Creative restructuring of Singapore media: Research Lacunas

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Recommended Citation
Leo, P., Creative restructuring of Singapore media: Research Lacunas, Asia Pacific Media Educator, 14, 2003, 4-17.
Available at: http://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss14/2
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In February 2002, the Singapore Government initiated ‘Remaking Singapore’ (The Prime Minister’s Office Press Release) as the nation-state faced its worst economic downturn since its Independence in 1965. Amidst this broad effort to fundamentally review Singapore’s strategies for economic growth and survival as a nation, the media sector also underwent a series of restructuring exercises, which began in April 2000 with the introduction of competition between the two core local print and broadcast media players. The broader plan to develop Singapore into a “global media city” was drawn up in the ‘Media 21’ of the ‘Creative Industries Development Strategy’, released in late 2002. Policy developments and discourses in such instances suggest that Singapore is calling out and giving urgent recognition to an apparent shift in the “new economy” – from a knowledge-based one, to one that is increasingly creativity-based. Merely from these observations, Singapore’s media scene today appears more complex than it was before the introduction of media restructuring. The following discussion explores some potential areas of research arising from the assumption that the Singapore media sector has and is continuing to undertake reforms in an effort to remain viable in the globalising economy that is not only knowledge-based, but increasingly creativity-based.

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In February 2002, the Singapore Government initiated ‘Remaking Singapore’ as the nation-state faced its worst economic situation since its Independence in 1965. In the press release from the Prime Minister’s Office (2002), it was explained that:

“The concurrent revolutions in info-communications, biology, technology, religious fundamentalism and globalisation have necessitated a fundamental review of Singapore’s strategies for economic growth and survival as a nation. While the Economic Review Committee deals with the economic dimensions, the Remaking Singapore Committee will focus on the political, social and cultural aspects of our survival as a nation. The
complementary nature of the two Committees is deliberate. For Singapore to forge ahead in the 21st Century, both our economic engine and social condition must be sound.”

Amidst this broad effort to fundamentally review Singapore’s strategies for economic growth and survival as a nation, the media sector also underwent a series of restructuring exercises. Beginning with the introduction of competition between the two core local print and broadcast media players in April 2000, the vision of developing Singapore into a “global media city” has been blueprinted in *Media 21* contained within the *Creative Industries Development Strategy*. This strategy was proposed under the Creative Industries Working Group of the Services Industries Subcommittee of the Economic Review Committee (CI-ERC).

The economic framework of Singapore’s media sector has thus shifted away from a monopolistic one. The print and broadcasting monopolies have crossed into each other’s turf to compete. Telecommunication players that were previously not involved in broadcasting have begun to enter (as in the case of *Starhub* through a merger with the *Singapore CableVision*) or are at the threshold of seeking entrance (as in the case of *SingTel*) into the broadcasting arena. Gaining entry into broadcasting for the telecommunication companies (telcos) means gaining strategic positioning to harness the promises of convergent services like interactive television (iTV) and voice-over internet protocol (VOIP) services. It also means the pay-TV scene in Singapore would be expanded. The introduction of competition which, given the deeper-pockets of the telcos, could be more rigorous than that seen in the free-to-air TV market; the range of service would also be diversified beyond the current 37 channels of one-way TV services.

With these changes in the industry, the regulatory functions of info-communication authorities have been restructured to better manage and promote convergence. In late 2001, the telecommunication-arm of the Ministry of Communication and Information Technology (MCIT) was reassigned to the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA). Consequently, MCIT’s statutory board regulator of telecommunications, the Infocomm Development Authority (IDA) came under the ambit of MITA. On 1 Jan 2003, the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA), the Singapore Films Commission (SFC) and MITA’s Films and Publications Department (FPD) were merged to form the ‘Media Development Authority’ (MDA). Unlike its predecessors, MDA’s primary role is supposedly emphasised on developing rather than regulating media content across media platforms in Singapore. Indeed, the vision of ‘*Media 21*’ claims that it “embodies a paradigm shift from the perception of the media as a mere means of mass communication to an interdependent ecosystem of the full range of media industries…” (2002,
p.1) to support the Singapore’s overall efforts to remain viable even in the ‘Creative Economy’ (CI-ERC Media Release, 2002).

