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# Ideology of Survival

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Freedom of Expression, Internet Regulation, and  
Political Legitimization in Singapore

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## Abstract

The advent of information technology has generally been heralded as a force for the breakdown of authoritarian political control. Especially the Internet is seen as a forum for public information and democratization that escapes all forms of political motivated censorship. On the other side, there are few studies on the relationship between new information technology and non-liberal political structures. This thesis addresses this relationship by analyzing the political culture, and the media, in Singapore.

Singapore possesses authoritarian characteristics, and there is extensive and sophisticated controls over the information flow. The authorities seek to control and censor media content in order to protect “national values” and political stability. At the same time, one can find one of the most comprehensive strategies for the development of IT in the world. The duality, the wish for being number one on new information and communication technology, combined with a strong wish to censor the information flow that comes with the new, as well as the traditional, technology, seems like a paradox, and is the reason why Singapore presents itself as a fascinating and essential case study.

The thesis consists of two main parts. First, Singapore’s political system and some innovations made to its system by the government, is examined. I will examine various ways the opposition is being repressed, and the extent to which its acceptance is related to the choice between wealth and liberty, the lack of a critical intellectual elite, the predominance of a Confucian ethic, and the distinct features of the concept of *kiasuism*. Then I discuss whether the political monopoly in Singapore is rationalized through an elitist ideology, which depicts government as a technical process that must be the preserve of a meritocracy.

In the second part, both regulations towards traditional and new media will be analyzed. The analysis of Internet content regulation will focus on three areas: legal framework, technical measures, and self-regulation. Within each area I will show how the government coercion on the political arena as well as within the traditional media, has impelled stability in such a way that coercion within the new media becomes unnecessary. This has resulted in a situation where individuals voluntarily comply with the government’s plan for development and regulation of the Internet.

## Acronyms:

1-Net	Consortium comprising Singapore Communications Investments (owned by Singapore's Telecommunication Authority, Singapore Telecommunication, Singapore Cable Vision Ltd, Pacific Internet Pte Ltd and Cyberway Pte Ltd.)
ADSL	Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line
AFI	The ASEAN Forum on the Internet
ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations.
ATM	Asynchronous Transfer Mode
AWSJ	Asian Wall Street Journal
BG	Brigadier-General
FAN	Family Access Network
FEER	Far Eastern Economic Review
GIF	Graphical Interchange Format
GII	Global Information Infrastructure
GILC	Global Internet Liberation Campaign
HRW	Human Rights Watch
IASP	Internet Access Service Providers
ICP	Internet Content Providers
IHT	International Herald Tribune
ISA	Internal Security Act
ISP	Internet Service Providers
MITA	Ministry of Information and the Arts
NIAC	National Internet Advisory Committee
NIAS	Nordic Institute of Asian Studies
NIC	Newly Industrialized Countries
NML	News Media & the Law
NPPA	Newspaper and Printing Presses Act
PAP	Peoples Action Party
PICS	Platform for Internet Content Selection
PM	Prime Minister
RSAC	Recreational Software Advisory Council
SEDB	Singapore Economic Development Board
SBA	Singapore Broadcasting Authority
SBA Act	Singapore Broadcasting Authority Act
SDP	Singapore Democratic Party
SingTel	Singapore Telecommunications Ltd.
SPH	Singapore Press Holdings
SCV	Singapore Cable Vision
TAS	Telecommunication Authority of Singapore
U.S DA	United States Department of the Army
U.S DS	United States Department of State
WNC	World News Connection
WP	Worker's Party

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# 1 INTRODUCTION

The overall purpose of this thesis is to analyze the relationship between new information technology and non-liberal political structures. In order to do this I will study the conditions of freedom of expression in Singapore on the political arena, in the traditional media, and on the Internet.

The more specific purpose of this thesis is to analyze how the government in Singapore regulates the mass media and the Internet, and how this regulation is legitimized. For reasons of space, the thesis will focus on the regulation of *content*: How does one regulate the Internet as opposed to traditional mass media? What political and technical means are used to control content on and access to the Internet? How are these efforts legitimized?

The advent of information technology (IT) has generally been heralded as a force for the breakdown of authoritarian political control (Rodan 1998:63). The information technology, with Internet as the main focus of attention, has been described as an “anarchy” and a “democratization tool”. Scholars, politicians, and others have praised Internet as the “first truly humane civilization in recorded history” (Alvin Toffler, quoted in Sussman 1991:279), “essential for the development of the human family”, and a “technological Messiah”, an anthropomorphized machine that will bring democracy and development to the world. The interactivity is seen to greatly enhance mediation between decision-makers and citizens, “allowing democracy of a more participatory nature than at any time since the ancient Greeks” (Rodan 1998:64). The belief is that Internet is a forum for public information and democratization that escapes all forms of political motivated censorship, and that “advances in the technology of telecommunications have proved an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere” (Rupert Murdoch quoted in Rodan 1998:63).

On the other side, there are few empirical studies of the relationship between Internet and non-liberal political structures. It is my belief that authorities that subject the traditional media to a strict political motivated control have more interest invested in controlling the Internet than democratic nations have. When extensive networks of political surveillance are already in place and a culture of fear about such practices exists, the impact of monitoring and censoring is likely to be strong. If information in general is viewed as a threat to established power structures, the advent of Internet will create a need for regulation and control that exceeds the control mechanisms used on the traditional media. It is also my belief that in certain social and political settings, the Internet has the potential to assist authorities in identifying government critics. The hypothesis of this study is that information on the Internet does not flow in a vacuum, but in a political space that is already “occupied”.

## 1.1 The Case

Singapore is a former British colony located on the southern tip of the Malaysian Peninsula. From the attainment of self-government in 1959, the *Peoples Action Party* (PAP), and its leader Lee Kuan Yew, have been in power. Being a country with a great ethnical, linguistic, and religious diversity, the need for extensive regulation and control of the public has always been strongly emphasized by the government. In an effort to create a united nation, the PAP has through the years taken several precautions to ensure political stability and continuous control. Their efforts culminated in the so-called “shared values”, a set of moral principles that is supposed to help the development of a Singaporean identity.

The national media is said to play a vital part in bringing the people together. Originally, Singapore had four major media clusters, corresponding to the four official languages (English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil). Each is said to have started out with different key values and world-views. One of the major efforts from the PAP has therefore been to control and censor the media, as well as the political opposition.

At the same time Singapore has experienced an enormous economic growth, being one of the newly industrialized countries known as the “Asian Tigers”. According to Economic Forum’s Global Competitiveness Report 1998, Singapore ranked 1<sup>st</sup> as the world’s most competitive economy (SEDB 1998).

In Singapore, one can find one of the most comprehensive strategies for the development of IT in the world (Rodan 1998:64). In the last decade, Singapore has directed its efforts towards building up “IT2000” – an advanced information and communication technology structure – making the country a leading IT nation. Combined with the political will to nurture industry and huge state-led infrastructure investments, Singapore is in the process of transforming itself into an “intelligent island”, where a national broadband network provides the backbone. On the other hand Singapore possesses authoritarian characteristics, and has extensive and sophisticated control over expressions. The authorities seek to control and censor Internet content for the same reasons they censor the traditional mass media: in order to protect “national values” and political stability.

This duality, the wish for being number one on new information and communication technology combined with a strong wish to censor the information flow that comes with the new, as well as the traditional technology seems like a paradox, and is why Singapore presents itself as a fascinating and essential case study.

## 1.2 Focus

The analysis will focus on three areas: political democracy, mass media, and Internet. When examining political legitimization, I will use the “Asian Values” debate as a point of departure. “Asian Values” will not be discussed as a philosophical system, and are used only as point of reference. I will *not* discuss if the limitations on freedom of expression are in fact a problem for the general population in Singapore (as it supposedly would be for a Western audience). Instead, I will

concentrate my study on elite utterances, focusing on the macro-political situation. I will study the political opposition in order to establish a background and an understanding for the media regulations. I will study the traditional media to show how extensive the control of the traditional information flow has been. And last but not least: I will *not* study telecommunication *per se*, but go into the political signals and actions concerning the regulation of *content* and *access* for the inhabitants of Singapore.

### 1.3 Previous research on Singapore

This thesis comprises several areas of concern. It is a study of policy, communication, legal issues, development, culture, and human rights. The study draws both on original findings and previous studies and literature. If we look at the overall trends in what has been published about Singapore, the field of *economics* stands out. Singapore's success in capitalist economic development is legendary, and the city-state is frequently cited as a model of capitalist development.<sup>1</sup> However, the scope of this study lies in policy and the communications field. It is therefore useful to review the specific areas of research, and the gaps in scholarship. This way, a comparison between this study and prior research studies can be done.

There are various studies on *politics* in Singapore. Many of these have concluded that the political culture in Singapore involves a sophisticated and systematic combination of legal limits on independent social and political activities combined with extensive mechanisms of political cooption to channel contention through state-controlled institutions (e.g. Chua 1997<sup>a</sup>; 1997<sup>b</sup>; 1995; 1994; Rodan 1998; Singh 1991). A minority of writers has addressed the repression that accompanied Singapore's economic development. Most of them have been human rights advocates, or opposition politicians and dissidents having an ideological or personal agenda (e.g. Seow 1998<sup>a</sup>; 1998<sup>b</sup>; 1990; Lingle 1995), but others have also contributed to the literature (e.g. Tremewan 1996). After 1993, there has also been a substantial production of literature on the political as well as the cultural aspects of the "Asian Values issue". The discussions are influenced by Asian writers (e.g. Chan 1997<sup>b</sup>; Mahbubani 1998; Maiping 1997), as well as scholars within a "Western" context (e.g. Emmerson 1995; Jayasuritya 1997; de Jesus 1996; Tønnesson 1996).

On the *communications* field, there is a "dearth of published research on the Internet phenomenon in Singapore" (Teo et al. 1997:326), and most research has been done in Europe and the USA. This also seems to be the case for general communications studies. Singapore has had little education in the communications field. A degree course in Mass Communication was launched at the National University of Singapore in 1991, and in 1992 a School of Communication Studies was established at the Nanyang Technological University (Hukill 1994:204). The lack of education may have contributed to the relatively modest production of domestic communication literature. Because there has been no formal education in mass communication in Singapore before

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<sup>1</sup> For a review of the literature on the economic growth in Singapore (especially in relationship to income distribution) see Williams 1996:165-168.

1991, few researchers have made domestic contributions to the field. The ones that have made attempts so far have been scholars that have not had communication as their specialization. The major research themes have concerned communication policy and planning, advertising and social campaigns in Singapore (e.g. Kuo 1991:114-117; Lazar 1993). There have been no major works on the theoretical issues of communication, especially relating to the “Western” and “Asian” models of the media. There is minimal reference to theories and research traditions that goes beyond Singapore. And, as Kuo points out, most communication studies in Singapore have been descriptive rather than explanatory, and are done on an *ad hoc* basis (1991:120). There are, however, some exceptions. The Asian Journal of Communication and Media Asia has in the 1990’s presented several studies that relate to media policies in Singapore (e.g. Datta-Ray 1996; Gopinathan 1992; Hao 1996; Hukill 1994; Idid 1996; Kuo 1991; Tay et al. 1996; Venkateswaran 1997; Yeap 1994). These studies, ranging from general professional issues applicable for Asia (Datta-Ray 1996), to empirical studies on the public trust of the press in Singapore (Hao 1996) give valuable insights to the overall trends in communications research. When it comes to the area of Internet, two contributions on general content regulations can be identified (HRW 1996; Staksrud 1997). Ang (1997, [et al.] 1996) and Rodan (1998) are the two academics that have addressed this issue with specific reference to Singapore. However, neither provides an extensive study on the regulations.<sup>2</sup>

## 1.4 Structure of the Thesis

I have chosen to answer the general question by splitting it up into three questions of research:

### 1. How are the conditions of the political culture and freedom of expression<sup>3</sup> today?

Singapore possesses a distinct political culture. It has been described as centralized, authoritarian, and static, but also pragmatic, rational and legalistic (U.S. DA:4.03). With a single party dominating for forty years a usual terminology used is “a hegemonic party system”, or a “one party dominant system” (Jones 1995:72).<sup>4</sup> It has also been labeled a “controlled democracy” in which other political parties are permitted, but there is no provision for political competition on an equal basis (Perry et. al. 1997:62-63). Others have classified Singapore as “corporatist” (Rodan 1993:81), the elitist “modern variant of Plato’s republic” (Singh 1992:60), a “dressed-up dictatorship” (Kausikan 1997:26), and “an offshore center for foreign capital” (Paul 1993:291).

Instead of placing Singapore into one simple category formulated by political scientists, I will in chapter three address the political structure by investigating how the conditions of the political culture and freedom of expression are today. In other words – it will be an empirical rather than a theoretical presentation, where current politics in Singapore will be analyzed. By using the “Asian

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<sup>2</sup> The United Nations Commission on Human Rights expresses concern over the lack of studies within this field, emphasizing the “need to raise awareness about linkage between media, including telecommunications technologies, and right to freedom of expression” (UN 1996).

<sup>3</sup> The term “freedom of expression” will in this thesis be used as described in the UN declaration of human rights, article 19 (adopted & proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations on Dec. 10, 1948): *Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.*

<sup>4</sup> Other examples of this type of political system can be found in Japan and Mexico (U.S. DA:4.02).

Values” debate as a starting point I will analyze the political freedom and freedom of expression.<sup>5</sup> The Asian approach to human rights will be considered in so far as it impacts the role of the political culture and the media. The focus is on how freedom is limited by different measures, and how these measures are legitimized.

## **2. How is the traditional mass media regulated, and how is the regulation legitimized?**

To answer this question, chapter four will concentrate on the structural conditions of the mass media, rather than their performance in terms of output. On the level of structure, media freedom is usually guaranteed or limited by media laws, therefore the media laws of Singapore will be the focus of the discussion. The goal will be to discover the *location* of media freedom: *Whose freedom? From whom? To do what?* Regulations on both domestic and foreign media will be studied, and different views on the regulations addressed.

## **3. How is the Internet regulated, and how is the regulation legitimized?**

In the fifth chapter, aspects of the Internet policy in Singapore will be analyzed. After a presentation of Singapore’s IT status, the analysis will focus on three areas of regulation: legal framework, technical measures, and self-regulation. Within each area I will present how the government coercion on the political arena, as well as with the traditional media, has impelled stability in such a way that individuals voluntarily comply with the government’s plan for development and regulation of the Internet. Within the field of developmental studies, there is a gap in the theory as well as the empirical documentation of such cases (see e.g. Gibson 1990:56-57). This study will hopefully fill some of that gap.

Finally, I will discuss in what way Singapore might become a role model for other governments that are trying to control the Internet (chap.6). In addition, the thesis contains a methodological chapter (chap.2), where choices and problems concerning the collection of empirical material will be discussed.

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<sup>5</sup> For an explanation of the modern “Asian Values” term, see chap. 3.



## 2 Methodology

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze how the government in Singapore regulates the mass media and the Internet, and how this regulation is legitimized. In order to do this; three questions for research have been formulated. This chapter will explain the *research methods* that have been used to find answers to the questions, and the reasons for choosing these methods as opposed to others. Research methods are a way of investigating an empirical topic by following a set of pre-specified procedures (Yin 1994:15).

Robert K. Yin defines a case study as empirical research where one investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (1994:13). This study is a single-case study where the case is regulation of the mass media and the Internet in Singapore, and the political legitimization of such. The study is embedded in more than one level of analysis. However, the methods used have not differed between the levels.

The thesis has a limited format. This is reflected in the selection of methods. I have chosen to focus on two methods: *document analysis* and *focused informant interviews*. These methods have been chosen because the thesis has the purpose of describing and discussing the political culture as well as regulations of the mass media and the Internet in Singapore. This means a study of *policy*, and within this type of study, document analysis and informant interviews are accepted and frequently used tools.

Conducting a study is in reality a sum of three main decisions: How to limit the empirical field, choosing method(s) to produce the data, and arrange the research process (Borum 1990:44). In the following I will address all three dilemmas, starting with the limitations of the empirical field. In addition, I will address the special methodological problems one faces when doing research about media regulations, and subsequently freedom of expression.

### 2.1 Limiting the empirical field

#### 2.1.1 Why Singapore?

Choosing a method is very much a *question of time and resources*. By investigating regulation policy and legitimization in one country I could go deeper into the material than for instance a comparative analysis would allow me to. I was able to have personal contact with the phenomenon by spending some time in Singapore, which gives a more extensive study. A single case study also provides for the opportunity to address the evolution of the process, seeing the changes in policy development chronologically. Being able to systematize the data material along a timeframe gave an additional dimension that lead to new ideas about the connection between variables.

