



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Opportunities and challenges for retaining public trust in a state-funded SPH Media

By NG Soon Kiat

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Introduction

“The Government’s key interest is to ensure the reach of SPH Media Trust’s products. No one gains if these products lack credibility and are ignored by audiences [...] It is because the public sees them as trusted sources of news that we must do all we can to keep them as viable propositions.”

Speaking in parliament in February 2022, this impassioned preamble by Singapore’s Minister for Communications and Information, Josephine Teo, came ahead of the announcement that her ministry had set aside S\$900 million (£555m) in funding support for Singapore Press Holdings Media Trust (SMT) over the next five years.¹

SMT, a not-for-profit holding company of SPH Media, publishes English daily *The Straits Times*, Chinese daily *Lianhe Zaobao*, Malay daily *Berita Harian* and Tamil daily *Tamil Murasu*, among other titles. The trust was spun off from newspaper publisher and mainboard-listed company Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) in December 2021, as the once-most profitable newspaper company in the world struggled to keep its media business afloat.²

The restructuring was the biggest shake-up of the local media industry since SPH was formed in 1984. Teo’s financial commitment does not prevent SMT – a company limited by guarantee (CLG) – from retaining its existing sources of income: reader revenue via news subscriptions, and advertising revenue.

While many herald the change in the funding model as a new beginning for news media in Singapore, there is concern among some media scholars, industry veterans and socio-political commentators about what this might mean for the editorial independence of the new entity.

¹ Ong, J. (2022, Feb 15,). SPH media trust has exercised editorial independence, this will not change with govt funding: Josephine Teo. *The Straits Times* Retrieved from <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/politics/sph-media-trust-has-exercised-editorial-independence-this-will-not-change-with-government-funding-josephine-teo>

² Lau, J. N., Lin, T., & Low, M. M. (2013). *Mapping digital media: Singapore*. Retrieved from https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/a62c182b-21c6-4255-8f76-5019f012cef1/mapping-digital-media-singapore-20131017_0.pdf

Bertha Henson, the former associate editor of *The Straits Times*, asked in a blog post: “The worry then is what this means for the independence of the new entity when it comes to reporting and writing the news. Will it be beholden to the (government) and other private and public players?”³

Are such fears about journalistic integrity and independence warranted? Might government funding have any effect on public trust in SPH Media? How would the restructuring alter the relationship between the state and the press? These are questions that this paper sets out to examine.

³ Henson, B. (2021). It...Could be... A new beginning for news media here. Retrieved from https://berthahenson.com/2021/05/07/it-could-be-a-new-beginning-for-news-media-here/?fbclid=IwAR181mJDJgO0m5mmAKSYiW1PiiYbwsg9GmKQ7LVCM6RYKEmOP_4NnCAYWz8&=1.

Uniquely Singapore: How the media environment came to be

As chief media policymaker, Lee Kuan Yew – Singapore’s first prime minister and long-time leader of the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) – shaped the local media landscape for decades.

A Cambridge-educated lawyer, Lee Kuan Yew saw the media as one of three critical institutions (the other two being the economy and army) for an effective government. He did not subscribe to the Western notions of press freedom, which he felt gave the press right to be a power centre equal to the government, the judiciary, the legislature, and the voting public.⁴

In a speech in Helsinki on June 9, 1971, Lee Kuan Yew laid out the fundamental principle that would underpin Singapore’s media policy and influence its media environment for many years. Freedom of the press, he said, “must be subordinated to the overriding needs of the integrity of Singapore, and to the primacy of purpose of an elected government.”⁵

Two significant players dominate Singapore’s news industry today: Mediacorp, the state-owned sole provider of free-to-air television channels and the leading radio station operator, and SPH Media, which publishes six newspapers in four official languages in both print and digital editions, among other titles.

Since its inception in 1984, created by the merger of two newspaper groups, SPH has supported Singapore’s national interest, promoting desirable values identified as crucial to the nation-building process.^{6,7}

Former *Straits Times* editor Cheong Yip Seng, who published a tell-all memoir in 2013, insists this did not necessitate playing the role of a subservient press, as

⁴ Cheong, Y. S. (2013). *OB markers: My straits times story* Straits Times Press.

⁵ Ministry of Communications and Information. (2017). Maintaining social harmony - managing the media environment. Retrieved from https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/policy_history/card?id=6.

⁶ Josephi, B. (2002). On the cusp between global and local: Young journalists at the Strait Times. *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 1(12), 123-138. Retrieved from <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss12/8>.

⁷ Tan, D. (1993). *Values, nation building and control: The Singapore mass media in the next lap*.

evidenced by the “constant run-ins” the national broadsheet had with the government.

His frequent encounters with ministers and policymakers did, however, make clear the government’s vision of the ideal Singapore press, which was never laid out in writing: “credible but not servile, critical without undermining its policies; supporting its goals in an intelligent, lively way.”