In appearance and workings, Singapore’s media scene thus seem more complex today in the twenty-first century than ever before. The economic transformations in Singapore’s media policies, which started with the processes towards privatisation in the early 1990s, seem to be continued in these next stages of development.

It has been said that in Singapore, “‘Economic growth’ is the anchor without which all issues become irrelevant” (The Straits Times Editorial, 11 Jan 1990, in Birch, 1993, p.4). This statement encapsulates a pragmatic “do-or-die” thinking that guided the way Singaporeans function even on the day-to-day. Such thinking came out of a political strategy that the People’s Action Party (PAP), the nation-state’s ruling party since its independence in 1965, had used to divert Singaporeans away from the political. The “steady and systematic depoliticization of a politically active and aggressive citizenry” was to a large extent aimed at creating a people focused on economic productivity (Chan, 1975, p.51). A productive-people ensured the smooth and efficient running of the economic machinery as Singapore aggressively industrialised to expand its entrepot economy into one that is based on manufacturing. Hence, the social and economic developments went hand in hand to ensure the in-coming investments that would in turn be converted into employment for the people.

In Gramscian terms, the state relied on the media, particularly television broadcasting to create and recreate “a particular cultural and moral level … which corresponds to the needs of the productive forces for the development” (Gramsci, 1971, p.258) of Singapore as a nation, shaped in the image of PAP’s ideals. Broadcasting and the print media were treated and harnessed as pedagogic instruments that extended the classroom drills of public consciousness into the private spheres of people’s homes. Nurturing discipline and perhaps even docility in the citizenry was deemed as an effective compliment to the industrialisation drive. Former Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew was clear about it when he wrote that the television as an educational tool, should be able to stand up to “the litmus test… [of] whether it nurtures citizens who can live, work, contend and co-operate in a civilised way” (Report on Moral Education, 1979, cited in Heidt, 1987, pp.144-5). These imperatives have guided much of the media’s functions and roles throughout the years as a handmaiden to the economy as the latter transforms from being a mere colonial entrepot centre, to an export-oriented industrialised economy, and to becoming a
‘total business centre’ and a hub of services.

Even as it aggressively stepped into the 1990s, the economy that was supposedly driven by knowledge and information, Singapore seemed to hinge on the strategies of its ‘manufacturing era’. Accordingly, the vision of Singapore becoming a ‘total business centre’ was built in anticipation for enabling the new requirements of this new economy to function. Many national projects were embarked upon to ensure that Singapore would be ready to swim with the new tides of this world economy. National communication infrastructures such as the SingaporeOne Asymmetrical Digital Subscriber Line (ADSL) network and the hybrid-fibre coaxial (HFC) cable network were built along-side initiatives that promote Internet communication for efficient e-businesses and e-learning. The idea of making Singapore an efficient and convenient city by its well-connected physical infrastructure was transposed onto the ways new media communication was managed and provided for. Singapore was to become an “intelligent island” by the pipes and superhighways it built to enable the efficient economic operations of the new information-based economy (see National Computer Board, 1992). Within such an economic environment, the socio-cultural and political-cultural networks that were still essentially disciplined and unquestioning, could still be tolerated, and indeed, function healthily.

However, it seems the “new economy” is transiting from the age of information and knowledge into one that is increasingly dependent on innovation and creativity. In his book, The Rise of the Creative Class (2002), Richard Florida declared that today’s economy is “fundamentally a Creative Economy”. He differentiated the ‘creative economy’ from the ‘information-based’ and ‘knowledge-based’ economy that Peter Drucker (1993) proposed earlier to mark the post-industrial era. Drucker noted that “The basic economic resources – ‘the means of production’… is no longer capital, nor natural resources… nor labour.’ It is and will be knowledge”. Florida proposed instead ‘creativity’ as the key driver. In the Creative Economy, ‘knowledge’ and ‘information’ are but only “tools and materials of creativity”. Applying creativity on knowledge and information brings about “innovation”, its product (p.44). Through the statistical comparison of US cities as case studies, Florida showed that for a society to succeed as an economically viable and socially vibrant society in this new economy, it needs to balance all three conditions of economic development: Talent, Technology and Tolerance. It is interesting to note that Florida bases the calculations of ‘Tolerance’ on the “Gay-index” and the “Bohemian-index”. Thus, all the more one is prompted to wonder how the notions of ‘creativity’ could be problematic for Singapore, which has various legal guidelines
against homosexuality and unacceptable “bohemian” behaviours.