Aside from the restraints given by time and resources, also the very nature of the study required an in-depth analysis. This was due to the fact that there is (to my knowledge) no other

country that has developed a system for regulation of content on the Internet. There are several countries that try to regulate the Internet, and some do it quite effectively by denying access to the general population, or groups of citizens (e.g. Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, and Malaysia). But the Singaporean government is the only one, which has allowed all of the citizens to have access to the Internet, at the same time as they control it (more or less) effectively. I therefore decided not to do any comparative research. This decision also leads to the problem of saying something general about censorship on the Internet, based on this case. Since Singapore is the first and so far the only country to implement these kinds of systems, it is hard to generalize.<sup>6</sup>

### 2.1.2 *Selection of parties: Authorities, Political Opposition, and the Media*

I have chosen to study three main parties: *the government authorities*, *the political opposition*, and *the media*. The criteria I have used for the selection of parties have been *relevance* (how relevant are the parties for the discussion? Is it necessary to implement them in the discussion in order to answer the questions the thesis rises?), and *access* (are the parties accessible to me in a form that can be accepted in terms of general research norms?).

The *authorities* will be represented through political leaders, and their organizations. I will study these individuals and organizations as representatives of a policy or an ideology. Statements given through official interviews, and in written form like press-statements, documents, reports etc. will therefore be interpreted as opinions presented by an organization, not the specific individual.

There is a total of twenty-four registered political parties in Singapore, but only two-three are active and known to the general public (FEA 1999:1075). On studying the *political opposition*, I have mainly concentrated on two registered political parties, namely the Worker's Party (WP), and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP). These two have been preferred because of their comparatively large activity on the political area in the nineties. Their representatives have held seats in the Singaporean parliament, and have been involved in the highest profile lawsuits between the government and political opponents. Because this thesis mainly discusses a development that has taken place in the last decade, the decision to concentrate on the WP and SDP seems logical.

Not all interests are as organized and accessible as the above mentioned. The opposition activities are extensively restricted through laws and practices. Because organized political activities are not allowed outside the registered political parties, it is virtually impossible for a scholar from the outside to get in contact with any grass root movement.<sup>7</sup> The same goes for any alternative media that might exist within Singapore. Because criticism of the government is a felony, a

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<sup>6</sup> There are also some personal reasons that go beyond the case of freedom of expression or the Internet. In 1993 I spent five months in Singapore. During this time I learned about the country and the people. Coming home to Norway I had a feeling of knowing this small country in a deep-rooted way. At one point in time I decided to do a semester report on the media in Singapore. After reading relevant material I was astonished. My whole perception of Singapore being a western island in South East Asia, a country where I could see all my dear American soaps and get uncensored news from all over the world, fell apart. The need to know what I missed back in 1993 drove me to write a report on Singapore (Staksrud 1999), and later on this thesis.

<sup>7</sup> In Singapore the term "grassroot organization" is used on parapolitical institutions coordinated by the PAP (Perry et al. 1997:65). The selection and appointment to these organizations are under the control of the Prime Minister's office. I however use the term in the meaning (opposition) society at the local level, distinguished from the centre(s) of political leadership.

publication of this type can not be published on the Internet or in any other accessible form.<sup>8</sup> I will therefore not address issues like to what extent there is a grass root movement, what kind of clusters exist within the population, and along which cleavages they might be placed.

When choosing which *media* organizations and official offices to investigate, some are quite obvious. The *Singapore Broadcasting Authority* (SBA) has the legal responsibility for the regulation of the Internet, as well as all broadcast media, so naturally this becomes a very important source of information. In dealing with the future visions and developments of the Internet, and the technical side of the regulation the *Telecommunications Authority of Singapore* (TAS) has been correspondingly apparent. Legal documents have provided valuable information, worth mentioning are the Singapore Broadcasting Act, and the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.2 Collecting Material: Document analysis

Document analysis is the method of systematically analyzing written or audiovisual productions that is not produced or generated by the researcher. According to Syvertsen (1998), document analysis is a part of almost all media research, but especially important within certain fields such as analysis of media-policies, like regulation and implementation. This research is mainly based on written, published, public, institutionalized documents. The official documents represent the collective memory of organizations, and is their best way of systematize routines and experiences. It is also a very important way for the organizations to present themselves (Syvertsen 1998:5). I will also use other types of documents like relevant web and multimedia presentations, and research papers taken from internationally recognized journals and publications.

### 2.2.1 Sources

A wide range of sources has been used, depending on the theme discussed. Underneath, the most important are listed, classified by the party analyzed.

The position of the *government* will be investigated through analyzing all relevant legal documents, proposals, white papers, progress reports, official reports, internal and external publications, and other written productions from public offices. The Singapore Government Press Release service has been subscribed to (through email), and all official statements coming from Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA), and from the Prime Minister's Office from September 1998 through July 1999 have been studied. Singapore Infomap ([www.sg](http://www.sg)), an electronic version of the Singapore Yearbook has been frequently used. The Infomap is established as the official web site for disseminating government information about Singapore, and can therefore be labeled as a government source (Reid 1996). Also articles appearing in the mass media concerning the government will be examined. By being granted a limited access to World News Connection (WNC), an online service from the American government that offers translations from local Asian

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<sup>8</sup> There are some web-sites located outside Singapore aimed at the political situation. The "Singaporeans For Democracy" web-site, located at <http://www.gn.apc.org/sfd/> is worth mentioning.

<sup>9</sup> The Statutes of the Republic of Singapore, Chapter 297 (Act 15 of 1994) and Chapter 206 (Act 12 of 1974).

media sources on a day-to-day basis, I had access to a few non-English sources.<sup>10</sup> Academic books and biographies will be used to present a picture of the political dynamics in Singapore. Officials from the governing People's Action Party (PAP) have not been interviewed, so this will be the main source of documentation on the political part of the thesis. A few sources are worth special attention: Kwang et al.'s book *Lee Kuan Yew – the man and his ideas* has provided valuable historical facts. The book also contains transcripts of speeches made by Lee. Beng-Huat Chua's *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* and the essay collection *Debating Singapore – Reflective Essays* edited by da Cunha, give information of the political and cultural ideology that the PAP policies are based upon.

The *political opposition* will be studied through reports from both domestic and foreign media, party programs and decrees, and documents from selected litigations. Some prominent opposition leaders and dissidents (all now living outside Singapore) have published material on their own experiences and on the Singaporean government. Francis Seow (1998<sup>a</sup>; 1998<sup>b</sup>; 1990), Tang Liang Hong (web-site located in Australia), Chia (1996), and Christopher Lingle (1995) have been studied for this thesis. Newspapers and magazines – especially Far Eastern Economic Review and Asiaweek – are used to document recent developments.

The collective views and policies of *official organizations* will be studied in green papers, annual reports, laws, different types of publications (e.g. information pamphlets, directories, statistics), and press statements (including transcripts from published interviews when available). An example of such a source is the government's official web site<sup>11</sup>, where all Ministries and government bodies are listed. Since the law guides policy, *the Statues of the Republic of Singapore* will be used as background material for the discussions. Policies will also be studied through earlier studies when available.

As already mentioned, the *Asian Journal of Communication* and *Media Asia* has several relevant studies on *media issues* related to Singapore (e.g. Datta-Ray 1996; Gopinathan 1992; Hukill 1994; Kuo 1991; Yeap 1994). But also other international journals have provided relevant material. Among the journals that have been used are: Asian Studies Review, Comparative Politics, Contemporary South East Asia, Discourse and Society, Foreign Affairs, Gazette, Index on Censorship, International Journal of Information Management, Journal of Democracy, Journal of Contemporary Asia, The News Media & The Law, NIASnytt, Political Science Quarterly, Singapore Law Review, Society, and South East Asian Affairs.

### 2.2.2 Critique of the sources

One general problem with document analysis is the *potential over-reliance on documents in case study research* (Yin 1994:82). It is important to note that all the official documents I will use have been written for specific purposes (and audiences) *other than* those of this case study. I have merely been

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<sup>10</sup> The access was granted by the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) in Copenhagen. The sources in question are marked in the reference list.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.sg/govern.html> (accessed April 6, 1999).

a vicarious observer to a communication process between other parties. In addition the language used is believed to reflect institutions, thought processes, values and ideology, and therefore the interpretation of it might differ, according to the language of expression (Hantrais et al. 1996:7). Knowing this, I have always tried to identify the objective of the papers, as a means to reduce the chances of being misled by documentary evidence, and to misinterpret the purpose of the documents. For instance, some papers turned out to be more of promotion material, with little informative value. However, these papers represent valuable information as to the self-representation of the organization, and the values the organization emphasizes to the general public. Also, when official papers have had a clearly defined author, his or her position is taken into account when considered relevant.

As a general rule, all statistical material provided by international/western sources have been cross checked with Asian sources. This is to make sure not only that the numbers are accurate and that there is a uniform basis for assessing, but also that the meaning behind the numbers are not misinterpreted due to cultural differences.

### *2.2.3 Using the Media – the need for additional control*

Special attention has been paid to the use of domestic and foreign media as a reference, because this raises some principally methodological questions when one deals with media subjected to strict control.

Many of the documents I have used come from the media, mainly newspapers and weekly journals. As a scholar within the field of media-studies, I hold skepticism towards the reliability of these kinds of sources, the same way I do to others. Syvertsen (1998:6) points out that other fields of study often have showed a lack of source criticism when it comes to newspaper articles, news-bulletins, press statements etc. The reports are often treated as factual sources reflecting reality. Media studies can therefore serve as guidance for other sciences.

In my experience this consideration is exceedingly important when doing research about freedom of expression (and subsequently media freedom). When using media-documents from and about Singapore, one must take into consideration that the media are under the autocratic control of the political authorities. As I will document, political leaders, or persons approved by them, own the domestic media. The media is also subjected to a wide range of laws and regulations, including a law that forbids criticism of the government. The English language daily newspaper The Straits Times is one of the domestic media sources. This newspaper is considered to be the main outlet for official news, and government departments tend not to issue their own reports where they can rely on The Straits Times for this purpose (Perry et al. 1997:xiv). Foreign media also have to be critically reviewed, especially since international papers and journals (which are the most likely ones to write about Singapore's internal affairs), usually have a market in Singapore (e.g. Far Eastern Economic Review, International Herald Tribune, Asiaweek). They are therefore subjected to Singaporean law, and have to be careful in their writings. There are several cases where foreign

media have been given substantive fines and forced to retract stories after writing about the government in Singapore.

Keeping this in mind, media documentation still proves to be a relevant source of information. This particularly applies to their adequacy in providing perspective and values from the Singaporean authorities, but also more factual information has been retrieved.

Documenting violations of freedom of expression in Singapore has generally been complicated, mainly because of two factors: First of all, I am dealing with fairly recent cases. This means that *time* has not yet worked and made the cases go into history, and scientific documentation and analyzes are yet to be made. A natural source for these types of cases would be human rights organizations like Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch, but since they usually are not allowed into Singapore, most of their reports are based on the same media material I have studied. Therefore, media reports seem to be the most available and updated source of information. Secondly, even if the media are very cautious when writing about controversial cases, bits of information are presented. By going through a substantial number of articles, news releases, interviews etc, I have tried to form an accurate picture of what has happened. For instance, I found no precise reports on the defamation suits against prominent WP members. But I will document what really happened, by making constructs based on small pieces of information taken from many different sources. Like a puzzle, the information bits give a whole picture if you put them together and have the patience to do so. Also, sometimes what is *not* said or printed can tell the story, whether it is repressed for political reasons, by external force and regulations, or by internalized norms within the journalists or the editor. The problem is of course how to uncover this type of story.

#### ***2.2.4 Using the WWW as a source of information and documentation***

A substantial number of the sources I will refer to, has been downloaded from the World Wide Web (WWW). This causes potential methodological problems concerning authenticating the sources. As Syvertsen (1998:12) points out, most web-sites are not subjected to any form of editorial control, and there are no routines for the standardization and updating of information. Despite of this problem, I have used the WWW because the geographical distance has made it difficult to retrieve certain publications only available in Singapore or other parts of South East Asia. It is, however, important to note that the majority of WWW sources can also be found in some written, published form. This goes for all the on-line newspapers, and most of the research reports. Those which are not published “on paper”, have been contacted by mail or phone in an attempt to authenticate them.

### **2.3 Collecting Material: Informant Interviews**

Two major strengths of the interview as a method is that it is *targeted* – it focuses directly on the case study topic, and it is *insightful* – meaning it provides perceived causal inferences. But the interview has its weaknesses. An interview is biased to poorly constructed questions, it has a

response bias, and gives a problem with inaccuracies, due to poor recall. There is also the possibility of reflexivity: that the interviewee gives the responses that the interviewer wants to hear (or what he or she believes the interviewer wants to hear) (Yin 1994:80).

### 2.3.1 *The Focused Informant Interview*

There are several types of interviews that can be done. For this study I decided to go with a *focused* interview, where the interviewee was more of an informant than a respondent. The interviews were *open-ended*, and assumed a conversational manner. In a focused interview the informant is interviewed for a shorter period of time (a few hours). The interview follows a certain set of questions derived from the case study protocol (Yin 1994:85).

I decided to use this type of interview because I mainly wanted to confirm certain facts that I already thought to have established. However, I also wanted fresh views and additional information. The strategy was then to *present myself as genuinely naive* about the topic we were supposed to talk about, coming to Singapore to learn. This is a strategy Yin (1994:85) recommends, and it did work, but only up to a certain point. Especially when interviewing executives and official representatives from official bodies, the need to confront them with reports and documentation that encountered information they provided would occur. Mostly, the information was related to legal cases. For instance – one official told me that the authorities never had violated people’s privacy by reading their email. I had examples from various sources (mostly media and human rights organizations) that told a different story. When I mentioned these cases they were usually not denied as false, but I was given the response to the effect that “these things happened before my time” and “we don’t do that anymore”.

Asking controversial questions also means putting pressure on the interviewee. During the interviews, I was very careful when asking questions that might seem like criticism of the government. I tried to formulate them in a very respectful way, keeping in mind the cultural distance between the interview object and myself. *Modus operandi* was that I waited to ask controversial questions until I had gotten answers to my other questions, expecting that it could be difficult getting answers.

On some occasions I experienced how asking certain questions would mean getting an answer completely out of context. I once asked a scholar at the National University of Singapore about the media freedom in the country. Did the scholar find this to be a problem? Was this an issue for the people of Singapore? In the answer I was told about the housing policies of Singapore. These types of reactions might be attributed to several factors, most likely the fact that professional bodies cannot freely comment on political issues outside their professional interests except through officially-endorsed channels such as selected committee hearings (Heng 1991:10). When situations like these occurred, I chose not to pursue the line of questioning. I saw no point in putting the object under more pressure, knowing that he or she worried about possible future consequences. In this sense one can say that *research ethics take priority over research results*.

Another problem was the lack of contact with any grass root movement. This is a general problem one faces when doing research in Singapore, since the only voices that one hears are the ones coming through co-opted channels such as the government's Feedback Unit (Heng 1991:10).

These situations also showed that *document analysis proved to submit important background material also for other types of methods*. In the end it turned out to be a great difference in interviewing executives compared to interviewing "ordinary Singaporeans", scholars, and journalists. These differences will be addressed later on.

### 2.3.2 General interview related issues

In the following, some general interview issues are presented: timeframe used, the different informants and relating problems, the "lack" of an interview guide, and the interview situation.

#### *Timeframe*

In 1998 I traveled to Singapore with the purpose of collecting empirical material, both through written documents and interviews. The research trip lasted three weeks, from July 2 – 23, 1998.

The length and time of the research trip was due to both personal and financial factors, and caused a methodological dilemma. Since the interviews were done fairly early in my research process, I had not developed a complete sense of the field of study. Perspectives that come with working with the material over time might have been lost. I have, however, had an interest in Singapore for many years, and I have lived there for several months, so I did not need time to "get to know the country" when I arrived.

In addition to the interviews conducted in Singapore, I have made several informal contacts with scholars and others, both in Europe, and South East Asia. These contacts have mostly been made to confirm empirical facts, and are not considered "interviews". They will therefore not be addressed in the following discussion.

#### *The Informants*

The official interviews were planned before I arrived in Singapore. The different organizations were contacted through email. This seemed like an acceptable method inasmuch as the Singaporean government strongly encourages this type of communication as a part of the "Intelligent Island"-image. After contact was established, I sent mail explaining my interest and the purpose of my study. All of the originally contacted bodies were positive to my request for interviews, but they all wanted a specific list of questions I wanted to ask. Unfortunately, some of my potential informants later chose either to cancel the scheduled appointments, or wanted me to talk to a higher official. As a result I ended up with the following informants<sup>12</sup>:

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<sup>12</sup> Several of my informants asked to be anonymous. For some, this would also include the organization or department they represented.