That vision was – and still is – a tall order.

On the one hand, SPH publications needed to make sure they did not lose credibility, otherwise, they would be of little value to anyone; on the other hand, the political leadership held fast to the principle that Singapore journalists have no right to be members of the fourth estate. This was a constant challenge for newsrooms.

Media scholar Beate Josephi, who interviewed young journalists and their supervisors at *The Straits Times* in the early 2000s, described how Singapore journalists often find themselves “treading a fine line between curiosity and criticism”.⁸

But Singapore’s political leaders have long maintained that its media model has served the country well.

While Western critics often see Singapore media operating under the authoritarian model – as the country’s consistently low ranking on the press freedom index by global media watchdog Reporters Without Borders shows – the government insists that the Singapore press follows a different model of contributing to nation-building.

As Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong [noted in 2019](#), “what we have done has worked for Singapore and it’s our objective to continue to do things which will work for Singapore.”⁹

⁸ Josephi, B. (2002). *On the cusp between global and local: Young journalists at the Straits Times*. Asia Pacific Media Educator, 1(12), 123-138. Retrieved from <https://ro.uow.edu.au/apme/vol1/iss12/8>.

⁹ <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/singapore-takes-an-approach-that-works-for-it-pm-lee-says-on-proposed-fake-news-law>

Newspaper and Printing Presses Act: Time to go?

To keep the press in line, the government enacted laws, including the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (NPPA) in the 1970s, which stipulated the terms and conditions of ownership, licensing, and distribution of newspapers.

Under the NPPA, newspapers require annual publishing permits, granted at the discretion of Ministers, which can be denied or revoked at any time. In addition, newspaper companies must issue “management shares” to government nominees.

Today, the Ministry of Communications and Information oversees the enforcement of the NPPA. There has not been any attempt to establish a board or regulator for the press independent of the government.¹⁰

When news of the restructuring of SPH was announced, observers wondered if the existing licensing system would be reviewed.

In a [commentary](#) published in *The Straits Times*, the newspaper’s associate editor Chua Mui Hoong questioned whether the NPPA, which was passed “several lifetimes ago by digital time”, is still well-placed to help the media operate independently in this day and age.¹¹

However, the government has quickly brushed aside calls for any review of the regulatory framework.

“Although the business and financing model will change, the government does not intend nor expect this to affect the relationship between MCI and the SPH newsroom,” S. Iswaran, Josephine Teo’s predecessor at the communications and information ministry, told parliament in May 2021.¹² This could be read as a statement of status quo control.

¹⁰ Lau, J. N., Lin, T., & Low, M. M. (2013). *Mapping digital media: Singapore*. Retrieved from https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/uploads/a62c182b-21c6-4255-8f76-5019f012cef1/mapping-digital-media-singapore-20131017_0.pdf.

¹¹ Chua, M. H. (2021, May 14,). Media restructuring: Review regulatory regime next? *The Straits Times* Retrieved from <https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/media-restructuring-review-regulatory-regime-next>.

¹² Singapore govt says state funding won't impact relationship with newspaper publisher. (2021, May 10,). *Reuters* Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/article/sph-restructuring-media-idUKL4N2MX1VJ>.

In separate interviews for this paper, senior newsroom editors agreed that the NPPA needs a relook.

“There should be a discussion about whether to review the NPPA, given that times have changed and that the restructuring is underway,” Lee Huay Leng, editor-in-chief of Chinese Media Group, who oversees *Lianhe Zaobao*, *Shin Min Daily News* and other Chinese-language titles, told me. “I am in favour of reviewing it.”

Speaking in her personal capacity, and not as a representative of *The Straits Times*, Chua Mui Hoong suggested the existing framework may have outlived its usefulness.

“That the license can be revoked without [MCI] needing to give an explanation or reason means the government has a very powerful tool. But frankly, in this day and age, maybe that tool is less powerful already, from the government’s point of view,” she said. “If I were the government, [...] I would be looking at how best I can control today’s media, which is digital, and which now has a different ownership structure.”

Lee Huay Leng, who was deeply involved in the formation of SPH Media, said the SMT transition period “may not necessarily be the best timing” to review the NPPA. “We needed to deal with many things then. If we included the review of NPPA, the focus of the restructuring would change,” she said. “When is a good time to discuss this? Probably when the next generation of leaders takes over.”

Less wiggle room in recent years

Besides formal legislation, media outlets also must deal with informal rules of engagement called “OB markers” or “out-of-bounds markers”.

According to Singaporean media scholar Cherian George, the term comes from golf and refers to the boundaries of political acceptability. While not punishable by imprisonment or fines, a breach of OB markers, which often have to do with racial and religious sensitivities, invites political retribution: individuals and organisations risk losing political capital.¹³

Leslie Fong, the former editor of *The Straits Times*, also noted that the press laws and political culture in Singapore are such that, “the Government, with a vast array of powers at its disposal, will not countenance the press taking any determined stand against it on any issues that it considers fundamental.”¹⁴

Media watchers and practitioners worry the uneasy act of balancing editorial and political pulls is becoming more difficult.