Current policy developments and discourses in Singapore seem to call out in urgent recognition for the growing existence of the Creative Economy. The strategies and initiatives outlined in the various economic restructuring packages, including the Creative Industries Development Strategy and Media 21, calls this a “bold... unleash(ing)” (CI-ERC Media Release, 2002, p.1). ‘Creativity’ suggests, at least at the commonsensical level, as requiring one to operate with a questioning disposition: that creativity ventures into the realms of conventions and status quos for the purpose of challenging them to discover alternatives. Upsetting the preferred states of power relations thus seems to be a prerequisite of creativity. If so, what are the implications of restructuring the media, the economy, and the society towards a culture of greater creativity, have on the dynamics of power relations in Singapore?

The current media policy developments and discourses are also emphasising another key idea, the ‘ecosystem’. This notion links the media sector within a broader network, which includes the Arts and Heritage scene and Info-Communication Technology (ICT) scene. This move is significant. These three historically separated sectors have, as a result, been reconfigured, relocated and reassigned into a synergistic framework. The building of ‘Fusionpolis’, a “state-of-the-art work, live, play and learn environment for media and infocomm companies, and the artistic community” is a physical manifestation of the ‘ecosystem’ idea (Media 21, 2002, p.7). The official statements and documents claim that the intention behind this “creative cluster” is not only to bring about economic vibrancy, but also bring about a ripple effect in the wider community to be inspired into greater creativity and social vibrancies (CI-ERC Media Release, 2002, p.2). Also, it was not until the introduction of this policy framework that the media in Singapore has been largely segregated from the other sectors. This was particularly if its joining with the other sectors meant subjecting it to the greater influences of economic ebbs, flows and manipulations of the market place and private interests at the expense of ‘public interests’.

To what extent would/can Singapore meet the new economic demands of the new creative economy given it has historically been careful not to unfurl the discipline and docility instilled in the citizenry? Would not these new demands encroach on the jealously though contritely guarded value system (e.g. how ‘tolerance’ is to be defined now in light of Florida’s recommendations about embracing the bohemian spirit and the gay community)? The viewpoint that “economic growth’ is the anchor without which all issues become irrelevant” in Singapore
PETRINA LEO: Creative restructuring ...

is likely to still ring true for quite a long while more, judging by the outcome of the 2001 General Election. Yet, if the economic imperatives of a maturing new economy were increasingly driven by creativity, rather than just knowledge and information, would holding fast to this rationale, and in what ways, challenge the way Singapore negotiates its economic interests against the interests of social relations and political imperatives? The assumed knowledge about the basic attitudes, ethos and cultures of this new economy appear to pose challenges to those that Singapore has been subscribing to all this while, during its manufacturing and even its services era. It remains to be seen what part the increasingly commercialising media in Singapore would play in the new creative economy.

Recent research works on Singapore and its media still reflect the media mainly, if not only, in that dimension where they are institutions/instruments of governmentality for central socialisation, acculturation and nation-building. Although these works are important, it shows a gap in research on media in Singapore. While not necessarily claiming that these aspects of Singapore media are inoperative or that they have been relegated due to restructuring, the presence and significance of emerging dimensions in the media sector and the impact these have on the government-media-industry-society dynamics and relations need to be more extensively accounted for.