**Table 1 – Interviewed Informants**

Organization:	Informant/Representatives:
Telecommunications Authority of Singapore (TAS)	Representatives from: Development Directorate (infrastructure), Office for Technology Development, Director-Generals Office - International Affairs
Singapore Broadcasting Authority	Senior Management Executives on Policy Senior Management Executive on Public Relations
National University of Singapore	Three Scholars
Media organizations in Singapore	Journalists (two), Editor (one)

More informal contacts were also made, mostly through telephone or correspondence. This includes the ASEAN Telecommunications Regulators Council (ATRC), the National Internet Advisory Committee, one Internet Service Provider, two Singaporean newspapers, the Norwegian Embassy in Singapore, Singapore's General Consulate (Norway) and Embassy (Sweden), a defendant in the "Lingle-case"<sup>13</sup>, Index on Censorship (Emily Mitchell and Ursula Owen), and scholars at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (especially Dr. Børge Bakken, and Dr. Geir Helgesen). In addition, contact with media organizations that have had close encounters with the Singaporean government was initiated. These turned out to be very reluctant to talk about their experiences and about their relationship with the authorities.

#### *Interview-guide and presentation of themes*

As already mentioned, the official informants were presented with a list of themes that I wanted to discuss (see appendix no. 1). During the interview I chose not to ask pre-formulated questions, but rather go with the responses I got. This way I was able to direct the themes, but still being able to open up to new themes and lines of questioning that might spring out of the information I got. In addition to the original list of themes, I also brought a paper with selected facts and documentation. These were used as reference, and as starting points for controversial questions.

#### *Interview Situation*

The particulars of the interview situation would naturally vary, but one important point must be made. The focused informant interview is generally seen as a method where one records the interview for later analyzing and reference. I did not record any of the interviews. Again this must be attributed to the controversial topic of the thesis. Some informants demanded from the start to be anonymous out of fear for possible future sanctions (Singapore law prevents anyone outside the registered political parties to make political statements). Discussing this problem with scholars at my department in Oslo, there was left little doubt as to the additional problems recording might cause. Having already received several cancellations of interviews, I wanted to make sure that I

<sup>13</sup> Addressed in chapter 4.

would not jeopardize the remaining. During, and right after the interviews, I therefore took notes, trying to preserve most of the information received, but – of course – was doomed to lose some.

### 2.3.3 *Problems relating to the status of the informant – Scholars and Journalists*

The interviews always had an open-ended nature. During some of the interviews, e.g. with people related to the media, “ordinary” Singaporeans, scholars, and others, the interviewees’ personal perception was the information provided. Strategically I would after a while try to direct the theme into the question of freedom of expression, censorship, and human rights. The most typical responses I would get were:

*I may feel that the lack of freedom is a problem for me, but the government knows what they are doing, so they must be right (...) Lee Kuan Yew is like our father. And it is a father’s job to teach his children what is right and wrong.*

In both cases I was tempted to interpret the empirical fact to be that the interviewee was intimidated by the restrictions put on him/her, and that his or her senses told him/her that this was a problem. However, the social reality the authorities present through their strong paternal control makes the subject question his/her own perception. This problem becomes especially apparent when dealing with issues as freedom of expression. Not only do the interviewees reveal insecurity about their own perception of reality, they also face problems when trying to formulate these individual feelings and opinions. The potential for sanctions, the fear of saying too much, or “getting it wrong” when compared to the official version may pose yet another difficulty to get the empirical facts. And I am not the first researcher to face this problem. In the words of Paul (1993:296):

People now seem fearful to discuss substantive issues about the nature of their society and their relationship to it. (...) [Singaporeans] are nervous, so bloody scared. Nobody wants to say anything. It’s always ‘don’t quote me’ They are scared of losing a license or their jobs

Jones (1995:73-74) asserts in his article “Democracy and Identity” that in the political thinking of Singapore’s “founding father” Lee Kuan Yew, the island cannot afford to allow its increasingly affluent citizens to create their own identity. Instead the government creates it for them, and organizes every aspect of the Singaporean psyche. The many cancellations of interviews, as well as the reoccurring “Billygoat Gruff”-philosophy of “please, don’t ask me, ask someone bigger than me...” may also be an indication of the same problem.

On the other hand, it might be that the interviewees did not perceive the lack of personal freedom of expression to be a problem at all. Several studies have shown that identity and perception of oneself as opposed to the “group” or the society are different in Western and Asian cultures (e.g.; Hofstede 1984; Gullestrup 1992; Kim et.al 1994; Triandis 1995: 1994: 1988). In the West, liberalism serves as a foundation for *individualism*, where the fundamental assumption is individual reason and where values like freedom to choose, and freedom of expression are held high. In East Asian Cultures, Confucianism serves as a moral-political philosophy and a foundation

for *collectivism*<sup>14</sup>. Here the fundamental assumption is relatedness, and values like obligations, nurturing, and harmony are held high (Kim et al. 1994:6-7). This difference can also be applied to how one sees the political leadership.

Speculations, fantasy, and logical reasoning are all fundamentals in scientific research. At the same time, it is vital that the results of ones own line of thought can be tested through a confrontation with the empirical reality. I have been “forced” to trust my own perception of the situations, an “impressionistic” method, were I have used my own ability, as a Western scholar, to perceive and relate to the situation, in order to answer some of the questions raised. According to Hellevik (1991:15-18), this is a permissible method.

### 2.3.4 Problems relating to the status of the informant – Executives

The purpose of the study is to give an accurate and thorough understanding of how Singapore regulates the mass media and the Internet, and how this regulation is legitimized. To do this one must have a comprehension of both the attitudes and ideologies of the implicated parties, how these attitudes are formed into laws and goals, and finally how the underlying principles is formed into practical measures and practices.

When interviewing official representatives from various bodies, the aim was not to investigate their perception of the policies, but the expressed policies of the organizations. My interviews would especially concern the regulation of the Internet. Since the tools and the control mechanisms of the Internet are new in the sense that Singapore to this day is the only nation with an effective control mechanism for unwanted content, no in-depth research has been done before. I found for example no descriptions of how the filtering of the content was done, the effectiveness of it, or how a broadband system really works on a national level. Interviews was therefore used to provide a deeper understanding of the issues, as well as making sure that there was no misunderstanding and misinterpretations on my side as to the type of control that was implemented. Another goal was to verify declared violations of freedom of expression, and reported cases where people had broken the laws pertaining to the Internet.

The government bodies chose their own interviewees, all of which turned out to be higher executives. Fivelsdal (1990) discusses some of the problems that are more or less unique for the situation of interviewing executives and people in management. In my experience there was indeed several problems connected to the interviewing of organizational leaders. I will address the most important one here, namely the problem of having more than one interviewee.

All the government bodies appeared with more that one representative for the scheduled interviews. In most cases two, but sometimes three. This caused several problems. First of all I was not able to achieve the open-ended conversation I had planned. On one occasion the interviewees

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<sup>14</sup> *Collectivism* implies an emphasis on (a) the views needs, and goals of one or more *ingroups* rather than oneself, (b) social norms and duties defined by ingroups rather than emphasis on behavior that results in individual pleasure, (c) beliefs and values shared with ingroups rather than beliefs and values that are idiosyncratic for particular individuals, and (d) readiness to cooperate with ingroup members. *Individualism* refers to the belief that the individual is an end in him/her self, and as such ought to realize the self and cultivate his or her judgement, notwithstanding the weight of pervasive social pressure in the direction of conformity with the views, needs or goals of some ingroup (Triandis 1988:286)

had prepared a multimedia presentation of their own work. This would mean that they had a ready-made presentation, and that the information provided was rehearsed, cleared, official, and tactical. They controlled the situation, and I found it hard to go back to an open-ended interview when they finished. The presentation was also more of an advertisement for the organization than an actual reply to the questions and themes I had presented them with in advance. The result was a cognitive restriction and structuring of the areas that I wanted to discuss.

Another problem with having more than one interviewee can be attributed to the interview situation. As already accounted for, I decided not to record the interviews, but asked if I could take notes during the session. When I made notes of responses or cue words, the interviewees consulted each other. Often this was done in a tone that confirmed their mutual view on the last theme discussed, but relevant information might have been lost during these incidences.

On all occasions I detected a strong unwillingness from the interviewees to generalize and formulate personal, independent opinions. They also used each other to confirm that what they said was accurate information or formulations.

Usually the lowest ranked official would do most of the talking, and the higher ranked would come in and direct if necessary. Sometimes I got the feeling that the higher executives were there to inspect the whole situation. For instance, on one occasion I asked a question that turned out to be somewhat controversial. The main interviewee started to answer the question, but was quickly handed a note by the superior officer. The interviewee looked at the note, and then stopped talking to me in the middle of a sentence. The result was an awkward silence that was very uncomfortable for all parties. It was very hard to go on, and the interview ended shortly after.

### 2.3.5 Other Problems

One common problem with interviews is *reflexivity*. Here, reflexivity means that the interviewee gives the responses that the interviewer wants to hear (Yin 1994:80). This can cause a major problem with both the validity and the reliability of the collected data material. Based on the fundamental cultural values in Singapore, like harmony, nurturing, and never putting the opposite party in an embarrassing situation, one would expect this to be a potential problem.

However, during some of my interviews, the problem seemed to be reversed. First of all, I did not have any conscious idea of what kind of responses to expect. On the other hand my interviewees may still have picked up signals from me. This could be based on my appearance, my way of asking questions, or the cultural difference. It could also be attributed to the negative and skeptical type of international (or at least Western) attention that has been given to Singapore's general policy and to the regulation of the Internet.

Although I did not expect any certain answers, I did suspect that some topics and lines of questioning could be perceived as controversial. This would be the case in questions concerning allegations of violations of freedom of expression, and reports concerning political surveillance, both physically and "online". I was *not* prepared for the immediate hostility that some of the subjects revealed. Especially one of the interviewees - a journalist - told me, before I had asked any

questions, that the person was “sick and tired of people from the West coming to Asia with an imperialistic view”. We should mind our own business and stop forcing our views on them. This type of reactions made the forthcoming interview hard, because the climate and premises of the interview started off in a negative tone. It also made me aware that the cultural distance between myself and my case could take forms that I was not prepared for, in the sense that I might have given signals that were the exact opposite of what I hoped to send. This brings us to another reflection that must be done: the need for a culturally qualified reader.

## 2.4 Interpreting the Interviews: The need for a culturally qualified reader

Despite of all the problems I faced when collecting the data, the process have showed that the main problem lies in what I will refer to as a “cultural” factor. In Singapore, as well as in other parts of Asia, the art of hinting and implying without saying is a cultural convention. Combined with the philosophy of not putting anyone in a position where they might “lose their face” or their honor,<sup>15</sup> it provides the sources with a dimension of connotations that seems to require a culturally qualified reader. I am not that reader, because I am born and raised in Norway, and use western-based symbols when relating to the world around me. In addition, my field of study limits me. I have no formal background in anthropology or Asian studies.

On the other hand: will there ever be a culturally qualified reader? There are no realistic criterions for the “ideal researcher”, and one does still study other cultures. The best solution must be to be aware of the problems, and reflect on them, like I have done in this chapter.

In the end, the interviews carried many problems as to their validity and reliability. When informants refuse to be named or quoted, or tend not to give information requested, the interview situation in itself becomes interesting, less the answers given. A decision has therefore been made to downgrade their importance in this study. Informants are used as a background, not as the primary source of information. Because of the difficulties in validating views and values presented, the views of the informants are implemented if a number of other scientifically recognized sources could corroborate them.

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<sup>15</sup> For instance: In 1994 Singapore’s neighboring country Indonesia experienced major fires. The situation got so bad that also Singapore and other countries were affected. According to Lingle (1994, appendix no.4) Singapore, and other South East Asian nations did not offer any help to the government in Jakarta because *they would not offend them by implying that they were not able to take care of their own problems.*

## 2.5 Concluding Remarks: Researching Freedom of Expression in Singapore

Three distinct reasons have made the empirical gathering of data difficult. First: There is limited available research on the human rights problems in Singapore. To my knowledge no Nordic scholars have paid a special interest in Singapore outside the field of economics. To help this problem I spent two weeks as a guest researcher at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies (NIAS) in Copenhagen, Denmark, March 1999.

Secondly: The Singaporean laws are designed in such a way that critical views on the government are in most cases considered a violation. This prevents the openness one is accustomed to in other parts of the world. Also, the structure in ownership - where most of the media must be considered government controlled - makes it very difficult to identify opposing views and values that might exist within the Singaporean people. The media is *not* critical, is *not* a watchdog. Quite the contrary - the media is the foremost follower of the authorities and their policies. Consequently, one faces problems of verifying statements, and reported criminal activity of the registered political opposition. They are simply out of reach - they are in jail or have been denied the right to speak in public, or they have fled abroad to escape criminal prosecution.

It has also been hard to get hold of certain types of information. As an illustration: I worked several months to get a hold of the correct election results for the Parliament in Singapore. Contacting official sources did not help, and the statistics provided through different media sources proved to be inconsistent or incomplete. The same problem occurred when trying to get hold of certain legal documents.

These problems will most likely exist (more or less) in non-liberal states in general. For instance - with the obstacles one faces when collecting the data - how much hearsay can one accept? In my case I have used unconfirmed reports - if they are "unconfirmed by several sources". It is a paradox, but when the proper authorities deny allegations, and label human rights reports as propaganda, one is inclined to report these sometimes well documented, but still unconfirmed cases.

Thirdly: When setting out to do research on freedom of expression in other parts of the world, it is virtually impossible as a western scholar not to make references to the Western models of democracy and of the press. But then one may face the problem of comparing "apples and oranges". The comparison of culture presupposes that there is something to compare, that each culture is not so unique that any parallel with another culture is meaningless. This is known as the Malinovskian dilemma<sup>16</sup>:

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<sup>16</sup> After Bronislaw Malinowski, who introduced functionalism in anthropology in the 1920s.

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*...the purpose [of institutions] is derived from the particular culture of that society, which is a unique whole. Therefore, institutions can only be understood in terms of their own culture; functional equivalent with institutions in other societies cannot be proven; and, according to Malinowski. "cross-cultural comparison of institutions is essentially a false enterprise, for we are comparing incomparables"*

(Hofstede 1984:32)

Some scholars feel that cultures indeed are unique, and that such a comparison can not be done (Hofstede 1984:32). On the other hand – others might argue that “apples and oranges” are both “fruits”. Comparison is possible in the Singapore case, because most of the institutions and laws are hand-downs from the colonial days. However – if the institutions mean the same, have the same “substance”, is another question.<sup>17</sup> In addition one always stand the risk of being ethnocentric – having a tendency to think the characteristics of one’s own group or race superior to those of other groups or races (Hofstede 1984:25).

Research is recognized by the use of empirical data according to specific rules. The most important goal is to prevent scientists in only selecting and presenting those data that will strengthen their own hypothesis. Should I have failed in this, I hope that my sources are presented in such a way that others might go back and correct the mistakes.

In this chapter, an outline as well as a discussion on, the research methods used to collect the empirical material for this study has been given. Having all the methodological problems, as well as their solutions in mind, it is now possible to address the empirical evidence, starting with freedom of expression and political culture in Singapore.

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<sup>17</sup> Several studies have concluded that classical civil liberties which occupy a pride of place in the constitutions of the former British colonies, have not taken as deep a root in their political and administrative cultures as might have been expected (see e.g. Venkateswaran 1997).



# 3 Freedom of Expression and Political Opposition in Singapore

There are several paradoxes in Singaporean politics. Perhaps the biggest one is this: Singapore is now considered the most competitive nation in the world.<sup>18</sup> It has an economic standard that matches and even surpasses the industrialized democracies of the West. At the same time it has a political system that have authoritarian characteristics like the ones usually associated with Third World regimes. The Peoples Action Party (PAP) has been in power since 1959, the political opposition is winged, and independent institutions like the universities, churches, and trade unions are weak.

Using this decade's "Asian Values" debate as a starting point I will study this paradox by investigating the current conditions of political culture and freedom of expression in Singapore.<sup>19</sup> As outlined in the introduction, this chapter presents Singapore's political system and some innovations made to its system by the government. It goes on to examine the various ways the opposition is being repressed, and the extent to which the acceptance of this repression by the general public is related to a conflict between wealth and freedom, the lack of a critical intellectual elite, the predominance of a Confucian ethic, or the distinct features of Singaporean "kiasuism". Finally, this chapter will discuss whether the PAP's political monopoly is rationalized through an elitist ideology, which depicts government as a technical process that must be the preserve of a meritocracy.

## 3.1 Asian Values

In the past decade there has been an intensified East–West debate over human rights. At the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, June 1993, representatives from East and Southeast Asian nations put forward a decree where they explicitly declared that they could not accept parts of the international human rights standards, as they were not in accordance with "Asian Values".<sup>20</sup> Some of the governments also characterized human rights as just another part of a "subtle imperialistic attempt of asserting world hegemony by constructing a social and political construct designed at undermining national independence" (NIASnytt Nov. 21, 1996).<sup>21</sup> Malaysia's Prime Minister claimed, "Asian Values are universal values. European values are European values"

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<sup>18</sup> The ranking is done by the Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report 1998, and is referred to in the Singapore Economic Development Boards Annual Report. For an extensive study on Singapore's industrialization and the political economy, see Rodan 1989.