In interviews with media scholar Howard Lee in 2018, industry stakeholders spoke of an increasingly tightened media environment. They said the government deployed legal, economic, and social levers to restrict journalistic freedom. They also saw a general deterioration in government-media relations that was not directly affected by regulation and legislation.¹⁵

Chua Mui Hoong, who writes weekly political columns in the *Straits Times*, has also noticed a “narrowing of space” in the last few years, when social media platforms and online media sites experienced immense growth.

“The freer the online media is, the more the government would want to tighten its control of local media because when there is so much freedom in alternative media and so much criticism of the government, we will see the government wanting to

¹³ George, C. (2012). *Freedom from the press – journalism and state power in Singapore*. Singapore: NUS press. Singapore: NUS Press.

¹⁴ Fong, L. (1995, July 15,). A time to cheer, a time to dissent. *The Straits Times*

¹⁵ Lee, H. K. H. (2021). *Media governance in Singapore – efficacy and challenges* Retrieved from <https://researchrepositary.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/61543/1/Lee2021.pdf>.

retain its grip on local mainstream media [as] a conduit of information so that it can get its point of view across more easily.”

Chua Mui Hoong added: “The challenge for us in the local media is to try to manage that relationship to maximise the space we have to operate so that our coverage can be as credible as possible and as independent as possible.”

State-funding: A double-edged sword?

Like most newspaper businesses in other mature economies, Singapore Press Holdings has been plagued by declining readership, revenues and share price in recent years. To appease shareholders, it reduced costs by cutting investment in talent and technology, resulting in “[declining content and product quality](#)”.¹⁶

This did not improve the company’s bottom line: for the financial year ending in August 2020, SPH’s media arm recorded its first-ever loss of [S\\$11.4 million](#).¹⁷

To free its news media from shareholder pressure, SPH hived off its media business into a not-for-profit entity in December 2021, allowing it to get funding from private and public sources, including extra financial support from the government.¹⁸

Some academics worry that the injection of state funding could make media companies more susceptible to government influence. Media scholar Marius Dragomir, for example, lists state subsidies as one of the four main financial strategies and tactics that authorities use to dominate the media sector.¹⁹

He suggests it is the least accountable form of state funding in the media because the government decides at its discretion to offer subsidies to media outlets, justifying that as an act to help media and journalism thrive.²⁰

Liew Kai Khiun, a Singaporean independent media and culture researcher, also noted that – unlike the commercial media model, which depends on a wide range of advertisers for revenue – relying on a small, concentrated pool of funders could

¹⁶ WAN-IFRA. (2022). How publicly funded news organisations are sustaining impactful journalism. Retrieved from <https://wan-ifra.org/2022/06/how-publicly-funded-news-organisations-are-sustaining-impactful-journalism/>.

¹⁷ Cordon, M. (2021). Singapore Press Holdings to restructure media business into a not-for-profit entity. Retrieved from <https://www.techinasia.com/singapore-press-holdings-restructure-media-business-notforprofit-entity>.

¹⁸ Tan, C. (2021, May 7,). SPH deal aims to improve asset values, ease shareholder pressure off media unit. *The Business Times* Retrieved from <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/companies-markets/sph-deal-aims-improve-asset-values-ease-shareholder-pressure-media-unit>.

¹⁹ The other three strategies listed by Dragomir are public funding for state-administered media, state advertising, and market-disruption measures.

²⁰ Dragomir, M. (2017). Control the money, control the media: How government uses funding to keep media in line. *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism*, 19 doi:10.1177/1464884917724621

make media companies more susceptible to influence as there is pressure to want to continue receiving financial backing.²¹

Government funding of news media is common in many places, especially in European countries.

For example, the French government spends hundreds of millions of euros annually to support the press, including prominent papers like *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro*. It has done so for over half a century, now through its *Presse et Pluralisme program* which distributed €483 million in subsidies between 2020 and 2022, according to the [Ministry of Culture](#).²²

SMT is expected to spend approximately 40% of the funding received on technology investments and digital talent in the initial years of subsidy deployment. The remainder will be spent on newsroom capability building and training, particularly for the vernacular newsrooms.

As a condition, SPH Media must provide half-yearly progress updates on three key performance indicators:

- the total reach and engagement of the company's products, particularly its digital platforms.
- specific reach indicators for vernacular groups and youth.
- and the resilience of SPH Media's flagship products to minimise downtime and disruption.

It is not known whether these reports will be made public.

²¹ Oh, T. (2021, May 6,). Explainer: SPH shake-up — what is a 'company limited by guarantee' and how does a non-profit journalism model work? *Today Online* Retrieved from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/explainer-sph-shake-what-company-limited-guarantee-and-how-does-non-profit-journalism>.