So far, it is more common to find the introduction of competition between the local media players as incidental features in papers (e.g. Rodan, 2001). Ang Peng Hwa and Lora Lee (2001) provide a cursory article to the introduction of competition in Singapore’s media. Perceiving media liberalisation as limited and a stand-alone event, Ang and Lee report on it as a reflection of Singapore in transition, and outlined the various challenges that could be expected over time. Cherian George’s (2002) article on Singapore’s press deals more critically with the issue of restructuring. He argues that “while the changes [towards the pro-market policies in Singapore’s media system] may be subtle and evolutionary, they contribute to a real and discernible long-term trend towards greater democratisation.” (p.173). However, given that this paper was focused on the press, it has not established an overarching picture of the changes that have been occurring in Singapore’s overall mediascape. One basic need is thus to first acknowledge, map, expound upon, and interrogate, the extent the current and on-going developments in Singapore’s media reflect a change in the basic ‘narrative’ of media’s role in Singapore society.

The study of narratives in policies must not be underestimated.
It has been acknowledged variously as being important and necessary when researchers within the policy sciences began to recognise that the ‘scientific’, ‘objective’ and ‘logical’ approaches were not the only ways to study policies. In fact, policy analysts have realised that if they continued to treat the study of policies merely as a rational and neutral activity, the underlying policy issues especially contentious ones, might not be specified or conceptualised. This is because perceptions of the same world, situation or issue can differ depending on the individual’s background, values, assumptions and biases. In other words, “meaning is highly contextualised” (Bridgman & Barry, 2002, p.141). Also, the language that is used to deliver thoughts and views do not merely mirror the world, but it has the propensity to construct and shape views. This in turn suggests that contestations and power play reside and arise within and between discursive frameworks. Emery Roe, for example, stresses that the stories in policy descriptions and analyses are a “force in themselves, and must be considered explicitly in assessing policy options”. This is because these ‘stories’ or ‘policy narratives’ “often resist change or modification even in the presence of contradicting empirical data”, given that they “continue to underwrite and stabilise the assumptions for decision-making in the face of high uncertainty, complexity and polarisation” (1994, p.2). Therefore, the study of narratives within policies is a useful way to uncover why and how policies emerge. It also provides a way to reconcile seemingly contradictory and irrational developments in policy frameworks (Bridgman & Barry, 2002).

Studying the socio-cultural and the politico-cultural implications arising from the restructuring of Singapore media within the discourses of ‘creativity’ and ‘ecosystem’ is significant in the way it relates to the wider research communities across various fields. Research surrounding the creative and industrial dimensions of culture and cultural policy studies seem to be converging or are at least increasingly related. ‘Creativity’ seems to be gaining popularity across various fields of research today; critical communication and cultural studies is only one keen player among many others. Indeed, the study of creative industries is taken up across many fields, ranging from business management to social studies. Some of them focus on capturing the definition and formulae of the ‘creative’ – whether of the individual as worker (e.g. Florida, 2002), of the industry (e.g. Tepper, 2002; Howkins, 2001), or of the society (e.g. Florida, 2002). Others devote themselves to highlighting the problematics within the conceptualisation of the discourses about ‘creativity’ and adoption.
of the ‘creative industries’ as an idea or as a particular type of industry which is ‘real’ and new (e.g. Healy, 2002).

Terry Flew notes that the concept of creative industries is one of the more visible dimensions of late (2003, p.89). The surge of interest in this area seems to stem from the rate and extent of take-up on the notion of ‘creativity’ within policy and corporate circles. Indeed, the term ‘creative industries’ was introduced by the Blair Labour government in Britain in 1998 and it has infiltrated into universities, such as Australia’s Queensland University of Technology (Flew, 2003, p.89). However, as Healy notes, this area of study had its origins in Adorno and Horkheimer’s critical and denunciatory conception of ‘The Culture Industry’ (1977, orig.1940s). This has, in turn, been discussed over the last thirty years in various works, albeit not in relation to the concept of “creativity”, by other cultural and media studies researchers (e.g. Jeremy Tunstall, Nicholas Garnham, Herbert Schiller, Dennis McQuail, Robert McChesney, Stuart Cunningham, just to name a few).