<sup>19</sup> The Asian values debate is not new. Images of democracy and dictatorship in the East–West relationship have been subjected to a debate for almost 2,500 years, starting with the Persians and the Greeks in 472 BC. (Emmerson 1995:96).

<sup>20</sup> Singapore has not ratified the United Nations Treaty on Torture from 1918, Civil and Political Rights (1966), Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (1966), or Racial Discrimination (1966). They have however ratified the Treaty on Genocide, the Right of the Child, and the Convention to Eliminate all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). All three treaties were ratified in 1995 (Tay et al. 1996:17).

<sup>21</sup> Very few Asian states were present at the 1948 Declaration, being then under colonial control (Tay et al. 1996:16).

(Economist June 25, 1998).<sup>22</sup> Later the same year, the ASEAN governments met in Singapore and added human rights to their final draft of their joint communiqué. Here they reaffirmed their position and emphasized that due regard must be paid to “specific cultural, social, economic, and political circumstances”.<sup>23</sup> At the core of the debate lies the question of freedom of expression.<sup>24</sup>

### 3.1.1 Singapore’s shared values

One of the strongest agitators from the Asian side is Singapore’s Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, and Asian Values are sometimes referred to as “the Singapore Model”. In 1991 the government in Singapore introduced the White Paper on “Shared Values”. *Our Shared Values* are five sentences said to incorporate the various aspects of Singapore’s (and Asian) cultural heritage.<sup>25</sup> The values are the “attitudes and values which have helped us to survive as a nation”, and are meant to be a blueprint for the development of a national ideology<sup>26</sup>:

Nation before community and society above self

Family as the basic unit of society

Community support and respect for the individual

Consensus, not conflict

Racial and religious harmony

The values are a mix of description and prescription, as the project did initially involve extensive surveys of the Singapore population.<sup>27</sup> The final version, however, was primarily shaped by the government’s own suggestions. The third value was an amended version of the original suggested “compassion for the less fortunate”. Another suggestion from the researchers was “honest government”, but this was not incorporated out of a view that the ideology was intended as a guide to personal rather than institutional behavior (Perry et al. 1997:77–78). In his presidential address to the parliament a year later, Mr. Wee Kim Wee stated:

*Singapore’s status as a cosmopolitan city has left us vulnerable to negative external influences. As such, the adoption of the Shared Values would help us safeguard against undesirable values, which may be detrimental to our social fabric.*

(Singapore Infomap)

The underlying concept of the paper, as well as the PAP philosophy, is what Western scholars might recognize as *Communitarianism*, an ideology where collective interests are always placed above

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<sup>22</sup> For a discussion on the different cultural standards for freedom of expression, as well as the different charters of human rights (European Convention, American Charter, African Charter and a proposed declaration on freedom of expression in South Asia) see Venkateswaran 1997. For a more in depth study on Asian Values, the American Journal of Foreign Affairs has provided a platform for the articulation of Asian Values rhetoric.

<sup>23</sup> In 1998 Freedom House classified 19 of Asia’s 38 countries as Free (50 percent), nine as partly free (24 percent) and ten as not free (26 percent). 24 (63 percent) are electoral democracies (Karatnycky 1999:120). Singapore was classified as partly free.

<sup>24</sup> There were of course also other human rights issues discussed at the conference, but the Asian Values issue was often raised. For instance during a discussion on human rights and homosexuals, Singapore’s Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng stated “Homosexual right is a Western issue, and is not relevant for this conference” (Clammer 1998:228-229)

<sup>25</sup> Ironically, the values draw on Confucian ideas, while the paper is purporting not to privilege any one community over another.

<sup>26</sup> The Shared values and their history can be found at <http://www.sg/flavour/values.html>

<sup>27</sup> Not all agree with this interpretation. Chua (1995:33) describes the shared values as a moralizing statement rather than as having descriptive or prescriptive value.

individual ones.<sup>28</sup> In a modern society it will be the politicians who decide what the collective interests are. Singapore's own leaders label the political system as "communitarian democracy", although the communitarian model is still to be elaborated in detail (Chua 1995:200; Perry et al.1997:66).

### 3.1.2 *The Leader as a Father*

In Singapore the family is seen as the "basic unit of society", but the whole nation is in many senses an extended family.<sup>29</sup> Lee Kuan Yew has stated that this is the fundamental difference between Asian Societies and those of the West "...Eastern societies believe that the individual exists in the context of his family. He is not pristine and separate. The family is a part of the extended family, and then friends and the wider society" (Zakaria 1994).

According to Dr. Geir Helgesen (March 4, 1999)<sup>30</sup>, all types of leaders in East Asia are viewed as "fathers". However, while leaders Western cultural societies often are connected with "power", the leaders in Asia are also seen to have a strong obligation to care and nurture. Or as Prime Minister Goh said "We [the PAP] find it necessary, from time to time, like a good father would, to help members of the family to progress" (quoted in Jones et al. 1995:163). This notion can be traced back to the ideology of Confucius, which is the reference point for most Asians in relation to society and family. Another argument about the Asian notion of power is made by Pye (1985:21) who claims that in most of Asia the concept of power has been seen as the exact opposite of the Western view: to have power was to be spared the chore of decision-making. Thus "the aspiration that impelled people up the ladder of power was that they might eventually rise above the need to trouble themselves with decisions. Decisions are what vex the minds of the weak and make life troublesome". In his study of Asian Power and politics in several countries, Pye (1985:x) was able to identify one underlying theme: That for most Asians the acceptance of authority is not inherently bad, but rather is an acceptable key to finding personal security. He concludes that the search for autonomy and for individual identity has been a distinctly Western quest, and that for Asians the search for identity means finding a group to belong to – that is, locating an appropriate paternalistic form of authority.

### 3.1.3 *Understanding Asian Values*

Three distinct approaches to the analysis of Asian Values can be identified (Jayasuriya 1997): First, there is the *culturalist approach*, that suggests that there are inherent normative values within East Asia that steer social, economic, and political systems.<sup>31</sup> Just as the Western liberal democracy is a result of historical development and the entrenchment of liberalism (based on the values of

<sup>28</sup> For a study on communitarianism in a global and philosophical perspective, see Tam 1998.

<sup>29</sup> Singapore Department of Statistics reported that in 1998, only 1.7 percent of the entire population was divorced or separated. This might be an indication of the strong familism present in current Singapore.

<sup>30</sup> Conversation at the Nordic Institute of Asian Studies.

<sup>31</sup> This approach is based on a "social" definition of culture, in which culture is a description of a particular way of life, which expresses certain meanings and values in art, learning, institutions and ordinary behavior. From such a definition, the analysis of culture is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in a particular way of life. For a discussion on the analysis of culture, see Williams (1961).

equality and freedom), the political system in Singapore is shaped and structured within the limits set by Asian values and cultural assumptions. For instance: The development of parliamentary rule has often been considered crucial for the decline of authoritarianism (Rodan 1993:77). In Southeast Asia one tends to prioritize a hierarchical world-view. Hierarchical shared opinions, grounded in Asian culture and history, fit the needs of the modern, technocratic managerial regime in Singapore (Bell et al. 1995:4). The Westminster-based parliamentary system seems to cover these needs.

A domestic representative for this approach is Kishore Mahbubani<sup>32</sup>, self-pronounced initiator of the modern Asian Values debate. He argues that democracy, human rights and freedom of the press are “sacred cows” of the West, and not universally applicable. Mahbubani (1998) therefore calls for an abandonment of the assumption of moral superiority by the West and points out that it is vital for Western minds to understand that the efforts by Asians to discover Asian Values are not only, or even primarily, a search for political values. The West has to understand that liberal characteristics, like a free press, serve as “opium for the society”, and that financial and political stability is thwarted by an irresponsible press. In the East Asian form of collectivism, *harmony* is placed at the top of the hierarchy of values, and for many Asians, freedom of expression represents the opposite (Triandis 1988:289).<sup>33</sup>

The second approach is the *instrumentalist approach*. Asian Values are identified as a political strategy and analyzed accordingly. Culture is being constantly reinvented by political élites to be deployed as an instrument of political control. It is also central in constructing a state identity. Several Western scholars see the PAP “Asian Values” legitimization as nothing more than a set of values authoritarian governments employ selectively as a political means, rather than universally for development ends (see e.g. Buruma 1997; Gibson 1990; Lingle 1995; Tønnesson 1996). Their attachment to the family is nepotism, their “consensus not conflict” becomes corrupt politics, respect for authority and lack of criticism result in fear and an inability to innovate, the importance of personal relationships becomes cronyism, and paternalism gives way for authoritarianism. Lingle (1995:194) has even stated “despite remarkable [economic] advances under some Asian regimes, the rigid intolerance of these authoritarian capitalist states bears troubling similarity to fascism”. Others deny the whole existence of Asian Values. Asia is merely a geographical concept, unlike the relatively homogeneous culture of Europe, and it is absurd to ascribe a single set of beliefs to some 3.4 billion people (see e.g. Dworkin 1997). Chan (1997b:42) links the Asian Values debate directly to Singapore: “...at a time when ‘Singaporean values’ are still being formed, ‘Asian Values’ is a convenient label for Singapore to use to distinguish itself from the West”. Emmerson (1995:97)

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<sup>32</sup> Mahbubani, a civil servant and career diplomat, has been with the Singapore Foreign Service since 1971. He has a honorary doctorate from Dalhousie University, Canada, and is now Singapore’s ambassador to the United Nations (Mahbubani 1998:192).

<sup>33</sup> Other Asian values are, according to Mahbubani “attachment to the family as an institution, deference to societal interest, thrift, conservatism in social mores, and respect for authority” (Economist June 25, 1998).

describes the debate as narrow, consisting of polemic conducted largely between Singaporeans and Americans. As an Indonesian scholar<sup>34</sup> commented to me:

*Singapore is not Asian, but seen as Western. We [Indonesians] laugh when we hear Lee Kuan Yew talk about “Asian Values”. Asian Values are something we had before, when we were agricultural societies. The authoritarian way is not Asian, but Western. Asia is more compromising.*

Some have even suggested that the mixing of values has contributed to a peculiarly Singaporean values system supportive of corporatist government (see e.g. Perry et al.1997:73).

The last approach is the *structural and reactionary modernist*. The basic thesis is that there is no modernity in general, but that there are different paths to modernity. The cultural language of Asian Values is in itself an artifact of modernity, and one rejects the claim of the European civilization to define modernity for the entire human race (see e.g. Kausikan 1997; Feenberg 1995:169-245). The main features of the Asian variant of reactionary modernism include the use of technology and competition in an active participation on the world market, the infusion of cultural language into economic discourse, and an orientation towards the future (Jayasuriya 1997:22-27). The Japanese philosopher Kitarō Nishida stands as a representative of this approach. He argues that each nation must realize itself through its own particular culture, and that a world culture consists in a field of dialogue and conflict rather than a specific, substantive way of life (Feenberg 1995:183).

The Asian Values debate is extensive and complex, and within the framework of this study, it is not possible to discuss the concept of “Asian Values” in depth. Instead, I will relate the debate to Singapore. In the following, Singapore’s political system will be studied, in order to understand the political legitimization behind the regime.

## 3.2 Government and Politics

### 3.2.1 Major features of Singapore’s political system

Singapore is a republic with a parliamentary system for government, and a written constitution. The head of the state is the *President*, elected for a fixed term of six years. Historically, the powers of the president have been restricted, but in 1988 a white paper was introduced in Parliament, recommending an increased influence for him or her.<sup>35</sup> As a result, the president was to be directly elected by the people and empowered to veto budgets and key appointments to public office (United States Department of the Army [U.S. DA]:4.01).

The *Parliament* is unicameral and consists of 83 elected members who sit for five years. It convenes at least once a year, and members may speak in any of the four official languages. The Parliamentary procedure follows the British pattern; all bills are deliberated in three readings and passed by a simple majority. Under the Singapore Constitution, Members of Parliament elected on

<sup>34</sup> The comment took place during a conversation on Asian Values and Human rights Sept. 22, 1998. The scholar requested to be anonymous.

<sup>35</sup> It is believed that the proposed changes originated as a device intended to permit Lee Kuan Yew to retain some power, should he retire as Prime Minister. There has only been one election for President. In 1993 Mr. Ong Teng Cheong (PAP) was elected by the citizens of Singapore. For a more detailed discussion on this matter, as well as the constitutional developments, see Tan et al. 1997.

a party ticket has to resign if they change party or if they are expelled (Perry 1997:61; Woon 1994:16).

Mainly because of the size, Singapore has only one level of government – the national and the local are the same.<sup>36</sup> As in all British-style politics, the government is headed by the Prime Minister, who leads a cabinet of ministers of state selected from the ranks of the members of Parliament. To ensure that there will be representation by some members of a political party not forming the government, an amendment to the Parliamentary Elections Act was made in 1984, making a provision for the appointment of three non-constituency members of the opposition parties (U.S. DA:4.01). The number is reduced for every directly elected candidate.<sup>37</sup> The total number of members in Parliament from group representation constituencies has to total less than half the total numbers of members. Elections are done in single-member constituencies, the different areas send only one candidate, and voting is compulsory.

### 3.2.2 *The People's Action Party*

The governing *People's Action Party* was founded in 1954, and in the 1950s it acted as a left-wing party of trade unionists. Their leadership consisted of English-educated lawyers and journalists, and Chinese-educated and pro-Communist trade union leaders and educators (U.S. DA:4.02). Originally, the PAP had gone into an alliance with the communists in order to extend their organizational network among the Chinese population. When the British rulers left in the late fifties, Lee Kuan Yew and PAP won the 1959 election, and gradually eliminated communists from influential positions within the party and government. Later, the Internal Security Act (ISA) was used to prevent alleged communists from participation in politics (U.S. DA:5.02).

Today, the political power in Singapore is in the hands of a small group of individuals, most of them instrumental in Singapore gaining its independence. Since 1965, they have been convinced that the city-state cannot afford the luxury of partisan politics, and have acted to “depoliticize” the power structure (U.S. DA:4.03). Instead, they seek to maintain economic growth and political stability by the paternal guidance of the PAP. This has been done through the forging of a Singaporean identity, and the sense of threat from its regional neighbors (Perry et al. 1997:67).

The PAP leaders have always emphasized their governmental roles more than their party roles and the administration of the state more than politics. People have not been elected as much as they have been chosen to run the country, or as Deputy Prime Minister Brigade-General Hsien Loon Lee (son of Lee Kuan Yew) once said: “In Singapore you don't volunteer to go into politics – you are invited to enter”(quoted in Jones 1996:593). Unlike many other one-party states, the PAP has not made efforts to attract the general population masses to the party or party-lead

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<sup>36</sup> A distinctive feature of the Singaporean government, which I will not address in this thesis, is the statutory boards; autonomous government agencies established by an act of Parliament that specifies the purpose, rights, and powers of the body. The boards are separate from the formal government structure, and do not enjoy the immunities and legal privileges like government departments. Such boards include *The Housing and Development Board*, *The Industrial Training Board*, and *the Singapore Muslim Religious Council*. The statutory boards have played a major role in the governments post-independence development strategy, and their activities have usually served multiple economic and political goals (U.S. DA:2.04).

<sup>37</sup> For a discussion on this type of “government approved opposition”, see Tremewan 1996.

organizations, or replace community organizations with party structures. But they have close ties to several national organizations, like their umbrella organization National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), affiliated with almost 73 percent of all unionized workers (United States Department of State [U.S. DS] 1998:6).<sup>38</sup>

The PAP leaders are highly articulate, expressing their principles in speeches, books, and interviews. Their main view is that the government is an instrument intended to promote national ends, and that no inherent limits on government concerns should be recognized. Intellectual analyses and rational decision-making are prized and the leaders have traditionally prided themselves of their ability to make unpopular decisions, in search of future growth and prosperity. They see themselves as good examples of moral and political rectitude, and the use of rhetoric is central in their communication towards the domestic public, as well as the foreign media (Chua 1995:57; U.S. DA:4.03).

Singapore's growing prosperity and the government's general honesty and effectiveness, have strengthened the PAP leadership over the years. But, also the strict control over media and the courts, restrictions on the opposition's political activity, and strong party discipline have helped them getting complete control over the political process (U.S. DS 1998:3). Singapore's vulnerability to multitudinous dangers has always been the tenet with which the PAP has legitimized their political omnipotence. Brown (1995<sup>b</sup>:147) classifies the PAP policy as an "ideology of survivalism", where the lack of any clear national identity demanded national unity and political acquiescence as the only way to overcome Singapore's vulnerability as a small nation in an unstable region.