²² <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/Thematiques/Presse/Documentation/Rapports-etudes>

This [prompted questions](#) from observers like Henson (see Sep 3, 2022 Facebook post) about public accountability and how these funds might impact editorial decisions.²³

²³ Henson, B. (2022). What's happened to SPH media trust? Retrieved from <https://www.facebook.com/bertha.henson.54/posts/pfbid0bMaDdgKsGvhjXX1zKzZaG5hdBNNM1nHxAGK83zoSDBf4rLSBCxGTDLygwbvPhXMdl>

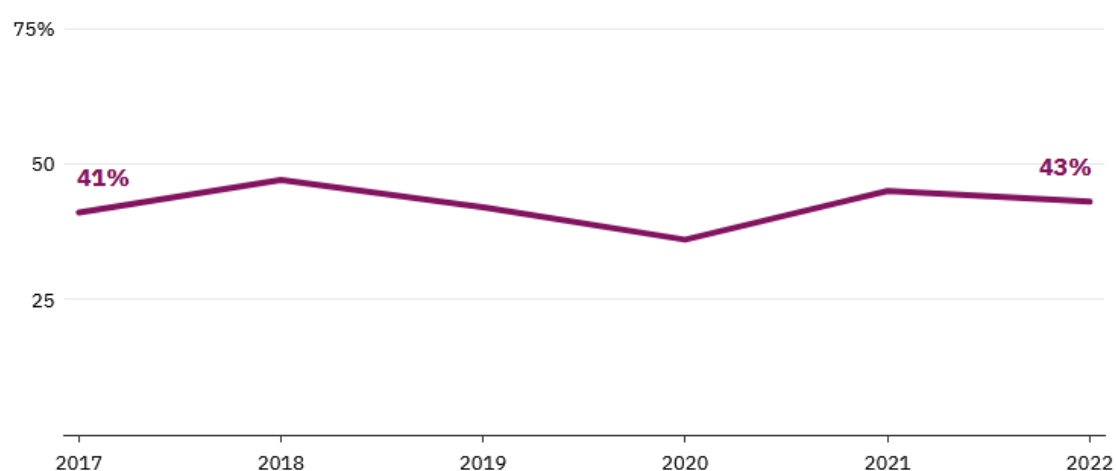
Public perception of SPH Media

No major opinion poll has been conducted on how the public views SPH’s restructuring. However, according to Reuters Institute’s Digital News Reports (DNR), between 2017 (when it first included Singapore) and 2022, overall trust has consistently ranked around 20 out of over 40 countries surveyed.

Overall trust score

Change over time 2017–2022

Singapore



Line graph shows stability of Singapore audiences’ reported trust in news between 2017 and 2022

A [more granular look](#) at the data (see graph on next page) shows the public appears to have less trust in SPH Media publications (*The Straits Times* and *Lianhe Zaobao*) than in their respective Mediacorp rivals (CNA and Channel 8 News).

It is worth noting that the government owns the national broadcaster through its investment company [Temasek Holdings](#). In the five years before 2020, the government allocated [about \\$310 million](#) annually in funding for the broadcaster.²⁴

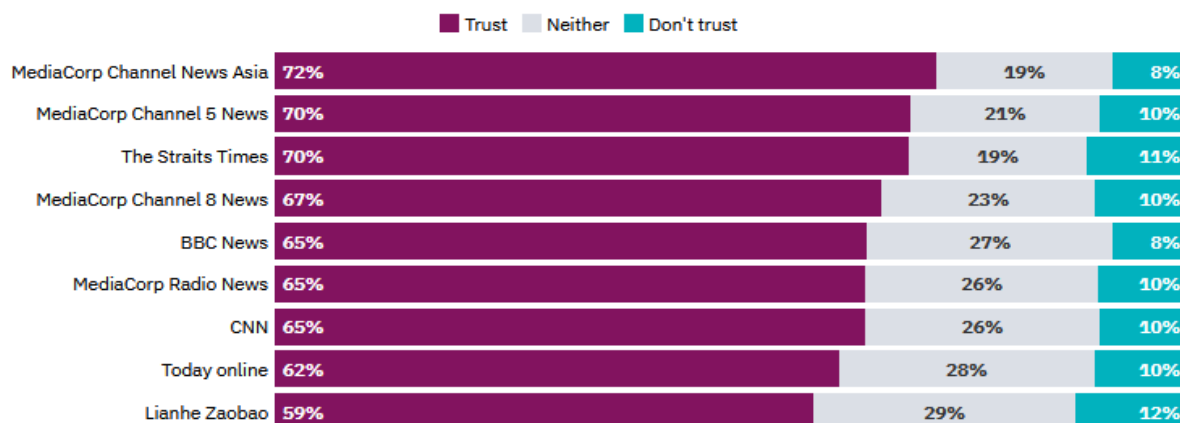
A former *Straits Times* journalist told me that SPH “seems to bear more scrutiny and criticism” in comparison with MediaCorp outlets as “people seem to hold us up to

²⁴ <https://www.mci.gov.sg/pressroom/news-and-stories/pressroom/2020/1/mci-response-to-pq-on-psb-programmes-funding#.ZEvsoGqRmhM.whatsapp>

higher standards as the ‘paper of record’ or the national broadsheet, as compared to other digital media or broadcast channels.”

