

TELEVISION IN SINGAPORE: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO ITS TELEVISION INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

TV arrived in Singapore on 15 February 1963 and since its inaugural launch Singapore's TV industry has undoubtedly developed over the years. In the context of the four theories of the press, it can be quickly concluded that Singapore's TV industry is Authoritarian by its regulative nature. Despite being a democratic country, the freedom to express freely what is on one's mind through the use of TV as a medium is still extremely restrictive. As a result, there are many reasons as to why Singapore's TV industry is still moderately unadventurous, especially where censorship is concerned. As the TV industry in Singapore is operated and fully controlled by the government, the content that appears on TV is usually highly censored, scripted to precision in accordance with the MDA guidelines, non-offensive and contain the usage of propaganda. This paper seeks to give a brief insight into not only the history and transformation of Singapore's television (TV) industry to what it is today, but also to better understand how the said country's TV industry currently operates, and how their content is produced as well as the impacts it has around the region.

Keywords: Singapore, Television, Ownership, Censorship, Regulation.

INTRODUCTION:

In the context of the four theories of the press, it can be quickly concluded that Singapore's TV industry is Authoritarian by its regulative nature. This theory supports and allows the government to take power in accordance to what they deem may be rightful for their audiences. Thus, in turn, they control and decide what type of content is to appear on the mass media, for example: the TV industry in Singapore. On the contrary, the Social Responsibility Theory supports and allows the freedom to inform, educate, entertain, sell and last but not least, to raise discussions and have debates about issues that one may find conflicting. However, there is a fine line between the Authoritarian Theory and Social Responsibility Theory where Singapore's TV industry is concerned. Fred Siebert explained this when he described the Authoritarian Theory as a structure of ideology that the government uses to exercise social control, by means of them controlling the functions and operations of the press (*Fred S. Siebert, 1963*). Singapore evidently adopts the methodologies Siebert mentioned, and the government exercises social control by being socially responsible with regards to the content that goes on TV. Despite being a democratic country, the freedom to express freely what is on one's mind through the use of TV as a medium is still extremely restrictive. As a result, there are many reasons as to why Singapore's TV industry is still moderately unadventurous, especially where censorship is concerned.

History of Singapore's TV Industry:

TV arrived in Singapore on 15 February 1963 and since its inaugural launch Singapore's TV industry has undoubtedly developed over the years. Needless to say, the inauguration of TV broadcast, and its abilities to capture and portray moments to the public was the birth of a new evolution in Singapore (Straits Times, 2013). On 2 April 1963, Singapore introduced its regular broadcast transmissions, on its only channel, Channel 5, where programmes were broadcasted in English and Malay. A few months later, a second channel was introduced, Channel 8. This introduction of the second channel broadcasted programmes in the Mandarin Chinese and Tamil languages. (*Singapore Infopedia, 2004*)

In 1965, when Singapore officially separated from Malaysia as its own independent country, the news was announced on local television. Having gained its independence, the Singapore government then became self-reliant and took control of the radio and TV, calling it Radio-Television Singapore (RTS). As the birth of monochrome TV was well received, colour transmissions ensued, but were met with limited success. Fortunately, it all changed when RTS announced that they would be screening the live colour telecast of the World Cup Soccer Finals via satellite later that year, and Singapore's TV history took a changed from there. RTS was granted the bill to become a statutory board as it allowed them to be more competent as well as to expand their operations. RTS then became Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), and, SBC was taken over by Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS), which functioned as a fully privatised broadcaster, after which TCS was taken over by Mediacorp. (*Singapore Infopedia, 2004*) As of today, where broadcast is concerned, it is operated and controlled under the government. Since the inception of Singapore TV, programmes and contents produced have come a long way. These gradual changes are not limited to the following: from monochrome to colour, imports of content to producing local content and last but not least, from starting off with one channel to many channels: 4 main language channels catering to the different language groups in Singapore, and separate channels for the children, arts, news and entertainment. Some of the programmes Singapore has created over the years such as Maggie & Me, Stories of Love, R.E.M, The Little Nyonya, The Noose, Anything Goes, Squawk Box Asia, Extraordinary Asian, Art Less Travelled and Artisan's Reboots have flourished, garnered regional recognition, nominated as well as won awards(*Asian Television Awards, 2007 – 2013*), and have even gone on to be distributed to various countries around Asia, such as Malaysia, Thailand, Taiwan and Cambodia, just to name a few(*Rapid TV News, 2012*).