### 3.2.3 *The PAP and the Opposition*

"Why do we need an opposition in Singapore, when we have such an efficient, honest and incorruptible government?" The Vice-Dean at the Faculty of Law at the National University of Singapore raised this question in 1993 (Woon 1994:15). He goes on stating that even if the answer to the question should be a "yes – we do need an opposition" it will not happen because:

*Given the usual rag-tag ensemble that runs in elections, I do not think that we are going to get many "respectable" opposition members in the near future (...) I do not think that any reasonable person wants the PAP out of office. The alternatives are too gruesome to even contemplate.*

(Woon 1994:17)

In "The Year in Review 1994"<sup>39</sup> published by *The Institute of Policy Studies*<sup>40</sup> in Singapore, the twenty-four opposition parties are described in a total of 25 lines. The Singapore Democratic Party leader, Dr. Chee Soon Juan, is noted as the SDP's "biggest liability", and the paragraph ends with a declaration of not wanting to devote much space to "partisan politics". The reason is that the

<sup>38</sup> The Trade Unions Right allows the formation of unions with some restrictions. For instance there are prohibitions on the unionization of ununiformed employees (U.S. DS 1998: 3).

<sup>39</sup> Edited by Teng Yap Mui.

<sup>40</sup> The Institute of South East Asian Studies is the major publisher of academic books in Singapore (Gopinathan 1992:26).

opposition for now as well as in the future is “just a sideshow, albeit a colorful one, on Singapore’s political scene” (1995:54).<sup>41</sup>

The two examples presented above serve to illustrate the situation for the opposition in official Singapore. Historically, the opposition has been presented as too unintelligent to comprehend the problems, too selfish to sacrifice for the common good, or maliciously intent on destroying the nation. Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong has declared himself against the principle of political opposition: “it will divide the country. I’m not in favor of confrontational politics, so I’m not in favor of opposition” (quoted in Rodan 1993:100).

As mentioned, there are today 24 registered political parties in Singapore, but only a handful are known to the general public. *The Worker’s Party* (WP – centrist) and the *Singapore Democratic Party* (SDP – liberal) are the most influential, and have had representatives in the Parliament.<sup>42</sup> When it comes to subversive political groups, there have been reports of political actions towards small organizations.<sup>43</sup> None of them have been determined as a real threat to the PAP administration. The following discussion will therefore revolve around the two mentioned political parties, with the greatest emphasis on the Worker’s Party.

### 3.3 Limiting the Opposition

One way to investigate the status of freedom of expression in a country is to study the working conditions of the political opposition. If the opposition is free to pursue political power, address the general public, and present their alternative views, freedom of expression in general is likely to exist.

The general impression of Singapore is that as long as you live your life and don’t question the way things are done, you will have a fairly prosperous and comfortable life. However, there are people in Singapore that do not “go with the main stream”. The political opposition is still fighting to get political influence. Their efforts are, according to themselves, effectively torpedoed by the PAP through different means. Through the years, the PAP has put several types of restraints on their political counterparts, directed at silencing opposing views and criticism. The use of the judicial system for political purposes – the most effective being defamation suits that bankrupt the leaders of the opposition – is only one out of a number of strategies. The Government has wide powers to detain people, and restrict their travel (and return)<sup>44</sup>, freedom of expression and right to

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<sup>41</sup> In the same publication the media are described as “solidly pro-government news media”, neglecting to mention that the media also are government owned, and government controlled (1995:54).

<sup>42</sup> For a presentation of party platforms, see Sintercom’s “Vote Watch” at: <http://www.sintercom.org/Election96/Political-parties/long.html> (accessed Jan. 29, 1999).

<sup>43</sup> In 1974, seventeen persons were detained without trial under the ISA. In 1982 a Worker’s Party member was convicted to two years in jail for distributing “subversive literature calling for the overthrow of the government”. In 1983 one leader was executed for “soliciting a foreign government”, and in 1987 twenty-two English educated professionals were arrested under the ISA for alleged engagement in a Marxist group (The group had no organizational structure or name). All but one were released after agreeing to refrain from political activities in the future, and made the “ritualistic” television confessions (U.S. DA: 5.02).

<sup>44</sup> In 1985, the Parliament provided for the loss of citizenship by Singaporeans who resided outside Singapore for more than 10 years consecutively. This may result in people becoming stateless, and therefore violates principles set by the United Nations. The law has been used against the famous government opponent Tan Wah Piaoow. Former members of the Communist party of Malaya (CPM) must apply to the government to return, and renounce communism (U.S. DS 1998:3).

associate freely, powers that can be used to thwart the opposition (U.S. DS 1998). In the following, I will address some of the means used in current Singapore, with a special emphasis on legislative restraints.<sup>45</sup>

### 3.3.1 *The Prejudices of the Electoral System*

As mentioned earlier, elections are done in single member constituencies. This type of electoral rule gives a clear preference to the parties already in position, because it serves to eliminate parliamentary representation for minority parties, and to encourage the organization of parties whose candidates can win the majority of votes in many constituencies. The strategy can – in a worst case scenario – result in insignificant representation even if a party obtains more than 50 percent of the total number of votes. The result may become a more or less permanent exclusion of a significant disgruntled minority from political representation.

The following table presents the results from the parliamentary elections in Singapore since 1968<sup>46</sup>. The second column shows the total number of seats in Parliament, the third shows how many seats were uncontested by the opposition during the election. The fourth show PAP seats taken, while the two last gives the total share of PAP seats and votes won.

**Table 2 – Parliamentary elections since 1968**

<b>Election year</b>	<b>Number of seats</b>	<b>Uncontested seats</b>	<b>PAP seats won</b>	<b>Share of Seats won</b>	<b>Share of total vote</b>
1968	58	51	58	100	86.72
1972	65	8	65	100	70.43
1976	69	16	69	100	74.09
1980	75	37	75	100	77.66
1984	79	30	77	97.46	64.83
1988	81	11	80	98.76	63.17
1991	81	41	77	95.06	60.97
1997	83	47	81	97.59	64.98

Sources: *Far Easter Economic Review* (July 19, 1990; Jan. 3, 1993), Perry et al. 1997:61-84; Singh 1992:61-64; Tremewan 1996:152-186

The results from the parliamentary elections show that the PAP has taken the majority of seats, never less than 95 percent of the total. Four elections gave no seats to the opposition, while the 1991 election gave their best result with a total of four seats. The PAP has always had the majority share of votes, but the opposition's share has varied from 13 percent (1968) to 39 percent (1991). It is also worth noting that in some elections over half the seats were uncontested. This is not only

<sup>45</sup> This thesis will concentrate on legal limitations and public practices. Documentation from human rights organizations has suggested that the authorities under the Internal Security Act have violated civil rights. For instance, they have held dissidents in solitary confinement underground, beaten them, denied them sleep, legal counsel or contact with family. For a documentation of these and other practices, see Tremewan (1996:187-227).

<sup>46</sup> Elections from 1955–1963 were for the Legislative Assembly and will not be addressed.

due to lack of resources and the short notice for the elections (nine days in 1991), but is also a tactic to avoid allegations from the PAP of “freak election scenario” (Rodan 1993:97).<sup>47</sup> In 1997 the opposition parties collectively devised a strategy, which let the PAP win before the electioneering took place. The idea was to remove the threat of displacing the government, hoping to make the electorate more willing to vote for the opposition (Chua 1997<sup>b</sup>:131).

Apart from the uncontested seats, the election results from Singapore suggest that there is a strong tendency towards *gerrymandering*<sup>48</sup>, and the electoral boundaries are in fact redrawn for each successive election. According to Chua (1997<sup>b</sup>:129), constituencies in which the PAP has been closely challenged, are systematically eliminated and absorbed into adjacent constituencies with redrawn boundaries.

### 3.3.2 Explanations for dominance – the 1997 election

From 1968 until 1981, the PAP’s political legitimacy was almost unquestioned within Singapore (Rodan 1993:83). Today the political dominance of the PAP can only partly be ascribed to the popularity of the party and its success in delivering goods and services to the population (Perry et al. 1997:62). It might therefore be useful to address the election process itself in order to identify other factors that might help the PAP to stay in power.

In the latest election (1997) the Singapore Democratic Party, thought of as the leading opposition party, was left without a single seat.<sup>49</sup> Apart from the “normal” election factors, like linguistic capabilities of the candidates, and campaign effectiveness, the PAP seemed to apply election tactics that intimidated voters. Especially did *economic pressure* seem effective. In 1997 they warned the voters from supporting the opposition by emphasizing that the upgrading planned for government-built and managed housing estates (where most Singaporeans own their homes), would not be a priority in opposition-held constituencies. They would have to wait longest, and according to Mr. Goh, some might even become “slums”. And as result few householders voted for what could be a decline in the value of their property (Economist Jan. 11, 1997)<sup>50</sup>. *Media coverage* might have influenced the election process. All of the domestic media is pro-government, and surveys suggest that the covering of the opposition is biased (see e.g. Holaday et al. 1993; Tay et al. 1996)<sup>51</sup>. The National Solidarity Party has therefore called for impartial reporting from the media

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<sup>47</sup> The term “freak elections” interprets voting for the opposition as irrational. Since voting for the PAP is rational, opposition votes are read as protest votes based on emotions. Within this frame of thought, an election where the opposition is voted for is “freak”, and not based on a rational choice. The term has become a part of the vocabulary of Singapore, and fear of such an election exists among segments of the population (Chua 1995:22).

<sup>48</sup> *Gerrymandering* (after the American governor and Vice-president Elbridge Gerry (1744–1814) + *salamander*), means dividing an area into election districts in order to give a political party an electoral majority in a large number of districts, while concentrating the voting strength of the opposition in as few districts as possible.

<sup>49</sup> Despite this result, the election was not considered to be a great success for the PAP, since the party recovered less than 5 percent of the ground it had lost in the 1991 general election.

<sup>50</sup> In his book “Political Legitimacy and Housing”, Chua Beng-Huat argues that a successful national housing policy generates political legitimacy for the ruling government, and that public housing provision is the founding stone which the PAP have built their political legitimacy on (1997:124). Today Singapore has near a universal provision of public housing (according to Singapore Department of statistics home ownership was 90% in 1995. In the United Kingdom the corresponding number is 67 %, in the USA 65 %). Tremewan (1996:45) has a somewhat different view on the same issue, and argues that the public housing system has worked as a regulatory mechanism in political conflicts (see also Perry et al. 1997:247).

<sup>51</sup> In their article on Asian media and elections, Tay et al. concludes that even within a model of “Asian Values” on human rights, greater freedom should be exercised during the election process (1996:28–29).

and equal opportunity in publicity and the media (Manifesto article 1.3.4). Opposition parties also filed various complaints about *election irregularities*. Most of them concerned Ministers who visited the polling stations during voting, but some alleged the counting of invalid votes. There was also a discovery of a sealed ballot box with ballot papers already inside before the polling began. The government denied any impropriety (Economist Jan. 11, 1997).

Not only the voters are subjected to pressure. The opposition is also intimidated from challenging the PAP. Before the parliamentary election in 1997, Chia Shi Teck, a Singapore entrepreneur, announced that he would run as an independent candidate. In an interview with Far Eastern Economic Review [FEER], Chia talked about the difficulties he had in putting up four to six candidates. One of the people he was trying to persuade, a minority lecturer, was afraid that running could cost him his job at the university, and endanger his wife's child-care consulting contracts. Another potential candidate – a lawyer – was anxious that running could cause “his partnership to disintegrate, his marriage to unravel, and his ethnic community to isolate him”. Chia also got a phone call from one of the parents of a candidate crying, “please don't take my son”. Friends of his would not talk to him on the phone, and suggested that he changed his mobile phone to make it harder to tap. He concluded: “It looks like offering your services is a crime - not a crime of the law, but a crime of culture”. Leslie Fong, editor of The Straits Times, published an editorial where he admired Chia's nerve because “This can be an awfully cold and lonely place for those who are seen to have got into the PAP's bad books” (FEER Des. 12, 1996). There were however two opposition politicians that gained seats in parliament. In a comment to FEER one of them stated “...at least I have shown Singaporeans that it's possible to be in politics and survive. Politics is not as fearful, as destructive, as people perceive. I'm still here in the world. I'm still alive” (FEER Des. 3, 1998).

A final note on elections: Lee Kuan Yew challenges the principle of “one man one vote”. He has proposed to modify Singapore's voting system and give men<sup>52</sup> aged 35 to 60 years, married and with children, two votes each to reflect their heavier responsibilities and bigger contributions to society. The rationalization lies in the wish for a “more viable system and a more stable society” because “at the end of the day, we need a system that works, that enables representative government to function in an effective way” (Lee 1994). Also PM Yeo has expressed concern over the “one-man-one-vote” system, because on its extreme, it might lead to socialism and a welfare state. This because “the majority tends to vote in favor of the redistribution of wealth in itself, no matter what harm it might do to the overall economy” (Asia Times June 24, 1997). So far there has been no constitutional amendment on this matter.

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<sup>52</sup> According to Bell et al. (1995:4) the proposal did only include family *men*, not women.

### 3.3.3 Security Laws

The government in Singapore has repeatedly used security legislation to control a broad range of opposition activity.<sup>53</sup> The Internal Security Act (ISA) is enforced by the Internal Security Department (ISD), under the motto “Here to make it right”. The ISA gives provisions for detention without trial (U.S. DS 1998). Most of the liberties in the Constitution, like the right to profess and practice religion (Part IV, article 15)<sup>54</sup>, are restricted to not apply if they are contrary to any general law relating to *public order*, *public health*, or *morality*. All these restrictions are based on fairly general and broadly drawn laws, and the ISA gives broad discretion to the Minister of Home Affairs to order detention without charges if the President determines that a person poses a threat to national security (U.S. DS 1998:d). No one has been jailed under formal ISA detention since 1990, but the government maintained restrictions on the rights of one former ISA detainee to make public statements, travel abroad, and associate freely. The former MP Chia Thya Poh sat 23 years in preventive detention under the ISA.<sup>55</sup> The Societies Act specifically prohibits a registered organization to be involved in politics.

There are also legislative limitations on the possibility for political positions. After Lee Kuan Yew stepped down for his handpicked successor, Goh Chok Tong, new requirements for future presidential candidates were launched. To hold the post, one must have held one of certain senior public offices, or have run a company with paid-up capital of over \$ 62.5 million. This leaves only about 400 citizens eligible (Freedom House 1997<sup>b</sup>), and poses yet another difficulty, since a lot of the public offices in question are government appointed. Before the 1993 election, the Presidential Elections Committee, that certifies the suitability of potential candidates on the basis of character, reputation, etc. rejected the applications of two opposition leaders for not satisfying the criteria regarding character and financial expertise (U.S. DS 1998:3).<sup>56</sup>

### 3.3.4 Working Conditions

The right to form and participate in associations and organizational activities are subjected to various restrictions in the Constitution’s article 14, clauses 2 and 3 (see appendix no. 2). The Parliament can impose restrictions considered “necessary or expedient in the interest of the security of Singapore”. In practice the government restricts these rights. Most associations, clubs, etc. with more than ten members must be registered, but the Government denies registration to

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<sup>53</sup> The Singapore legal system has borrowed heavily from English law, but there are also other sources of influence. The Singapore Penal Code, Evidence Act and Criminal Procedure Code comes mainly from nineteenth century India, and Singapore company law is similar to the Australian one. There is also a substantial body of case-law (Singapore Infomap). For a more detailed legal history of Singapore see [http://www.sg/informap/mita/m\\_law.html](http://www.sg/informap/mita/m_law.html) (accessed April 2, 1998).

<sup>54</sup> Article 15 of the Constitution states: (1) Every person has the right to profess and practice his religion and to propagate it. (2) No person shall be compelled to pay any tax the proceeds of which are specially allocated in whole or in part for the purposes of a religion other than his own. (3) Every religious group has the right: (a) to manage its own religious affairs; (b) to establish and maintain institutions for religious or charitable purposes; and to acquire and own property and hold and administer it in accordance with law. (4) This Article does not authorize any act contrary to any general law relating to public order, public health or morality.

<sup>55</sup> After his release in 1989, Chia Thya Poh was confined to a small island near Singapore during evening and night hours until 1992. He is still not allowed to issue public statements, attend public meetings, associate with other former detainees, or take any part in political activity (Amnesty International Newsrelease (Nov. 27, 1998); U.S. DS 1998:1d).