Brand trust scores

Singapore



A stacked bar graph lists Singapore media brands alongside percentage of surveyed audience who said they “trust”, or “don’t trust” each brand. MediaCorp leads the table in positions one, two and four. The Straits Times is in position three and Lianhe Zaobao is in position nine, below BBC and CNN

In an interview, Dr Richard Fletcher, director of research at the Reuters Institute, explained that broadcast media generally enjoy higher levels of trust than print media due to the “visual nature of the medium”. But he noted that public trust scores are only a metric of audience perception, not a measure of the trustworthiness of the news brands and their content.

Professor Rasmus Nielsen, director of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, sounded the same note of caution in a commentary, pointing out that trust in news is about “much more than the factual accuracy and the trustworthiness of an outlet’s journalism”. “It is also about how that work is interpreted in light of domestic politics and people’s partisan sympathies,” he wrote.²⁵

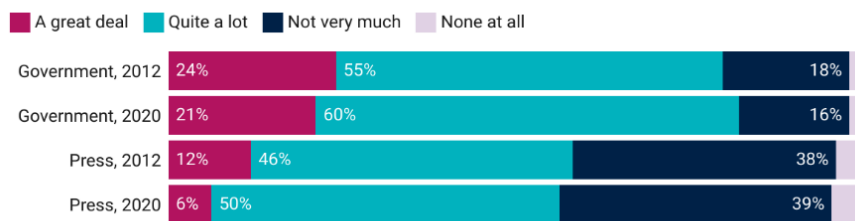
²⁵ Nielsen, R. (2022). The cost of courage: What lower levels of trust in independent digital news outlets reflect. Retrieved from <https://scroll.in/article/1026399/the-cost-of-courage-what-lower-levels-of-trust-in-independent-digital-news-outlets-actually-reflect>.

Singapore media scholar Cherian George also noted that “there is no such thing as a particular media outlet being credible about all things. The same outlet can be credible for some things and less credible for others.”²⁶

Nonetheless, such polling data still offer valuable insights into public perception, particularly on the issue of government influence, a key aspect of this paper.

For example, according to DNR 2022, 29% of respondents say that most, if not all, news organisations in Singapore put their political views ahead of what is best for society. 23% feel the reverse is true. Moreover, 22% of respondents agree that the media is free from undue political influence, a slight dip from 23% in 2017.

Confidence in Government/Press



Source: IPS Attitudes towards Institutions, Politics, and Policies (2020) • Created with Datawrapper

A stacked bar graph shows levels of confidence in government in 2012 and 2020 versus confidence in the press during the same years.

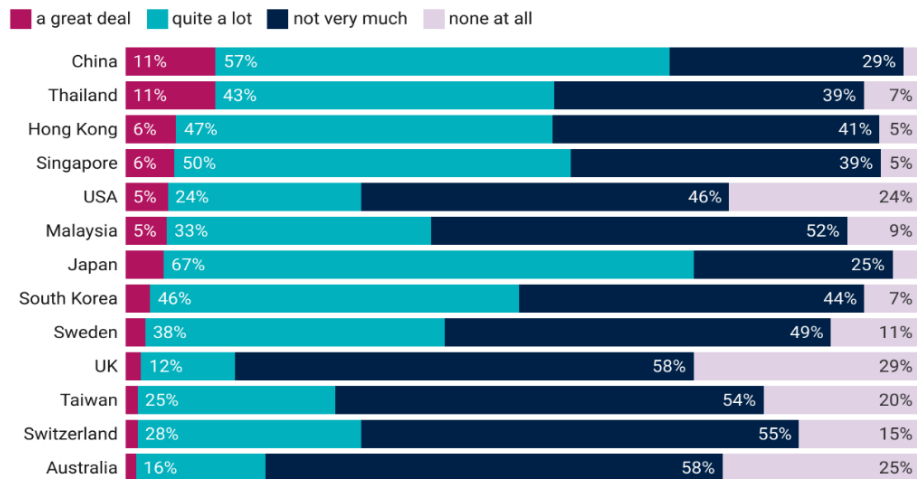
Polls by the Institute of Policy Studies, a Singapore think-tank, also show that overall confidence in the press has remained somewhat constant over the years, although it slipped from 57.8% in 2012, to 56.1% in 2020.²⁷ Interestingly, overall [confidence in the government](#) rose in the same period, from 79.3% to 81.5%.