Media Ownership & Regulations:

Singapore's only national broadcaster Mediacorp is wholly owned by Temasek Holdings (*Temasek Review, 2013*), a government investment arm (*Singapore Press*). As Singapore is a rather conservative country judging from its affiliation with Malaysia and its culture, what appears on TV is naturally

conservative as well. Contents that go on air in Singapore adhere to certain guidelines set out by the Media Development Authority (MDA) (MDA, 2014), another government owned statutory board that 'promotes and regulates the media sector, so as to contribute towards economic growth and help foster a cohesive and inclusive society in Singapore' as quoted on their website (MDA, 2014). However, Yeo & Mahizhnan (1998) have argued that censorship and various other related forms of media regulations are actually conflicting and unsuited for the kind of society that Singapore wishes to develop: well-informed, cultured and sophisticated. They strongly feel that it will be difficult to visualise the growth of Singapore with such measures (S. Yeo, A. Mahizhnan, 1998,). Evidently as the TV industry in Singapore is operated and fully controlled by the government, the content that appears on TV is usually highly censored, scripted to precision in accordance with the MDA guidelines, non-offensive and contain the usage of propaganda.

Censorship Practice:

Singapore's TV channels are free-to-air. Free-to-air channels have programmes that run throughout, broadcasting programmes around the clock (Mediacorp, 2014). Thus, the need to limit content is widely practiced as one can gain access to the TV all day. Singapore censors almost every programme that goes on air, and programmes are censored for various reasons but not limited to the impact and accessibility of films for children, needful exposure to children, anything that might degrade racial and religious harmony and last but not least, anything that might threaten national security (MDA, 2014). Singapore is a multi-racial society as well. Airing programmes that contain the above mentioned reasons might not be ideal as the general population in Singapore is still rather largely conservative. Thus, these censorship laws are put into place so as not to upset the general public as well as not to raise conflicts amongst them. Thus, content produced in the western countries such as the United States of America and the United Kingdom that are in accordance with the Libertarian Theory will not be very forthcoming with Singaporeans. Movies and TV shows such as Eurotrip, A Jihad for Love, South Park, The Last Temptation of Christ, Breaking Bad, The Wire and Game of Thrones are just some of the critically acclaimed shows that Singapore has banned or not aired on its free-to-air channels. These shows may not be shown for the various reason mentioned above earlier. (IMDB, 2014) & (Asia One News, 2010).

Effects of Censorship:

Uncensored media can have many impacts around the region. To name a few, uncensored media in Singapore can affect children's upbringing, affect cultures and values, may influence and encourage violent behaviours which may in turn annihilate the morals, views and peace and harmony which Singapore works very hard to promote. Detailed explanations on the impacts mentioned above are as follows:

CHILDREN:

Children are naturally visual and tend to re-enact what they see on TV. TV tends to influences and affect children's upbringing and how they view the world after. Children may pick up content that contains excessive foul language, and they may use such language without having the capability to understand that it is not socially acceptable. Children may use the foul language in public, which in turn would offend the general public. Another example would be showing programmes that have excessive gore, encourages violence or show detailed imitable techniques such as instructional drug preparation or ways of suicidal attempts. Sequentially, these might alter and affect the young minds and make them want to re-enact it for its 'cool' factor portrayal. There might also be an increase in the juvenile delinquency rate as such shows encourage aggressive behaviour, which in turn encourages delinquents. For example, the shows mentioned in the paragraph above will not be deemed right for youngsters, especially since Singapore believes in moulding young minds from the tender ages of infancy till teenage hood. Exposing them to such shows on would not be ideal as they may sway towards what is portrayed in the shows. These shows might also influence the way children think, and

destroy relationships with their family members, thus affecting and distorting the young minds and family values that parents would have instilled.