<sup>56</sup> In the 1993 President election PAP’s Ong Teng Cheong won with a total of 58.7% of the votes. His opponent Chua Kim Yeow got 41.3 % (PoliSci.com at <http://www.polisci.com/world/nation/SN.htm>, accessed Jan. 29, 1999).

groups believed to “be used for unlawful purposes” like disturbing public peace or welfare (U.S. DS 1998:2b). There are also laws that forbid all political activities that are not carried out by one of the registered political parties. Singaporeans are obligated to get governmental approval for all public occurrences with more than five attending persons, and the government closely monitors political gatherings, regardless of the number present (Freedom House 1996; U.S. DS 1998:2b). Persons who wish to speak at a public function must obtain a license from the police, a process that can be delayed for several weeks. Opposition leader Chee Soon Juan addressed this requirement in a “soapbox speech” on January 5, 1999:

*One very prevalent notion people have is that we [the opposition] have options. That's nonsensical. What's left open to us except to contest elections? (...) Every turn you take the government puts up an obstacle, requires a permit for this, a license for that (...) We try to apply ahead, they say it's minimum six weeks (...) We've applied as much as 2 1/2 months ahead. Then they say, no, don't apply so early. It's a game. It's not that we haven't tried.*

(Asiaweek Jan. 22, 1999)

Because he made his speech to more than five people without a license he was charged under the Public Entertainment Act. He was fined \$ 1400, refused to pay and was sent to jail for seven days. He also had to face charges for making another speech. If fined more than \$ 2000 he cannot run for office for five years (Economist Feb. 6, 1999).

The opposition parties are also restricted in distributing political material. In 1996 the Government denied an opposition party's request to produce and distribute videotapes on the grounds that “visual images can be used to evoke emotional rather than rational responses” (U.S. DS 1998:3; FEER Aug. 8, 1996).<sup>57</sup> In an amendment to the 1981 Film Act one allowed any one who imports, produces, distributes and screens a “party political film” to be fined up to \$ 62,000 and two years in prison (Asiaweek March 27, 1998).

In 1989 the FEER reported that Francis Seow, a leading government critic, was under surveillance (presumably by the Singaporean authorities), while staying in New York. Several American human rights organizations protested this incident (FEER Jan. 26, 1989). The U.S. Department of State has reported on the working conditions of the opposition:

*It is believed that the authorities routinely monitor citizens' telephone conversations and use of the Internet. While there are no proven allegations that they did so in 1997, it is widely believed that the authorities routinely conduct surveillance on some opposition politicians and other critics of the Government.*

(U.S. DS 1998:1/f)

### 3.3.5 Law Suits – Defamation and Contempt-of-Parliament

Restrictions on freedom of expression related to public order and inflammatory speech are a growing phenomenon. Eric Barendt (1985:200) points out that one rationale for legal restrictions is that society has a legitimate interest in preserving the quality of language used in public debate. Violent and indecent language often, it is said, encourages the spread of dangerous, harmful ideas. The most usual legal measure used on opposition members is defamation suits.

<sup>57</sup> The Singapore Democratic Party protested the decision and complained that the government was trying to prevent them from communicating its “alternative vision” for Singapore to the city-states voters.

In Singapore the threat of civil libel or slander suits, has for years been used as means to discourage criticism or challenges by opposition leaders (U.S. DS 1998:d). In Singaporean law, defamation can be a tort and a crime.<sup>58</sup> If an action amounts to the latter, the prosecution will be brought under the Penal Code. If the plaintiff requests damages, one will bring an action for defamation in tort.

To defame is basically to attack one's character or reputation, but there is of course the general problem of deciding what statements qualify. Defamation in civil law is divided into *libel* and *slander*. Libel concerns the more "permanent" forms of defamation (in writing or through broadcasting) while slander refers to spoken words (including pictures, visual images, and gestures). Libel is actionable for prosecution without proof of special damage, while slander must be proven in most cases (Myint 1978:329).<sup>59</sup> After proven that words are defamatory, it is necessary to prove that the words were in fact *published*, meaning that a third party must have heard or read them. In addition to this there are also two other forms of communication that might qualify as defamatory. The first is defamation by *innuendo*, meaning a statement can be defamatory by implication. The other one is *unintentional* defamation; in Singapore you can be held responsible for words published innocently (Myint 1978:331-332).<sup>60</sup> Public figures, like politicians and leaders, are seen as more vulnerable to unsubstantiated allegations, and therefore more deserving of judicial protection against allegations and criticism that might "undermine their ability to govern" (Means 1996:111). However, the law is only a formality without its practice and precedence. I will therefore present two cases that might shed some light on how this particular law is used to restrain the opposition.

In 1997 Tang Liang Hong, a Worker's Party candidate for parliament election, was found guilty of defamation towards Lee Kuan Yew and nine other PAP MPs, and ordered to pay a record \$5.77 million in damages.<sup>61</sup> The suits came after Tang had said that the PAP leaders lied when they said he was an "anti-Christian, anti-English-educated, Chinese-language chauvinist" (U.S. DS 1998:d; FEER June 12, 1997; March 20, 1997; March 6, 1997; Feb. 6, 1997).<sup>62</sup>

Later the same year Worker's Party leader J. B. Jeyaretnam (one of three opposition members in Parliament) was sued by Singapore's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong for defamation. The suit came after a statement made on the Worker's Party's final election rally, where Mr. Jeyaretnam told the crowd:

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<sup>58</sup> This principle is handed down from English law (Myint 1978:328).

<sup>59</sup> There are four exceptions, including "words calculated to discourage the plaintiff in any office, profession, calling, trade or business held or carried on by him at the time of the publication". This might apply to MPs and the government.

<sup>60</sup> For instance: If you as a fiction writer use a character name, a real person with the same name can sue for defamation.

<sup>61</sup> Legal Documents from this case (Suit No. 2523 of 1996 in the High Court of the Republic of Singapore) and several others can be accessed from <http://www.ozemail.com.au/~tangtalk/> (accessed Nov. 12, 1998)

<sup>62</sup> The Tang Liang Hong case resulted in a crisis between Singapore and neighboring Malaysia. When Tang fled from Singapore, he first left for Johor Bahru, a Malaysian city just outside Singapore. Lee Kuan Yew commented on this by stating: "He claimed that his life was under threat. But of all places, he went to Johor. If there is anywhere where people can do him harm, that is the place. [Johor is] notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings". The statement resulted in demonstrations in Malaysia where protesters called Lee "senile". Newspapers broadened the attack to Singaporeans as a whole. For instance did the Kuala Lumpur based newspapers *Voice of Malaysia* and *The Star* express bitterness and the *Star* called the PAP and Singaporeans "extremely arrogant" (*The Star* March 17, 1997; *Voice of Malaysia* March 27, 1997). As a result Lee had to make an historical apology to Malaysia's Parliament (*Economist* March 22, 1997).

*Mr. Tang Liang Hong has just placed before me two reports he has made to the police, against, you know, Mr. Goh and his people.<sup>63</sup>*

When the case against Jeyaretnam was heard in the High Court, it was argued that the words said were defamatory, because they suggested that the Prime Minister was guilty of criminal conduct. In other words a case of *defamation by innuendo*. The judge awarded Mr. Goh \$ 20 000 and ordered Jeyaretnam to pay 60 percent of the costs of the trial. Both parties contested the decision, and in July 1998, the Appeal Court raised the damages awarded to Mr. Goh to \$ 100 000 and ordered the Worker's Party chief to pay all costs<sup>64</sup> (The Straits Times July 18, 1998; FEER June 30, 1998; FEER Aug. 28, 1998). The Appeal Court declared:

*The statement was a cleverly disguised sting, directed at Mr. Goh, and was intended by Mr. Jeyaretnam to cast a stain on Mr. Goh's reputation in the hope that it might enhance his (Mr. Jeyaretnam's) chances at election the next day.*

They also ruled that Mr. Goh was entitled to more compensation because Jeyaretnam's lawyer had made a "wide range of accusations", concerning his integrity, character and suitability as a Prime Minister when Goh was on the stand.<sup>65</sup> The accusations were said to amount to "...a baseless attack, which, we think, aggravated the hurt caused to Mr. Goh, for which he is entitled to compensation" (The Straits Times July 18, 1998). When the judgment is enforced, he will be bankrupted, and – according to the law - lose his seat in Parliament. And the case does not end here. The Worker's Party leader faces seven other defamation suits by PAP leaders (among them Lee Kuan Yew) for the words he used at the rally. Jeyaretnam's response was "A human spirit is indomitable...I am not giving up the fight", but added "if Mr. Goh pursues me into bankruptcy court, I shan't be able to pay the judgement to vacate my seat in Parliament" (Associated Press July 24, 1998). If this is to be the outcome, it will not be the first time Jeyaretnam (said to be Lee's *Bête Noire*) loses his seat in parliament. In 1986 he lost his seat after the Singapore's High Court fined him \$5000. He also lost a defamation case to Lee Kuan Yew in 1988, but that time he managed to pay the damages (FEER Aug. 6, 1998).<sup>66</sup> Jeyaretnam did not make any appeals to Singaporeans to help him pay, but he asserted that it "had to be clear to them what was happening" (Associated Press July 24, 1998).

The irony of this case is that Lee Kuan Yew and Goh published the reports in question. These were the very reports they claimed had damaged their reputation, and it seems somewhat strange to consent to the publication of what you say is defamatory material, and then sue on it. Especially when the suit concerns the *publication* of the reports (Tang 1998).

<sup>63</sup> In the police reports Tang had written that the PAP leader's statements could "incite religious extremist to hate me and cause harm to my family" and requested police protection (Asiaweek Feb. 28, 1997).

<sup>64</sup> According to a press release from The Associated Press (July 24, 1998), this would amount to \$150 000.

<sup>65</sup> Jeyaretnam's lawyer in this case was the top British libel lawyer George Carman. Index on Censorship reported that there were "signs of discomfort" among PAP-leaders, because it seemed that Singaporean democracy itself were on trial. During the trial, when Goh was on the stand, Carman accused him of using the courts as weapon against opponents: "You say you believe in the principles of freedom of speech and freedom of the courts, but there comes a point when you adapt them for your own purposes to stay in power and stifle opposition" (Index on Censorship Online Aug. 26, 1997).

<sup>66</sup> In 1986 High Court judges in Singapore disqualified Jeyaretnam from practicing law, and he lost his place in parliament. This ruling was overturned by the Privy Council in London in 1987, but resulted in more of a moral victory than a political one (FEER Nov. 10, 1988).

Another type of charge that is used against opposition leaders is *contempt-of-parliament*. Head of the Singapore Democratic Party. Mr. Chee Soon Juan, was in 1996 charged after an incident in the parliament where he claimed that government subsidies to health care had fallen from 40% in 1970, to 5% in 1990. Due to a typographical error the latter number should have been 25%. This he later corrected. The parliamentary committee recommended that he be fined \$ 25 000 and that three other officials received fines ranging from \$ 5-13 000. If a parliament member is fined over \$ 2000, he or she will be barred from contesting the next election (FEER Nov. 7, 1996; FEER Des. 5, 1996).<sup>67</sup> Because of this – and other similar cases - there is not much opposition left. Chee Soon Juan<sup>68</sup> have also lost lawsuits brought by the government, and have fled to Australia (Economist July 25, 1998).

### 3.3.6 *The PAP and the Courts*

In an interview with Fortune, Lee Kuan Yew talked about allegations from the West that the government in Singapore were not satisfied with winning elections, but also wanted to punish opponents by suing and bankrupting them. Lee's response were:

*That's the press side of it. Let me explain. Let us look at all the libel cases. In all these cases, about 15 or 18 of them in the past 30-odd years, three quarters alleged corruption, and they did not even attempt to contest the case. Then they went to see their lawyers. They just surrendered. So there's no contest at all, and I had to make them bankrupt because that's the penalty for not paying your damages. That disabled them, and that checked these heinous lies – unless I check it and check it openly by coming out and saying, "Here I am. I am the plaintiff, you can cross-examine me. Not just about this particular case, about my whole life, and I'll answer you". In that way I have been able to destroy every single rumor of misconduct, either financial or in any other way. One quarter defended their case. They had lawyers. Queen's Counsels from London to cross-examine me, and I won because they were untrue statements... This latest opposition candidate<sup>[69]</sup> who disappeared immediately after the polls (...) if we did not sue him, we would leave his allegations in a gray area (...) – that's what he said – that we were liars and we are rogues. So I said, "Well, prove it". But on our part, we said publicly that he is anti-English-educated, anti-Christian, and a Chinese chauvinist, and we are prepared to prove it...*

(Fortune Aug. 4, 1997)

During the over 30 years the PAP has been in power, they have not lost a single defamation case (Index on Censorship Online Aug. 26, 1997). A part of the explanation might be that even if the Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, the Government restricts the independence of the judiciary in its control over the assignment of judges. Many officials, especially Supreme Court judges, have close ties to the ruling party and its leaders.<sup>70</sup> Also an amendment to the Legal Profession Act has been made so that the Law Society's powers of comment on current and proposed legislation are removed. The changes came after the Law Society had been critical of

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<sup>67</sup> Generally opposition from elected MPs is held in check by the absence of parliamentary privilege giving protection for statements made in parliament. This implies a need to meet legal standards of proof to avoid the risk of prosecution. It is the Parliament, dominated by the PAP, which determines whether a violation has been committed (Perry et al. 1997:66).

<sup>68</sup> Chee Soon Juan, Secretary General of the Singapore Democratic Party and a lecturer at the National University of Singapore lost his job in March 1993. He was also sued by his department chairman S. Vasoo for making defamatory remarks. Vasoo, a PAP M.P., and two other university employees were awarded \$200.000 in damages (U.S. DS 1998:d, Sintercom 1996).

<sup>69</sup> He is here referring to Tang Liang Hong.

<sup>70</sup> For instance: in the Tang-case it was revealed that the judge was a former partner in the law firm of Lee Kuan Yew (Index on Censorship Online Sept. 26, 1997).

changes in the law for political purposes (Williams 1992:370). All jury trials were abolished as early as in 1969, and judges can be reassigned within the court system if the government decides that they are obstructive (Means 1996:112). In addition, the Parliament in 1994 approved a bill abolishing all appeals to the Privy Council in London, making the Singapore Court of Appeal the highest court of review (U.S. DS 1998:e). This was done to “allow the republic to develop a legal system which reflects the needs and values of Singapore’s society” (Singapore Infomap<sup>71</sup>). In an interview with the *Indian Pacific*, the three dissidents Seow, Tang, and Chee, talked about their experiences with the legal system. Seow, a former solicitor general, went so far as to say: “...the ministers of the government could not possibly have mounted this kind of legal campaign if they were not confident in the reliability of their judges (...) courts are now being used as instruments of repression”. He also stated that when no undertones or overtones of politics were concerned, the Singapore courts were very reliable (*Indian Pacific* April 12, 1997).

One might ask why these practices are not more exposed in international media. There are few international reports on the suppressive practices in Singapore. First of all: generally little attention has been devoted to human rights abuses in the capitalist part of the world (Williams 1992:360). The lack of international attention can also partly be attributed to the difficulties in documenting these cases. Except from the registered political opposition, there are no non-governmental organizations in Singapore that monitor alleged human rights violations. The government does not prohibit such organizations, but any independent organization that tries to investigate and criticize the government faces the same obstacles as the political parties do. Amnesty International was for years denied access to Singapore. They were, however, allowed observers during the Jeyaretnam trial (U.S. DS 1998:4).<sup>72</sup> Former Solicitor-General Francis Seow reported to Human Rights Watch in 1989 that his interrogators said this was not a court of law, and the rules of evidence did not apply. They made the rules and “all the human rights organizations can do is to make noise, but how long can they do so? After a while you will be forgotten” (quoted in Tremewan 1996:203). Another explanation is that for an outsider, civil defamation actions in itself may appear to be relatively harmless, and therefore attract little attention.

### 3.4 Politics in Singapore – Four explanatory models

In my opinion it is safe to say that Singaporeans live under the authoritarian control of the PAP. Even if there are no immediate threats to the government, all critical voices are treated seriously and roughly, the most effective method being defamation lawsuits aimed at bankrupting. However, the PAP government takes offence at any suggestion that democracy is limited in Singapore. Pye (1985:340) observes that the authorities believe that their extraordinary achievements and the intellectual brilliance of their policy make them exemplary democratic rulers. As Minister George

<sup>71</sup> <http://www.sg/flavour/profile/pro-law1.html#A>

<sup>72</sup> One observer, Judge Paul Bentley (Canada) wrote in his report to Amnesty International where he expressed concern over the conduct of the trial. The report can be found at <http://www.gn.apc.org> (accessed Nov. 12, 1998). Amnesty International have also published the report *Singapore: J.B. Jeyaretnam – the use of defamation suits for political purposes*.

Yeo has emphasized: Singapore will always be a democracy, but one that suits its circumstances (Information Square Nov. 8, 1998). And one must not forget the fact that Singapore is a democracy in the sense of having (more or less) free elections, where the ordinary Singaporean has the chance of “rebell[ing]” against the establishment. Even if the electoral system gives clear preference to the party in power, the principle of “one man, one vote” still exists. So – why is the PAP still in power?

