Register* which was later merged with the *Singapore Chronicle*.

C. Radio transmission in Singapore started out as a private business concern in 1936 before it was acquired by the government in 1940.

D. Television was introduced to Singapore in 1963, first in black and white, and by mid-1974, in full-colour transmission.

Mainly because of rapid changes brought about by information technologies, often because of economic considerations and in some cases because of political intervention, the press, radio and television that we have today are definitely different from what they used to be fifty years ago.

There is no need to dwell too long in discussing the historical development of the media industries in Singapore, except to add that, at present, the ownership of the major media organizations in Singapore are in the hands of two groups. The SPH group controls most of the print media, publishing daily newspapers in Chinese, Malay, and English. The local television and radio stations are controlled mainly by Media Corp,

which is government-linked. Of late there have been some cross-overs as a first tentative step towards some form of competition. So we have the free newspaper *Today* published by Media Corp, and the SPH group has already ventured into the television media.

The two major media groups are in many ways still perceived to be too closely associated with the government and this has raised uneasy concerns among those who would like to see lesser government influence and wider unimpeded competitions in the media, provided by companies which should not all be seen to be linked to one political party, especially the ruling party.

Despite our reservations, and to be fair, there has been a noticeable relaxation of government control over the media, even though the relaxation has been gradual and sometimes forced by external circumstances.

In many ways the government has no choice but to relax its tight control of the media. Firstly, if Singapore aspire to be a communications hub, as the government would want Singapore to be one, rules governing the management of the media will have to be liberalized somewhat. It will be extremely difficult for the government to attract media experts and enterprises to Singapore without giving the media people greater freedom to manage their businesses the way they see fit without the fear of government intervention or the threat of the withdrawal of business licence. Secondly, with the proliferation of and easy accessibility to the internet, it is impractical for the government to police the dissemination of news. The information superhighway has opened up cross-border avenues for users to read regularly updated news which might not be available through the traditional local media channels.

### ***The Politics of Media Control***

There are good reasons why any responsible government may find it necessary to retain certain control of the media, whether directly or indirectly.

The media can be used and have been exploited by their operators and owners as means to propagate certain value systems, incite ill-feelings and undermine the common good. It is understandable that no freely elected government would allow the media, whether they are locally owned or those from overseas, to upset its political agenda or to disrupt social

well-being. Unlike the freely elected government, the owners of the media do not have any legitimate claim to represent the people, although when left alone to ply their trade, they do have excessive “power without responsibility.”<sup>6</sup>

And because the government in Singapore is wary of the potential power of the media to inflict harm on society, or introduce what it may interpret as undesirable values, there are stringent laws which have been introduced to control the media. For instance, the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act of 1974 requires printers, newspapers and magazines to have a printing licence which may not be renewed if a media group is seen, for example, to have interfered in the political affairs of the country.

To ensure that no one exercises excessive control over any media group, not more than 3% of the shares in local newspaper group can be held by a single person. Directors of the companies must be locals and approval from the government is required for key appointments in the company. An interesting development to discourage foreign publications from interfering in the “domestic politics” of Singapore was the 1986 amendment to the Act which can be used to restrict the circulation of foreign publications. A further amendment to the Act in 1988 allowed the reproduction of any foreign “publication *in toto* without infringing copyright and on a cost-recovery basis.”<sup>7</sup> At one stage, reproduction copies of the Far Eastern Economic Reviews were sold openly in the newstands, with the advertisements blacked out. This is an effective and clever move by the government to dissuade foreign publication from interfering with the politics of Singapore, since it does not pay to undermine the interest of Singapore, even if the publishing house is located in the safe haven of another country.

It is not unreasonable to be suspicious of the influence and power the Press. Elsewhere, politicians, even those in Britain, know about the power of the press too well. A case in point is that long before the Labour Party in the UK was swept into office in the 1997 general election, Tony Blair assiduously courted the Rupert Murdoch-controlled News International Media group for support. *The Sun*, a widely distributed tabloid in the UK, and a newspaper better known for its traditional support of the Conservative Party, switched allegiance and openly endorsed Tony

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<sup>6</sup> Cf. James Curran and Jean Seaton, *Power without Responsibility: The Press and Broadcasting in Britain*, (London: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>7</sup> Kuo and Ang, *op. cit.*, p. 407.

Blair and his Labour Party probably after being persuaded by Tony Blair that a new Labour government will not be anti-business. It is debatable whether *The Sun* won the election for Tony Blair, even if the newspaper might be tempted to think so. But what cannot be discounted is the fact that the Labour Party must have recognized the influence and power of the Murdoch-controlled Press for Tony Blair to woo the News International Group for endorsement.

It is obvious that the Rupert Murdoch Media conglomerate, with tentacles reaching almost every corner of the world, is a powerful media organization. No responsible government that is freely-elected will allow any media group to dictate how a country should be governed and what values should be transmitted. Yet the concern about the power and influence of the media and the need for the government to apply certain control over the media, is double-edged. Any government which exercises too tight a control over the media or monopolizes the media faces the same temptation to exploit or manipulate the media for its own political agenda which may not necessarily reflect the interest or serve the wellbeing of the people.

We may cite, as an example, the danger of having a media group that is seen to be unabashedly sympathetic to the government, or at least seen to be beholden to the ruling party. I have in mind the way the local media played up and presented a questionable picture of liberation theology to explain why some church-workers were arrested for the so-called Marxist Conspiracy in the mid-1980s. The incessant blame placed on liberation theology (as if there is only one version of liberation theology available) betrayed the ignorance of the government officers responsible for the case and an equally ignorant press that carried the reports. Informed Singaporeans read the reasons for the arrest and the reports in the press as a crude and dubious propaganda to legitimize the detention without trial of a group of social activists who were critical of the government and perhaps too simplistic in their assessments of the socio-political problems of the country.