²⁶ Lee, H. K. H. (2021). *Media governance in Singapore – efficacy and challenges* Retrieved from <https://researchrepository.murdoch.edu.au/id/eprint/61543/1/Lee2021.pdf>.

²⁷ Mathews, M. (2021). *Attitudes towards institutions, politics, and policies: Key findings from the world values survey*. (). Retrieved from <https://lkyspp.nus.edu.sg/docs/default-source/ips/ips-exchange-series-17.pdf>.

Compared with its counterparts in other parts of the world, the Singapore press enjoys greater public confidence than in places like South Korea, Sweden, and Taiwan (see graphic below).

Confidence in the Press, by polity



Source: IPS Attitudes towards Institutions, Politics, and Policies • Created with Datawrapper

A stacked bar graph shows levels of confidence in press by country. China leads the graph; Singapore is fourth and the UK and Australia are near the bottom of the graphic.

The relatively high levels of confidence in Singapore press also bears out in news consumption patterns. In separate [research](#) conducted by market research company GfK in 2021, it was found that seven in 10 consumers in Singapore access SPH publications weekly, with *The Straits Times* enjoying the highest weekly reach at 44%, followed by *Lianhe Zaobao* (17%) and *The Business Times* (11%).

While trust in Singapore’s mainstream media remains somewhat healthy, most observers agree there is still room for improvement.

Problems in the newsroom, and a view from the top

To better understand the problems, constraints, and obstacles facing SPH Media as it undergoes restructuring, I spoke with former and current journalists, as well as senior editors of *The Straits Times* and *Lianhe Zaobao* to find out the challenges they encountered in the course of their work.

The interviewees spoke to me in their personal capacity, not for the organisation. I have withheld their identities to preserve their candour.

Between them, they identified four existing areas of concern, among which points one and four could be exacerbated by state funding:

1. A culture of deference to authority in the newsrooms
2. A lack of communication between journalists and editors
3. A deterioration of journalistic standards
4. Increasing control from government communication teams

Journalist A told me: “When SPH was going to get funding from the government, I was thinking: would that affect how much more constrained we are, given that we already are?”

Journalist B echoed those sentiments, adding: “It was not so much the state funding itself that was problematic; publicly funded organisations can find ways to remain independent and critical in coverage. However, *The Straits Times* had already shown signs of being unable to push back enough against attempts to influence coverage even before the restructuring, including pressure from the government but even from advertisers. There was thus concern or doubt about whether it would be able to hold [ground] given the increased reliance on direct funding [...]”

Editorial constraints have caused some talented journalists to leave the newsroom, they told me. And when experienced journalists depart, Journalist B said, the newsroom loses a “crucial layer of interlocutors” that could engage and work with the government to understand their concerns and scope out the parameters for news coverage.

Journalist D said: “If you cannot handle the stress of managing that relationship, you should not be in that role. You need a certain kind of temperament, nerves of steel, or a heart of fire to do this job, to hold and manage the space.”

In a recent social media [post](#) on LinkedIn, a top government official overseeing media relations shed some light on how they deal with disagreements on newsrooms' editorial decisions. "Editorially, if there were local media reports that the government has concerns with, the approach we take is to share the considerations and implications with the outlets in confidence," the official wrote.²⁸

But, as some interviewees pointed out, these "considerations and implications" were often not communicated to the journalists charged with writing the news, causing frustration when last-minute changes were made to their stories.

Journalist E felt "constant conversation" was needed in the newsroom about editorial decisions. "The crux of the issue is that journalists need to know the difference between the values the government has regarding the messages they want to communicate versus the values the newsroom has. Some journalists think the newsroom leadership is 80 to 100% aligned with the government. I do not think that is true, but it is not being communicated," they said.

With the proliferation of social media, journalists said politicians had begun to sideline journalists by going directly to constituents via Facebook, Instagram or TikTok to announce policy decisions or communicate their thoughts on certain public issues, expecting the press to report on them dutifully while avoiding being questioned.

For the mainstream media to continue to be a credible source of news and information, journalists told me they need timely and broader access to government information and data.

Currently, Singapore does not have a Freedom of Information Act. Journalists can access public data at data.gov.sg, singstat.gov.sg, or the websites of various public agencies. Information not found on these platforms can be requested, and approval of these requests is subject to the discretion of the public agencies.

Government ministries and agencies, interviewees said, also frequently hold non-attributable background briefings for editors and journalists to provide useful

²⁸ Ho, M. S. (2022). "What is the Singapore government's relationship with local 'state media'?". Retrieved from <https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:6996376263888183296/>

insights on policies and behind-the-scenes considerations but disallow them from reporting on them. Some felt this is in effect a gag on the press.