Political scientists have over the years answered this question with the widely accepted thesis of Singapore being “depoliticised”. But, as Chua (1995:41) points out, there is at least one conceptual weakness to this thesis: there is no lack of formal politics in Singapore. The PAP’s history of repression and long term control can be said to have depoliticised the population. But then one fails to recognize the undeniable popularity of the PAP among the Singaporeans.

Recognizing that formal electoral procedures are not the only factors that determine the real distribution of power, I will give a brief outline of four possible explanatory models. These are the choice between wealth and liberty, the lack of a critical intellectual elite, the influence of Confucian ethics, and the cultural features of *kiasuism*. These are of course not the only valid explanations, but might serve as examples, and provide a deeper understanding of the complexity and values of politics in Singapore.<sup>73</sup>

### 3.4.1 “Wealth over freedom” – Singapore and liberal development theory

To think that rising living standards will bring about a demand for more political rights and democracy is based on a liberal development theory. The argument goes that economic development produces the social forces that seek the democratic transformation of the political system (Heng 1991:9. See also Gaubatz 1996; Ng 1997<sup>a</sup>; Østerud 1991).<sup>74</sup> This model does not fit with Singapore, and theorists have invoked several special factors to explain this “deviant case” (e.g. Bell et al. 1995:1-2; Paul 1993). One of the more popular explanations is the strong sense of family values that are present in Singapore. But many fail to recognize the government’s vital role in bringing together different groups to work for common (fiscal) goals.

The political strategy of the PAP has not rested exclusively on a combination of intimidation of the opposition and ideological production. In the simultaneous development of social and economic policies, the political monopoly has been emphasized as a trade-off for material benefits (Rodan 1993:82).<sup>75</sup> Especially the housing policies have helped build support for the PAP. Several studies have argued that the growth of capitalism in East Asia has led to the emergence of a powerful capitalist class, and that they are in fact the prime beneficiaries and supporters of authoritarianism. Others, however, have argued that the “experience of static economic

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<sup>73</sup> Generally a number of hypotheses are used to explain why states are allowed to violate the rights of their citizens. The various theoretical positions include *political culture* (there is a significant relationship between the political culture of a nation and its willingness to tolerate repression), *regime type*, *the wealth of the society*, and *economic ideology* (high level of state coercion may have more to do with economic doctrine, there is a strong relationship between repression and orthodox market-oriented politics) (Williams 1992:360-361).

<sup>74</sup> There are theorists who believe that the ultimate result of industrialization is totalitarianism. See Paul (1993:292) for a further discussion.

<sup>75</sup> For a study on the political economy of social control in Singapore, see Tremewan (1996).

paternalism has produced a middle class grounded in a culture of dependence and anxiety” (Bell et al 1995:13. See also Brown et al. 1995; Jayasuriya 1995). Whatever the consequences, the PAP has not been reticent about using the state institutions to regulate the behavior of citizens:

*I am often accused of interfering in the private lives of citizens. Yet, if I did not, had I not done that, we wouldn't be here today. And I say without the slightest remorse, that we wouldn't be here, we would not have made economic progress, if we had not intervened on very personal matters – who your neighbour is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit, or what language you use. We decide what is right. Never mind what the people think. That's another problem.*

(Lee Kuan Yew's speech at National Rally 1986, quoted in Tremewan 1996:2)

Perry et al (1997:61) describes how Singapore lacks a system of national economic planning, and how the inner leadership has fulfilled many of the functions of a central economic planning agency. Singapore has the last decade worked hard to attract foreign capital and investments, with a policy of not tolerating the three abominations “hippies, long-haired boys, and critics of multinational corporations”.<sup>76</sup>

The PAP has successfully managed to create an ideological consensus among the Singaporeans, and today many “ordinary” Asians feel that with the development in Singapore, the city-state has proved the liberals wrong. For the general Singaporean public – comparing themselves to South East Asian neighbors – their socioeconomic progress has not gone unnoticed. Economic prosperity might seem more important than liberal democracy and freedom of expression. Many see their option as “liberty or wealth”, not “wealth and liberty”.<sup>77</sup> Most people also feel that it is “a cold comfort to be held up as a shining example of liberal democracy while having at the same time to beg for your daily bread from the rich” (Woon 1994:16). Mahubani (1998:86) takes this argument to a global level, arguing that the Western ideal of individual freedom and democracy always would guarantee that Western civilization would stay ahead of the pack. And this would not be in the interest of Asians.

One of the Singaporeans who have argued for democratization is Heng. He has made a strong argument that Singapore should strive for democracy for strategic purposes. He feels that Singapore is dependent on the presence of the US to keep political stability in the region, and that Singaporeans should not decry Western humanitarian concerns too loudly and too frequently (Heng 1994:19-21). But Heng's argument is also based on economy, and does not seem motivated by moral or altruistic considerations of what liberal democracy might bring the Singaporean people. An interesting argument made by Bell (1995) is that the limitations on individual freedom implemented by the PAP have resulted in a lack of community. Few citizens have a concern for the nation or are willing to act in the public sphere. Instead they are devoting their time and energy to the accumulation of material goods. The strategies used to thwart the opposition create a fear in the population and reinforce the tendency to stick to private affairs (Bell 1995:40). His argument

<sup>76</sup> The abominations were defined by former Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee, (quoted in Pye 1985:5).

<sup>77</sup> For an analysis of the relationship between democratization and economic development see Gaubatz 1996.

questions the premise that there is a necessary trade-off between individual liberties and commitment to the community.

### 3.4.2 *Lack of a critical intellectual elite*

Often in authoritarian or illiberal regimes, the domestic critique will come from the so-called Intellectuals, like students and academics. A natural question is therefore how scholars in Singapore view the PAP dominance. During my research trip to Singapore I talked to faculty members at the National University of Singapore (NUS). My impression was that the Singaporean scholars were most unwilling to talk about the PAP regime in general, and the regulations on expression in particular. The reasons for this may be complex, and I will not attempt to make any guess as to what might have been the reason for these special incidences.<sup>78</sup> But based on other sources as well as my own interpretation of the situation, I will make a few general points.

In the essay “Intellectuals’ role in society”, da Cunha makes the argument that the intellectuals in Singapore have been more of a failure than a success. He argues that any attack has been roundly and justifiably done because the “idle academics” have not contributed enough to the intellectual climate (da Cunha 1993:4). Again this might – if it is an accurate observation – be attributed to a number of explanations. The one da Cunha offers is that the Singaporean society consists of politicians and bureaucrats that resent criticism from intellectuals. Also a “culture of looks” where mere surface impressions and material well being are placed at a premium has developed. His fear is that this will lead to the total exclusion of intellectual development and spiritual fulfillment. Another explanation offered is that many employees at public institutions of higher education are PAP members, and they avoid public criticism of the political leaders (U.S. DS 1998:2/a). Seow (1998a:213) claims that there are extensive restrictions on publications by scholars, and that visiting professors, lecturers and scholars are expressly advised to steer clear of “sensitive” areas of research. Rodan (1998:69) supports this claim by discussion how academic books are not banned, but publishers, distributors, and retailers will often decide against any association with a critical or contentious manuscript or publication for fear of legal sanctions or the loss of annually renewable licenses. According to Pye (1985:255) there have been examples of “nontechnocratic” intellectuals in Singapore complaining about the government, but generally at least the Chinese Singaporeans “accept their in-control government and also are prepared to welcome its paternalism”. An example of a domestic intellectual who questions the PAP regime is Dr. Beng-Huat Chua. He recognizes the ideology of the PAP based on communitarianism, but argues for the need of institutions that can hold off the possible imposition of authoritarianism by the political leaders. His suggestions are amongst others to institutionalize the right to interest group formation and consultation, and a more independent press (Chua 1994:25-31). However, individual critics in public discourse face the possibility of government reaction. The short-story writer Catherine Lim published an article suggesting that the PAP government had two styles; an

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<sup>78</sup> See chapter 2 for a discussion on the collection of empirical material through interviews.

open consultative and consensus building represented by PM Goh, and the top-down decision making style of Lee Kuan Yew. The Prime Minister issued a sharp response stating that the government would never allow “journalists, novelists, short-story writers, or theatre groups to set the political agenda from outside the political arena”, and that individuals who wished to make sustained political commentaries should join a political party. The statement from the government resulted in executives of the National University of Singapore Society withdrawing an issue of their journal *Commentary* from publication. The issue focused on the much debated question of artistic freedom (Chua 1997<sup>b</sup>:124).

I do not know which variables are active when it comes to the academics in Singapore and their ability and wish to engage in criticism of the Singaporean political elite. But I was somewhat puzzled over their lack of concern over the freedom of expression issue. One of the scholars I met told me that there was indeed freedom of expression – like the ministers in old China could tell their emperor what they believed was the best decisions to make, the government in Singapore could tell their Prime Minister when they disagreed with him.<sup>79</sup> This could be done “without having to fear to lose their heads”. In my follow up question I asked about the freedom of the ordinary citizen. His or her possibility to have their voice heard. “But this is not necessary” the answer was, “the people’s worries are only financial, and they have no need to oppose the authorities. If they did, the society would end in chaos”.

### 3.4.3 Confucian Ethic

Confucianism is said to be the cultural root of the people of Japan, Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore. The Confucian “package” is said to contain the unchanging elements: hard work, education, pragmatism, self-discipline, familial orientalism and collectivism (Chua 1995:151).

Since the majority of Singaporeans are Chinese (77 %), an assumption that political behavior in Singapore can be explained by the adoption of Confucian ethic might be made. The PAP’s conformity and belief that total emotional commitment to unity is essential for collective success is seen as to reflect Singapore’s Confucian attitude.<sup>80</sup> For instance, Pye (1985:254) makes the observation that over the years, every single seat lost by the PAP is treated as a major, and a personally insulting, threat to the regime.

In 1982 the government announced that Confucian ethics would be taught in schools as an option under the compulsory religious knowledge program.<sup>81</sup> The move was an attempt to address

<sup>79</sup> I do not know if these were the cases thought of by the Singaporean Scholar, but to illustrate: In the Chinese *Zuo Zhuan* (Chronicles of Zuo) and *Guo Yu* (Commentaries of States), both dated back some centuries BC, freedom of expression is addressed. In the former Zu Zhuan refuses to close *dong xiang xiao*, a public place where people could meet and discuss political affairs. In the latter the Duke Shao Gong convinced the King Zhou Li Wang to let people express political criticism (Maiping 1997).

<sup>80</sup> The true features of Confucianism are open for debate. Chan (1997<sup>a</sup>) makes a strong argument for the compatibility between Confucian ethics and (Western) human rights. His article also addresses the freedom of expression issue in relation to Confucianism, concluding that there are no conflict, but that the limitations might be different from those applied in the West.

<sup>81</sup> An example on how values are incorporated in the schools is the course “Civics and Moral Education”. Here the children will be asked to grade statements according to level of moral. Examples of “multiple choice questions” is: Goals are intended to A) makes us rich. B) help us pass examinations, C) give us purpose and direction in life D) give us self respect. (Civics and Moral Education Secondary Tree Express/Normal Mid-Year Examination 1998). The whole exam can be found at <http://203.116.95.22/campus> (accessed Oct. 20, 1998).

the “less desirable aspects of Western culture” (Goh Keng Swee, quoted in Rodan 1989:172).<sup>82</sup> This was made as a special reference to the relationship between government and people. According to Goh, Confucianism provided a code of conduct by which such relationships were most satisfactorily executed: “Confucius believed that unless the government is in the hands of upright men, disaster will befall the country. By the way, in this respect, the PAP also believes the same thing” (Ibid.). If the government is competent and trustworthy it should not be questioned but obeyed, and there is no need for a political opposition.

But not all see the Confucian nature of the Singaporeans. Prior to 1979 Confucian or any other traditional Asian values were rarely a subject for public discussion in Singapore. Some feel that today’s understanding of Confucianism is no more than “a distilled folk version of familism” (Perry et al. 1997:71). Heng (1991:11) raises the question of whether or not Chinese Singaporeans are sufficiently Confucian in the first place. “...if there is a legacy of respect for authority passed down from the sage, how does one explain the defiant behavior in Taiwan and South Korea, which are probably more Confucianist than a Singapore where an English education system has diluted the Chineseness of its ethnic Chinese majority”. In Chua’s view, the PAP leadership has not succeeded in Confucianising the people, but they have “Confucianised” themselves, by prescribing their own code of ethics (1995:193). He also sees the “Confucian thesis” as having a limited influence on the political analysis of Singapore, because the thesis does not meet much support among local academics, who are closest to the details of Singapore’s situation (1995:164).

#### 3.4.4 *Kiasuism*

The word most often used to describe Singaporeans is *kiasu*, a Chinese Hokkien dialect word. Its original meaning is “being afraid to lose” but in recent years it has taken on a far broader local connotation of “always wanting to be number one” and “always wanting bargains” (Murray et. al 1996:242). Brown et al. makes the argument that the “middle class capacity to absorb and in fact endorse the linguistic ambiguities of political discourse stems from the survival strategy of *kiasuism*”. The selfishness that characterizes *kiasu* behavior stems from fear for failure, which is the dominant concern in a competitive and regulated society, rather than from any arrogant self-confidence. They conclude, “...the neurotic anxiety of the *kiasu* could not tolerate a free choice. This lack of confidence, moreover, welcomes the activist PAP style of politics” (Brown et al.1995:94). Thus anxiety seems to have a place in the *kiasu* nature of Singaporeans. Lee Kuan Yew has also addressed the value of fear in the people: “Between being loved and being feared, I have always believed Machiavelli was right. If nobody is afraid of me, I’m meaningless” (South China Morning Post, Oct. 6, 1997).

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<sup>82</sup> For an analysis of the redirection of cultural and political development towards “traditional” values, and the attempted “Confucianising” of the society see Chua 1995, chapter 7.

### 3.5 Singapore – a pragmatic meritocracy?

In the Confucian tradition, criticism was not generally seen as the advancing of alternative politics and values, but rather as bad taste and a lack of civility. Those who did criticize were seen to disrupt the political order and became outcasts, unworthy of membership in the community. As a consequence, politics became the articulation of consensus (Pye 1985:19). Also in collectivist cultures in general one finds a great emphasis on obedience, and on not criticizing superiors (Triandis 1988:296). Duty as opposed to rights is emphasized. This chapter has documented that in current Singapore, the emphasis on obedience has manifested itself in constraints for the political opposition through the electoral system, security laws, and difficult working conditions. The governing PAP sees the opposition as harmful for their nation-building efforts, and for the social and political stability in the country. The legal system is seen as an instrument intended to promote national ends and no inherent limits on government concerns are recognized. All in all the lawsuits against individuals in the opposition, present a strategy where any potential focus on the opposition *per se* is avoided.

The starting point for this chapter was the Asian Values debate. The PAP has through the “Shared Values” white paper emphasized five “Asian” values the Singapore community is built on and should be guided by. The Asian Values argument is often presented as an intellectual debate between Asia and the West. However, it is not a formally organized oral disputation between the two sides. Rather it consists of a diverse and ongoing written and oral debate where questions are being exchanged (Emmerson 1995:96). The study of Singapore suggests that the notion of common values is more important as a political debate *inside* Asia, and inside the nations.

It is hard to conclude about the political culture in Singapore. Political scientists and others have tried to place Singapore in pre-formulated categories, authoritarian, collectivist, and illiberal have been mentioned. The four explanatory models presented indicate that the population subjected to it more or less voluntarily accepts the PAP’s state intervention. Such a voluntary acceptance suggests that the legitimacy of the regime can not be evaluated in terms of a pre-selected political philosophy, like other scholars have attempted to do.

As a conclusion to this chapter I will point to some distinct features that are present in the Singaporean society, namely *pragmatism* and *meritocracy*. I will also discuss what signs there are of liberalization on the political scene.

#### 3.5.1 Pragmatism and Meritocracy

*Pragmatism* in Singapore can be seen in the tendency to adopt policies that offer the best prospect of success, whatever their ideological credentials.<sup>83</sup> It has developed into the belief that policy can be justified if there exists an acceptable rational response. The PAP therefore takes pride in responding to situations at hand with a pragmatic, rather than an ideological commitment. In Chua’s words: “If a measure of social control can be shown to contribute to economic growth, it is

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<sup>83</sup> For an overview of the historical roots of the Singapore pragmatism and meritocracy, see Chua (1995:58-64).

considered as necessary to survival *per se* and hence, ‘pragmatic’ (1995:4). Economic growth is seen as the best guarantee of social and political stability necessary for the survival of the nation (Chua 1995:59). Williams (1992:368) argues that the PAP ‘ideology of survival’ in reality justifies questions of social control and the distribution of resources on rational and scientific grounds. For the PAP leaders ‘representative’ government is less important than ‘responsible’ government. The elite must guide the electors, and it is the government alone who should be responsible for the policy implemented.<sup>84</sup> The National Solidarity Party claims that the PAP’s idea for ‘elitism’ is by nature no different from totalitarianism or autocracy (Manifesto article 1.4.2).