CONSERVING CULTURE & VALUES:

Conserving culture and values is a Singapore tradition. With that said, the media also has the ability to create a strong effect on its cultures and values. Singapore has 4 major races, Chinese, Malays, Indians and a small proportion of other races. There are many things that society is not ready to see or face. Thus, as a particularly conservative country, concerns might be raised if Singapore attempted to westernise its younger generation. Such content might contain social stigmas. Nudity is heavily frowned upon, as Singapore is a conservative country. Portraying characters in the nude is something that Singaporeans are not ready to face. One reason for this may be the different racial groups. Islam believes in women to be fully clothed, thus showing nude scenes would be offensive to them, especially in a conservative country. Another example of content that society would not be ready to see would be religion. Conflicts might arise from airing such content especially in a country that regularly promotes racial and religious harmony. Singaporeans might take offense if it insults their faith or if the messages preached are wrong. Albeit a democratic country, Singapore is still rather conservative and its citizens believe in the preservation of their individual cultures and values.

RACIAL & RELIGIOUS HARMONY:

Airing programmes such as *The Last Temptation of Christ* or *A Jihad for Love* might spark uproar with the possibility of racial and religious conflict. *The Last Temptation of Christ* have been banned in Singapore, as the government feared it might raise conflicts in a society where Christianity is widely practiced. *A Jihad for Love* depicted Islam in a scenario that degraded the beliefs and practices Muslims. Thus, the banning of this movie curbs the possibility of a disturbed religious harmony. Racial and Religious harmony is extremely crucial for a country like Singapore due to the racial riots in the 1960s. After the racial riots, Singapore has been encouraging fostering togetherness. This is done so as to not promote racial aggressiveness. Thus, any content that disrupts this harmony is strongly discouraged. Religious and racial groups might take offense when explicit content threatens their cultural and family values, impacting their children as well. Contents that degrade different religious and racial differences might spark an outcry causing conflicts, altering children's minds and affecting the peace and harmony that Singapore works so hard to promote.

POLITICAL INCLINATIONS:

As explained earlier, Singapore's TV content is rather rigid as its free to air channels are owned and run by the government through its investment arm Temasek Holdings. Singapore only has one channel that is dedicated to airing local and international news all day, Channel News Asia. However, as the content produced is government owned, news that goes on air does not contradict the current ruling inclinations of the government. Terence Lee cited a published work from one of Singapore's most prolific journalist, Cherian George, where George said '... newspaper editors are expected to have an instinctive grasp of Singapore's national interest, and how to protect them' (*quoted by Cherian George, 2002*). Terence Lee also quoted that 'George's explanation of how the Singapore government is able to control reporting and editorial outcomes via 'persuasive tactics', 'inducement' and via 'preferences' (*quoted by Terence Lee, 2013*), which in actuality is indirect propaganda. To further place emphasis on propaganda in Singapore, John A. Lent's article places emphasis on doubtful truthful confessions that have appeared on TV, from Singapore journalists. He believes that the confessions have been either staged or forced upon the journalists by the government, in order to set them 'free' or for publicity reasons (*John A. Lent, 1978*). This act itself is already a form of propaganda. Thus, both Terence Lee & John A. Lent's works reiterates the standpoint that propaganda is introduced by the government, and used by the governed.

CONCLUSION:

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew gained an international reputation for the engineering of a disciplined, ordered society relatively free of conflict, permissiveness, decadence, unbridled individualism, and other 'Western maladies'. The social engineering, which continues today, is undertaken by a political elite which has extended and consolidated its power since independence and in the process incorporated the civil bureaucracy and the trade unions' (quoted by Barry Wilkinson, 1988). Thus, drawing to a conclusion, how the TV industry in Singapore adheres to the practices and methodologies of the Authoritarian Theory. Furthermore, as explained in this essay, the Singapore government not only controls the general population, but also have undeniably engineered a well-ordered and regimented society. Therefore, before Singapore's TV industry can start to flourish and be able to attain the status of world-wide recognition like that of the western countries, its government has to practice what democratic countries are suppose to, a free media. The capitalist nature of free media for now at least, ensures competitiveness for quality news and TV production to take centre stage. It will be a long time before the people of Singapore can get a taste and come to understand the freedom of the TV industry. As a person passionate about the TV industry, I can only hope that one day Singapore will adhere and adopt more liberal practices, such as producing content that will raise discussions as well as content that would give Singaporeans a deeper intellectual capacity to distinguish between propaganda and individualism.

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