I am not an advocate of militant liberation theology and I am not an apologist for any liberation theologian. The point to make is that it seems sad that while informed Singaporeans might be able to question the fairness of highlighting just one strand of liberation theology to justify the arrest of the so-called Marxist Conspirators, the majority of the people who read the local papers, listened to the local radio stations, or watched the state-owned television channels would not have known that the portrayal of

liberation theology was one-sided, and it was the ugly side that was presented.

***Whose interest? Whose values?***

If the media have a ubiquitous influence and power on society, it is important therefore that we need to cultivate a critical approach to the media as well as a critical relationship with the media.

Malcolm Muggeridge had parodied the media in general and television in particular, as the fourth temptation which cannot be trusted. We do not have to take such a cynical view of the Media.

Nevertheless the owners and operators of the Media are not benign saints even if some of them have an evangelistic zeal in defending an unbridled liberal ideology of the freedom of expression, or profess that their intention is to serve only the interest of the people and the wellbeing of society. The fact of the matter is that the owners and the professional operators of the Media do have their own business, political and philosophical agendas, whether or not they declare them publicly.

As I have indicated, *The Sun* in the UK and many Media outlets around the world are owned by the Murdoch family. Most of the news-magazines like Asiaweek and the Far Eastern Economic Reviews have American ownership. Newspapers like the Asian Wall Street Journal and the International Herald Tribune are owned by Western business interests. CNN, with headquarters in Atlanta, USA, viewed, 24 hours a day, by millions of people around the world., is a part of the giant American-owned AOL Time Warner Media group. Are we to imagine that the owners and their editors do not have their own interests to protect or values to promote?

At the risk of being accused of exaggeration, might it not be the case that the power and pervasive advances of the large media organizations are colonizing the cultures and value-systems of the world by imposing, none too subtly, on the recipients a libertarian political culture of possessive individualism that worships the false god of quick profit, instant gratification and acquisitive consumerism?

I am not alone in expressing such concerns. William F. Fore, a respected Christian expert on communications, in his book the

*Mythmakers: Gospel, Culture and the Media*, devotes a chapter to discuss the “Media Imperialism” of American media groups.

### ***A Christian Response to the Media and Society***

Unless we retreat to some sort of spiritual ghetto where we could cut ourselves off completely from the influence of the media, we have to learn how to deal with the challenges posed by it.

While the media may not have the political legitimacy to represent the views and interest of the people, there is still a place in our maturing society for a further relaxation of government control over the media. This should facilitate two desirable developments. 1) In an atmosphere of a more liberal law to manage the media, journalists can take on a pro-Singapore stance without being seen as the mouthpiece of any political party. The existing law requiring the annual renewal of licence threatens the rice-bowl of the journalists and the balance sheet of the stock-holders of the media group, making it difficult for them not to toe the government line and thus raising suspicion of the media’s integrity. 2) If there is less government intervention, other Singaporeans may emerge to provide healthy competition to the established media organisations.

It is safe to assume that, generally speaking, Singaporeans are more likely to have the interest of Singapore at heart. They have a stake in the wellbeing of Singapore. A relaxation of control of the media in a society where the population is getting better educated offers us a platform to present views which the established media may not be interested in promoting.

Of great importance to us as Christians is that if we accept the sinfulness of humankind as we should, there are more reasons for us to develop additional checks, through alternative media sources, against the temptation of abuse of power by a political party or a politician. If being transparent is what we want our political system to be, an independent media can contribute to a more transparent society where no public servant and political leader can hide his or her sins.

It must be our Christian concern to defend truth and truthfulness. While healthy competition among the expanded (and hopefully expanding) media groups should be encouraged, there is a need to demand that truth will not be sacrificed in the name of expediency when information is rushed out without giving sufficient time for ascertaining accuracy and

truthfulness of the report. Truth was compromised when the major media groups in the USA reported on the results of the last presidential elections in the USA. Different television networks tried to outdo each other by announcing unconfirmed results which turned out to be a political soap opera rather than a reliable news reporting.

There is a place for the Church to understand the workings of the media,<sup>8</sup> and use the media to contribute to the shaping of societal values and moral vision for the sake of the common good. This means that there will be time when the church must go against popular current to reject value-systems championed by the media which goes against human flourishing and argue for Christian alternatives. It also means that the Church must be concerned about the downside of being fed by media that are closely associated with any particular interest group, including the government.

When we ask the questions *Whose interest? Whose values?* besides uncovering for ourselves the hidden interests and insidious values of the media owners and operators, raising the questions should also help us to be sensitive to those (such as the minority groups and the marginalized) whose interests and values might have been neglected by the media which might be more inclined to attend to the interest and tastes of the privileged and powerful.

Perhaps, the time is right for thoughtful Christians to form a Christian Media Watch to critique the excesses of the media groups and any unhealthy values which they may smuggle through their pages or editorial biases.

### **Recommended Books**

Gunaratne, Shelton A., *Handbook of the Media in Asia*, New Delhi:: Sage Publications, 2000.

Koh Siong Ling, et. al., *Arts and Media in Singapore*, Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000.

Lyon, David, *The Information Society*, Cambridge: Polity Books, 1988.

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<sup>8</sup> Here books like Carr, *op. cit.*, and William F. Fore's *Mythmakers: Gospel, Culture and the Media*, (New York: Friendship Press, 1990), are useful introductory guides.

Carr, Wesley, *Ministry and the Media*, London: SPCK, 1990.

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***Rev Dr Daniel Koh***

***Lecturer in Christian Social Ethics & Pastoral Theology***

***Trinity Theological College***