Indeed, many earlier research on culture industries were ‘Cultural Policy Studies’ that emerged “substantially” with the onset of deregulatory policies in the US, UK and Europe (Tumber, 2000, p.3). Such research in media and communications as cultural industries, were then also fuelled by developments brought about by convergence in communication technologies and businesses (McQuail, 1998). Out of these studies, there are two distinguishable forms of ‘Cultural Policy Studies’. The first form is economically oriented. Economic cultural policy studies is concerned mainly with the economic transformation of cultural policies. These include looking at how the government plays a role in setting parameters for cultural production and distribution required in the allocation of scarce resources (e.g. radio frequency spectrum, funding for local content development, etc.), and how cultural labour and consumption figure within national economies. Increasingly, it includes studying the economic shifts in agenda, outlook, discursive practices and aims in cultural policies. The other form of cultural policy studies is more theoretical. Based on Foucault’s works, these cultural policy studies are mainly concerned with the relations of culture and governmentality and the issues arising from such relationships (During, 1993, pp. 18-20).

The growing attention of cultural studies towards policy issues could also be due to the growing call within academia for cultural studies to engage more sensibly and relevantly with the issues, concerns and actors of policy-making. A strong proponent of this position is Tony Bennett who argues strongly for theoretical work to have greater pragmatic consequences than just uncovering “the truth” and in so doing “put policy into cultural studies” (1992, pp.28-
32). Stuart Cunningham’s *Framing Culture* (1992) demonstrates how this could be done. He investigates the relationship and differences between two institutions – cultural critique and cultural policy – and applies them in discussion of various case studies, “hardy perennials in the thicket of cultural policy in Australia”, such as Australian content on commercial TV, the introduction of pay TV, and violence on TV (p.9).

The research on Singapore in relation to creativity and the cultural industry have so far tended to look at culture as the arts, hence policies for the arts as ‘cultural policies’. To a large extent, this is because the researchers have seized on the research opportunities arising from the earlier strategic economic positioning of these cultural entities during the late 1990s to develop the Arts and Heritage sector into a *Renaissance City* (MITA & STPB 1995’s proposal on Singapore: Global City for the Arts), alongside the promotion of entrepreneurship and innovation within local businesses and technological developments. However, one should not discount the influence in the legacy of official discourses in Singapore in identifying ‘culture’ mainly as a matter of the arts and heritage. The term ‘culture’ was less identified with broadcasting and print. Examples of such works include those by Lily Kong (2000a; 2000b), and Kwok Kian-Woon and Low Kee-Hong (2002). Kong’s work is an example of the first kind of cultural policy studies. She looks at how the “hegemony of the economic” operates at the intersection between the economic and socio-cultural agendas behind cultural development policies, and the conflicts between the regulators and arts practitioners regarding the clash between developmental priorities and artistic ideals. Kwok and Low’s work tends towards the other kind, as it considers the “complexities in the logic and workings of cultural policy in Singapore” as a “component of the work of government in an age of transnationalism” and in relation to modernity (2002, p.150).

The study of Singapore’s media and communications as cultural, and hence political, practice has tended to come from David Birch (1993; 1999). Singapore’s media and communication policies are more often discussed with reference to a particular policy issue pertaining to a specific medium – particularly the press (e.g. George, 2002; Rodan, 2000) and the Internet (e.g. Yao, 1996; Ang, 1999; Gomez 2002; Lee, 2002). They concentrate on particular aspects of media regulation, e.g. on censorship (e.g. Yeo & Mahiznan, 1998; Gomez, 2000); ownership and control (e.g. Rodan, 2000). The media in Singapore is also often brought into discussions of political economic research on Singapore, such as the media’s role in the elections (e.g. see Kuo, Holaday & Peck, 1993; Tay, 2002; Mutalib, 2002), and numerously on the state of
Singapore’s civil society as reflected in its media (e.g. George & Pillay, 1998; Rodan, 2000).