Overall, the journalists felt they could be doing more to push the envelope but felt that they couldn't. I took these concerns to Lee Huay Leng, the editor-in-chief of SPH Media's Chinese Media Group who oversees *Lianhe Zaobao* (my employer) and *Shin Min Daily News*, among other Chinese-language titles.

Her response was that she felt the *journalists* were not doing enough to push the envelope. "There are some realities in our media scene," she told me. "I do not think we are entirely free, but our journalists have also not been fighting hard enough. So, I will spend time talking to journalists to better sense what [they] think, and I need to re-ignite the idealism in them."

She continued: "Some things are too sensitive to be discussed publicly in the media: religion, language, and race. But last year, we reported on Chinese privilege [which concerns race]. We did not ask the government for advice on how to cover the topic. We exercised our journalistic rights and approached our coverage in a cautious manner."

Earning public trust has and always will be a challenge, she said. "This friction will be there for a while – being credible, convincing people we are credible, and explaining our relationship with the state. That struggle to reconcile will always be there," she said. But the automatic assumption that editors toe the line because of the NPPA, or other pressures was unfounded. "I know for myself that I exercise judgment in the course of my work," she said. "There are reasons why we do not cover certain news or why we cover news in a certain way, but not all reasons stem from the fact that the government is funding us or that there is NPPA."

She also said that the Ministry of Communications and Information had been clear that the funding should not change the relationship with the press: "[Teo] had talked to her press officers, telling them that nothing has changed, that the relationship between them and us has not changed [after the restructuring]. Their funding us does not mean we are at their beck and call. We are very mindful of this; you do not give us orders just because you give us money."

Proof of this, she said, would be found in the editorial content. "Looking at our op-eds and news reports in the last year, does anyone think we are receiving instructions from the top? I do not think so," she said. "Look at how we cover the

next general election and presidential election. Readers can judge us then because this is the most direct way of assessing us.”

She continued: “The role of the media should be discussed during the Forward Singapore exercise.²⁹ But it is not on the agenda. It seems that this issue did not even cross the minds of the 4G team. The media must raise this issue and negotiate with the state or political leaders.

“I think we have a role in society, and if we call our country a work in progress, then yes, it is a nation-building role. But it is different from the Lee Kuan Yew era. Our society has changed.”

²⁹ Note: Forward Singapore is a year-long review of the country’s social compact launched by the fourth-generation leadership team.)

The right foot forward

Media scholars, observers and interviewees for this paper have suggested several possible steps that SPH Media – and the government – could take to build a credible and independent media organisation. Practices from other international outlets were also considered.

We can broadly categorise them into government-facing, public-facing, and newsroom-facing measures.

Government-facing measures

1. Rethink the role of the media together

Newsroom dynamics spring from how the government views the media in the first place, according to my interviewees.

A helpful first step would be a collaboration between SPH Media and MediaCorp to agree on the core interests of the media and its role. With key concerns outlined, the two could then engage the government more directly about concerns.

“It should be stressed that we both want the same thing: a credible and responsible media that will be good for Singapore,” one journalist said. At this point in Singaporean history, for example, public service journalism may be more beneficial to its future than nation-building journalism. “The media’s definition of public interest need not be inferior to the government’s definition of public interest.”

2. Reset relations

Other journalists I spoke to spoke of a need to reset government-media relations to function with more respect on both sides. For instance, government communications professionals might stop trying to micro-manage news coverage and trust that journalists have the public interest at heart. At the same time, journalists and editors should also be willing to listen to public service considerations and government constraints on policy issues and consider these in their reportage while maintaining their objective assessments.

A former editor said: “I feel [the government] needs to manage it differently. But to do that, you need a deep understanding of the media and how it operates – what are the really important issues, how the media in Singapore can be successful, thrive, and retain the journalists, what motivates them and all that. You need to have that

deep understanding. I do not think there is that deep understanding in government today, and that is a big problem.”

Public-facing measures

1. Introduce an editorial code

Bertha Henson drew up a [Code of Ethics](#) for journalists in Singapore (Nov 13, 2021). Among other things, it calls for a government-media relationship that is based on respect for the role each party plays.

“While we acknowledge that the greater role of nation-building falls on the elected, the media has the responsibility to bridge the elected and the citizenry to forge a consensus on values and policies that benefit the nation,” the code notes.

Journalists said they would like a code similar to the publicly funded BBC’s [Editorial Guidelines](#), which among other things, requires the broadcaster to “scrutinise arguments, question consensus and hold power to account with consistency and due impartiality.”

2. Introduce a Readers’ Editor

A Readers’ Editor, also known as Public Editor or Standards Editor, is a role that is usually independent of the newsroom, reporting to the publisher. They have responsibility for holding the newsroom to account for its journalistic standards, adjudicating public complaints about the media outlet’s journalism, investigating claims of error brought forward by readers and news sources, and publishing necessary corrections on all platforms.

As Kathy English, former Public Editor of *The Toronto Star*, noted: “A news organisation that creates and commits to an independent public editor makes a strong public statement about its commitment to trustworthy journalism.”³⁰

3. Introduce an independent council

Similarly, Cherian George suggested setting up a well-resourced independent press council investigating complaints about professional ethics violations. He also called

³⁰ English, K. (2021). How a revitalised public editor role could solve two of journalism’s biggest crises. Retrieved from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/how-revitalised-public-editor-role-could-solve-two-journalisms-biggest-crises>

for an independent body insulated from government interference to disburse funds to SPH Media.³¹

Communications professor Ang Peng Hwa from Singapore's Nanyang Technological University pointed to examples in Scandinavian countries such as Denmark, where government funding models have worked because they appoint an independent third party to receive and distribute funds to news organisations. "This is important because the governments cannot put pressure on the newspaper to cover them favourably, for example," he said.³²

4. Public forums or Readers' panels

To build more transparency and trust, newsrooms could consider hosting regular conversations with their readers to foster greater understanding and increase media literacy. At KURIER, a German-language paper operating out of Vienna, they tested the idea of a "readers' panel", in which it would select groups of 10 readers to come to the newsroom for conversations with its editor-in-chief.³³

KURIER staff also showed the readers how they work: how they select stories and deal with diverging sources. "Our readers asked us questions and told us frankly if, when and why they find us trustworthy," noted Philipp Wilhelmer, a culture and media writer at KURIER who led the experiment.

5. Disclosure of fund allocation and progress reports

As SPH Media submits half-yearly progress updates on three key performance indicators that the government stipulated, some interviewees proposed publishing these reports to defend its spending of taxpayers' money. Some also called for full transparency by disclosing the use of funds to instil greater public confidence.

³¹ George, C. (2021). Remaking an untenable media system: Why SPH's proposed overhaul is not enough. Retrieved from <https://www.academia.sg/academic-views/media-system/>

³² Oh, T. (2021, May 6,). Explainer: SPH shake-up — what is a 'company limited by guarantee' and how does a non-profit journalism model work? *Today Online* Retrieved from <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/explainer-sph-shake-what-company-limited-guarantee-and-how-does-non-profit-journalism>

³³ Wilhelmer, P. (2020). Trust us: Open your newsroom doors. Retrieved from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/trust-us-open-your-newsroom-doors>

6. Show your legwork

When government officials sideline journalists or are unresponsive to requests for information, most interviewees said reporters should show readers that they have done their due diligence in the newsgathering process. This means journalists should include details such as who they approached, what they asked and whether questions were answered.

Other journalists said news organisations should also be upfront about any edits made to online news stories (including changes to headlines, quotes, or captions) by adding disclaimers or footnotes, as more readers consume news online. Currently, *Lianhe Zaobao* does not have this practice.

Newsroom-facing measures

1. Better communication between editors and journalists

Within newsrooms, interviewees agreed that editors and journalists need to strengthen communication by having open and frank discussions about news reporting and other editorial considerations.

Journalists need to know their editors have their backs and leaders need to do a better job of clearly communicating their goals to journalists. “There is a set of metrics against which the government is measuring SPH Media. You need to communicate how those metrics translate into specific targets at the operational level,” one journalist said.

2. Strengthening mentorship

Some interviewees proposed investing more resources to guide inexperienced or younger journalists and stamp out undue self-censorship.

Journalist C, a *Lianhe Zaobao* reporter, said the strong focus on digital transformation came at the expense of “[paying] more attention to making sure that the quality of journalism remains high”. This meant younger and inexperienced colleagues lacked the journalistic rigour to contextualise stories or pose questions to newsmakers in a critical way.

Journalist B, a former *Straits Times* reporter, said editors and journalists had been stretched thin by other commitments – such as providing breaking news updates on a 24/7 online news cycle and producing multimedia packages – leaving less time for critical political coverage. “Structural factors compound self-censorship, and

hopefully, this can be alleviated if the *Straits Times* has more resources and expertise to restructure and improve its transformation strategy,” Journalist B said.

Conclusion

Most of the issues raised in this paper fundamentally centre on the competing challenges of meeting readers' needs and interests and maintaining a productive relationship with a government set on controlling the public narrative.

While these issues are not new or unique to Singapore, the environment in which SPH Media operates is vastly different. In the face of an increasingly diluted readership, how does the company continue to prove that it deserves to be valued, trusted, and respected – something it has demonstrated well in the past – while still being mindful of the political realities in Singapore?

The hard truth is that SPH Media can probably never stop this delicate balancing act. But however precarious navigating this difficult terrain might be, it is paramount that the company and the government take concrete steps to retain hearts and minds under the new model, or both will risk losing relevance and falling through the ice.

As Josephine Teo, the minister for communications and information, eloquently put it: “No one gains if these products lack credibility and are ignored by audiences.” That includes the government.