There are two pieces of work that look at Singapore’s media policies in relation to the underlying principles and ideologies guiding the nation-state’s wider policies on communications and culture. Eddie Kuo and Peter Chen (1983) provided “the first of its kind” study on the subject matter (1983, p.2). Researching from a sociological tradition, Kuo and Chen focus on presenting an empirical account of Singapore’s communication policy and planning on activities in relation to social development in Singapore. This include looking at how the various communication systems (i.e. the mass broadcast and print media) as well as telecommunication and postal services are regulated, operated and consumed, and how they influence the shaping of a racially, religiously and culturally heterogeneous society into a cohesive nation-state. It was ten years before another monograph on Singapore’s communication policies was published. David Birch’s notable *Singapore Media: Communication Strategies and Practices* (1993) added a new dimension to the first study. Birch’s critical studies approach to Singapore media uncovered the “measured ideological framework of a domestic and regional postcolonial politics of nation-building” (1993, p.vii). Since then, as noted earlier, there have been no extensive studies that look at Singapore’s media scene in light of the several developmental leaps that began in the early 1990s with the corporatisation of the state-run television system.

This paper questions the possibility and importance of locating fresh research perspectives from new empirical developments in Singapore’s media and cultural policies. The potential areas of research highlighted here could contribute to the currently limited coffers of studies on Singapore and its media from a critical cultural and communication perspectives. At the onset, given the nascence of the restructuring processes in Singapore media, providing a kind of baseline study would be critical to updating the basic ‘story’ about Singapore and its media. Recognising the need to discuss the ‘media story’ in relation to the policy stories about the arts and info-communication technology (ICT) means a ‘re-scoping’ of Singapore media within a broadened cultural and creative framework in Singapore. An exposition of this sort, where Singapore’s media, arts and infocomm sectors are examined in relation to each other within a reconfigured ‘creative industries’ framework, has yet to be done in the study of Singapore’s media/communication/cultural policies.

A reorientation of our approach in understanding the media in Singapore provides a new platform from which to study the
significance and implications of new media policies. It will help in future analyses of the socio- and politico-cultural shifts needed to accommodate global moves towards ‘creativity’ as the paradigm for economic and cultural policies more widely. Discussions and examinations of key concepts such as ‘knowledge-based economy’, and ‘creativity-based economy’, and their relationship to ‘globalisation’ and the ‘nation-state’, are currently attracting heightened interests in policy discourses. While as Flew points out, ‘creativity’ is today “a lot of different things to a lot of different people” (2003, p.90), existing theories and concepts about ‘creativity’, ‘new economy’ and the role of media in society have developed mainly within Western democratic contexts. By deploying these theories within the Singaporean context, and in finding out how they can be adopted and adapted in relation to Singapore may help contribute new insights to our understanding of ‘creativity’ in a culturally diverse way.

NOTES

1. Television was introduced by the PAP in 1963 when the fate of Singapore and the PAP were hanging precariously on the negotiations over its merger with the Malaysian Federation and the power-struggle against its party break-away faction, the Barisan Socialis. Television was believed to be a more powerful and effective medium than the radio in amassing and motivating the populace in its political struggles (Leo, 1995). Print on the other hand, as pointed out in Cherian George’s recent article, was at that time “out of step with the historic nationalistic project that saw Singapore emerge from colonial rule, through messy merger, to full independence.” It was this experience that had led to the tenuous feelings in the PAP leadership for the press that prompted the establishment of various levels of legal and regulatory controls for the press, journalists and public communication practices in general (2002, p.175-6). These, as several researchers have noted, had subsequently shaped the character of Singapore’s press.

2. The outcome of the 2001 General Elections (GE) suggest that Singaporeans still subscribe to the notion about the prime importance of economic survival. In the face of Singapore’s worst economic downturn since its independence, 75.3% of the votes, an increase of 10% from the previous GE, went to the PAP. Support for the two returning opposition seats sunk. Economic deliverance, it seems is still entrusted to the political incumbents. For fuller assessments on the 2001 GE, refer to Simon Tay’s ‘The Coming Crisis? Domestic Politics in and from 2001’ (2002) and Hussin Mutalib’s ‘Singapore 2001 General Election and its Implications for the Future of Democracy and Politics in the Republic’ (2002).
REFERENCES


PETRINA LEO: Creative restructuring ...

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