Paul (1993:304) calls the culture of PAP technocratic rationalism, because ‘it is based on the belief that technocrats should have a monopoly of political power’. As documented earlier, the PAP regime uses the judiciary to attack opposition leaders. Several scholars have made the argument that in East Asian Countries like Singapore, Taiwan, and South Korea, law is an extension of administrative technique and supplements the national plans and visions of the government. In other words – the law is a part of the ruler’s technical equipment<sup>85</sup> (see e.g. Bell et al. 1995:15; Jones et al. 1995:165). Minister of Education, Admiral Teo Chee Hean, declared the government’s view: ‘a two-party system would put us on the dangerous road to contention, when we should play as one team’ (quoted in Mutalib 1997:171). The previous analysis of the 1997 election revealed pragmatic thinking when the government linked electoral choice to the public infrastructure provision of upgrading government-built and managed housing estates. This type of argument is not new. Lee Kuan Yew has several times argued that constituencies that reject the PAP cannot expect to be insulated from ‘bad choices’ (see e.g. Rodan 1993:87). Also the ‘some men, two votes’ initiative taken by Lee Kuan Yew was rationalized with the wish for a ‘more viable system and a more stable society’. This because, in his own words, ‘at the end of the day, we need a system that works, that enables representative government to function in an effective way’ (Lee 1994). The analysis also suggests that the legal system have been infused with the PAP principle of pragmatism. It is now an instrument of social control, more or less tailored to the needs of the PAP. The legitimization for this kind of practice lies in a system that works, not in a political ideology or an Asian value. It is therefore questionable how much values, like those promoted through Confucianism, have to say in Singapore.

The cultural preference for familism has furthermore manifested itself politically in a pragmatic regime that provides individuals with special incentives to attend the need of family members, especially the elders. This may be seen in the government spending on social security, which represents about 2 percent of the total budget.<sup>86</sup> (The international average is approximately 30 percent). Rather than introducing welfare programs for disadvantaged Singaporeans, the Government helps fund welfare organizations in order to preserve the sense of personal

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<sup>84</sup> The claim for special political expertise is said to result in the screening of PAP election candidates by the use of IQ and psychological tests intended to eliminate self interest candidates (Perry et al.1997:69-71).

<sup>85</sup> This understanding of the law has its roots in East Asian legalism and Confucian tradition (Jones et al. 1995:165).

<sup>86</sup> According to Singapore law, children over 18 years are required to take care of disabled parents. This has resulted in several parents suing their children for refusing to look after them (Buruma 1997:158; Chan 1997:225).

responsibility, and prevent a “crutch mentality” (Williams 1996:169-170). Also marriage is subjected to political control. For instance did Lee Kuan Yew publicly express regrets that his government had given women equal rights, thus limiting their marriage prospects to Asian men who prefer women learning skills that would make them “marvelous helpers of their husband’s career” (quoted in Bell et al. 1995:4. See also Chua 1995:64-65; Lazar 1993).

In Singapore *meritocracy* means promoting *ability* over race, religion, and sex. The able are rewarded so that they may pull the rest of society along. The meritocracy is especially apparent in the education system, where examination results segregate young students according to their “natural intelligence” into different categories. The categories will fix their position in the division of industrial labor. Inequality is seen as a consequence of nature, and the early streaming is a process to find the “no more than 5 percent” that will lead the nation (Chua 1995:63). The belief that talent is generically determined, and that 80 percent of a person’s abilities are inherited, resulted in the “graduate mother” campaign. The government, worried of the “thinning” of the “talented” gene pool implemented a (pragmatic) policy of making graduates marry graduates, and then have three or more children (Chua 1995:64,71; Lazar 1993).

Meritocracy is also used as a legitimization by the PAP regime. Their rule is not so much based on popular support or democratic ideals as merit:

*Our right to govern is based on merit. We have to show that we are manifestly qualified to govern by our abilities, our training, our character, our ability to deliver the goods, and that we exercise power for the common good.*

(Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in Means 1996:107)

The previous discussion revealed how wealth is an important part of the Singaporean society. As Means (1996:107) correctly points out, the PAP’s claims of meritocracy leave little moral space for opposition parties, and when it becomes a measure of “merit”, few will question the ruling party’s self-serving claims to moral and political rectitude.

However, the Asian Values debate and the “Shared Values” created a logical flaw in the PAP rhetoric. Pragmatism and the “shared values” appear to be contradictions. Instead of being defined in ethnical-neutral, meritorious terms, the government started to define Singapore in explicitly Asian ethnic terms. The national identity is based on ethnic cultures, and the shared values give a clear preference to the Confucian ethics. However, according to PAP, since Confucianism is not a religion, it can interact with other traditions, and make Singapore “a wonderful place to plant the seed of a future global culture emerging out of the great traditions of the past” (Chua 1995:160).

### 3.5.2 *Signs of Liberalization*

As discussed earlier, liberal developmental theory postulates that industrialization creates conditions necessary for democracy. Singapore is today a wealthy, developed society, and the liberals should therefore expect to see the end of the authoritarian features of the PAP regime sometime in the future.

And there are signs of liberalization. Singapore's economic development has changed the conditions under which the PAP built their regime, and the growing middle class is exposed to the lifestyles and political cultures outside the city-state. There are also signs of a widening income gap that might provide fuel to a critical re-evaluation of the regime's self-justification. The electorate has changed. The younger generation is more educated and has higher political awareness than the one who experienced the independence years (Chua 1995:74). Since the 1980s the PAP has been more sensitive to the electoral opinion (Perry et al. 1997:67). The most concrete result is the non-constituency law, which allows up to three opposition members to take place in Parliament, and the government sponsored "feedback" channels to encourage greater public participation. But many feel this is not enough. Professionals have started voicing their reservations about legislation that affects their professional practices (Chua 1995:75,174). In May 1998, at a closed-door conference, Civic groups called upon the Singaporean government to be more tolerant of dissents. Information Minister George Yeo responded, "As our common consciousness grows, the bounds of debate will be relaxed. But realistically, we will always need an outer perimeter to hold our society together" (FEER May 21, 1998). Prime Minister Goh has signaled a more consultative and tolerant PAP, and a relaxation of "the state's circumscription of the individual" (Rodan 1993:78-79, 88).<sup>87</sup> "We must get away from the idea that it is only the people at the top who should be thinking and the job of everyone else is to do as told" (Goh, to Fortune Aug. 4, 1997).

But not all agree that liberalization is on the way. Bell et al. (1995:10) argues that the brief period of liberalization under Goh provided a means of pre-empting rather than responding to political opposition. Rodan (1993) also questions the liberalization, arguing that reduced paternalism does not automatically represent political liberalization. He notes that the conscious break from extreme paternalism is intended above all else to preserve the essence of the regime – the one party state. It is a strategy where dissent and disaffection are channeled through the PAP and institutions through which it can exert an influence, and away from opposition parties and non-governmental organizations. Paul (1993) supports Rodan with an analysis of the prospects of liberalization in Singapore. He suggests that Singapore is unlikely to become a liberal democracy in the near future, by illustrating how the country's economic structure, identity, location and smallness all favor the maintenance of authoritarianism. He sees the "Japanese ruling party model" as the most likely development, where fractions within the PAP take turns at the center stage of power.

### 3.6 Conclusion

This chapter has explored certain features of the political scene in Singapore. This has been done in order to document the current political culture and freedom of expression. Rules, laws, and official statements have been analyzed, and conditions of the political opposition have been

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<sup>87</sup> Initiatives by the PAP to provide alternatives for public involvement in policy include the Feedback Unit (1985), the creation of the Institute of Policy Studies (1988), and the nominated MPs (1990).

addressed. We have seen that electoral support is not about how the opposition performs, but how united the nation is behind the PAP leadership. Formal democratic procedures exist, but without politics. The legal system leaves little space for critical discourse by professionals or ordinary citizens, and it is used as a technical tool by the government. Singapore is democratic, if “democracy” means nothing more (or less) than a political procedure where supreme power is vested in the people and exercised by them by a system of representation involving periodically free elections. Several aspects of authoritarianism can also be found. This includes (I) the continuance in power of the PAP, a political party whose past history includes undemocratic suppression of opponents (see e.g. Seow 1998<sup>a</sup>; 1994), (II) a meritocratic ideal where a “father knows best” mentality excludes the public from government decisions, and (III) a legislation that curtails civil rights and democratic freedoms (e.g. the ISA that allows detention without trial) (Perry et al. 1997:81-82). The system is not likely to change in the near future, because even if the electorate is increasingly willing to voice its dissatisfaction with the government’s social control, they have little desire for a change of government, or to show a strong support for the development of opposition parties (Chua 1995:203).

The overall purpose of this thesis is to analyze the relationship between new information technology and non-liberal political structures. The empirical evidence presented in this chapter has established Singapore as non-liberal, with several restrictions on freedom of expression. As stated in the introduction, there is an underlying assumption in this thesis that when extensive networks of political surveillance are already in place and a culture of fear about such practices exists, the impact of monitoring and censoring is likely to be strong. In the next chapter the conditions of the traditional mass media will be addressed, in order to discover the location of *media freedom*.

# 4 Analysis of the current media situation in Singapore

The press in Asia was introduced during the colonial era, and the history of the press in Malaysia and Singapore is British in origin. The British introduced the first newspaper, the first wireless, and the first radio station (Idid:148). As a result many of the institutions and laws in Asian countries are similar to those we find in Western countries. However, the values that are implemented and the rationale for regulation of the media are different. It can be said that the practice of the media mirrors the political and social systems of a community at large (de Jesus 1996:3-7). Thus an examination of the media practice in a country is to discover the character of its political and social systems. An analysis of the traditional mass media is also believed to provide insights regarding the regulatory principles and value systems used in the development of regulatory tools aimed at the Internet.

It is an underlying presumption in this thesis that media freedom primarily is a question of *structure*.<sup>88</sup> In this meaning, media freedom is a question of how *independent* (or “free”) media organizations are in terms of ownership, editorial freedom, working conditions (e.g. freedom to hire any journalist), and decisions on content matters. This chapter will therefore concentrate on the *conditions* of the media, rather than their performance in terms of output. At the level of structure, media freedom is usually guaranteed or limited by media laws; therefore, the media legislation in Singapore will be the focus of the discussion. The discussion will be divided into two categories: restrictions on *domestic media*, and restrictions on *foreign media*. The main goal will be to discover the *location* of media freedom; *Whose freedom? From whom? To do what?* At the end of the chapter, a possible framework for a “Singapore media model” will be addressed.

## 4.1 Regulations on Domestic Media

Singapore has a rather unique media system. The media can be divided into four separate parts; each centered on different segments of the population. This is a natural consequence of the four official languages (English, Chinese, Malay, and Tamil). Each of the parts is said to have started with different key values and worldviews:

*The English press took the standpoint of the colonial government, the Chinese press promoted Chinese language, education and chauvinism, (...) The Malay press agitated for Malay rights and privileges and promoted Malay nationalism (...) The Tamil press maintained the ties to the local Tamil community in the mother country*

(Lee Kuan Yew 1988)

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<sup>88</sup> McQuail (1992:99) supports this view. He points out that no single “utterance” in the media can be said to be intrinsically more or less “free” than any other, in the way that some media messages might be said to be more or less truthful, accurate, balanced etc.

The government therefore found it necessary to create shared values and “a single nation identity” to work as a centripetal trend in bringing the different segments of the press together. One value that did not fit into the views of the Singapore leaders was the theory of the press as the fourth estate. To the Singaporean government the notion of the “marketplace of ideas” represented riots and bloodshed, not harmonious enlightenment.<sup>89</sup> The solution it offered was to understand Singapore’s special history and demography, and act accordingly:

*To compound our problems, the population of Singapore is not homogenous. There are several racial, linguistic, cultural and religious groups. For the Singapore Chinese, about 76 percent of the population, there is a wide range between Confucianism and Taoism to Maoist materialism (...) Censorship can only partially cut off these influences. It is more crucial that local production of films and publication of newspapers should not be surreptitiously captured by their proxies.*

(Lee Kuan Yew 1971)

In other words: the political leaders in Singapore believe that Singapore’s case is unique and deserves special considerations when it comes to media policy.<sup>90</sup>

#### 4.1.1 Printed Publications

The press in Singapore has been regulated since 1920, but regulations became extensive in 1974 when the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (NPPA) replaced the former Printing Presses Act. The reason for this change was to prevent newspapers from “being used for subversive purposes”, after three newspaper companies allegedly had used their papers to “subvert” the government (Sing 1990:130).<sup>91</sup> The regulatory instruments under the NPPA are in three separate parts – printing presses, newspaper companies, and newspapers.<sup>92</sup>

The *printing presses* section covers newspapers and various kinds of documents.<sup>93</sup> No person can hold or use a press without a license [3], and that there shall be an official register of printing presses [4]. The printers must keep a copy of all documents and produce it to any person authorized by the Minister [6]. In addition to NPPA there is also other laws that pertain to printers. The former “Printers

<sup>89</sup> This representation is based on experience. One of the most painful chapters in Singapore’s modern history was the “Jungle girl” riots in 1950. These riots which resulted in the killings of 18 and injuring 173 (mostly Europeans), started when the *Singapore Standard* published a story about a Dutch woman who had handed over her baby girl to a Malay woman when the Japanese invaded Singapore. After the War the mother traced her daughter and found out that she had been brought up as a Muslim. The Singapore Chief Justice (an Englishman), sent the child to a convent pending his decision on the custody of the Child. When the Malay press repeated the story, the riots started.

<sup>90</sup> Data from Freedom House show that countries with a predominant ethnic majority are less successful in establishing open and democratic societies than ethnically homogenous ones. In 1998 75 percent of the “free” countries were monoethnic (over 2/3 of the population belongs to a single ethnic group), while only 29 percent of the multiethnic countries were free. A monoethnic country is twice as likely to be free as a multiethnic one (Karatnycky 1999:117-118).

<sup>91</sup> The three newspapers were *Nanyang Siang Pau* – who “attempted to glorify communism” and *The Eastern Sun* – who, even if they took an anti-communist stand was alleged by the government to be funded by communists and was to be used to influence readers with Communist propaganda at the appropriate time. The third paper *The Singapore Herald* took an anti-government stand (Sing 1990:130-131). For a more detailed discussion on these cases see Seow 1998<sup>a</sup>, chapter 4-5.

<sup>92</sup> In the following, reference to the specific law number will be presented in parentheses.

<sup>93</sup> Defined under the act as “any printed newspaper or sheet of paper or other material and any printed pamphlet, leaflet, map, chart and plan, and includes any document bound together” (Part I, 2.).

and Publishers Act”, now called “the National Library Board Act” is one of them. This act regulates the printing and publication of books.

The second part of the NPPA concerns *newspaper companies*, and are generally intended to prevent “foreign elements” from gaining control of local newspapers and “using them against Singapore’s national interest” (Sing 1990:134). All newspapers must be published by a newspaper company [7], and all directors must be citizens of Singapore [9]. According to the former Minister of State for Communication and Information, this is because only Singaporeans can truly understand Singapore’s unique economic and security considerations (Sing 1990:135). It is also an offence for any journalist to receive foreign funds without reporting this to the Managing Director of the company within seven days [11].

In Western democracies, one of the main issues with respect to media freedom, has been the extent to which a given geographical public is served by a range of media which are independent of each other in terms of ownership and editorial policy (McQuail 1992:113). All the major newspapers in Singapore are published by Singapore Press Holdings (SPH).<sup>94</sup> According to NPPA [9] SPH’s key management shares can *only be held by government approved individuals*. The management shares confer voting rights 200 times greater than that of an ordinary share, and cannot be offered to ordinary shareholders, be dealt in on a stock exchange, or mortgaged. When it comes to ordinary shares, no person or group can hold more than 3 percent of any newspaper company unless they have the prior approval of the Minister [10]. Approvals for both types of shares can be revoked at any time, and funds from foreign sources<sup>95</sup> are not allowed. The system of weighted shares can be traced back to the British governance during the colonial days (Datta-Ray 1996:131).

The government controls the organization management. The first executive chairman was the former director of the Internal Security Department, another a retired government minister (Baratham 1992:4). A former Minister of Culture explained the government position by declaring:

*...who is to be the chairman? Who gives the order? Who lays down the policies? These are all complicated matters and, I think, it would be better that the press be allowed to manage themselves. Therefore, we have introduced these management shares to ensure that only the right people are allowed to exercise the powers of management of newspapers.*

(quoted in Seow 1998<sup>a</sup>:109)

The third and final part of NPPA’s regulatory instrument is part IV concerning *Newspapers*. A newspaper is defined as:

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<sup>94</sup> Statistics from the Asian Mass Communication Research & Information Center in Singapore and from the Singapore InfoMap (<http://www.sg/news.html>, accessed Aug. 23, 1999) show that there is a total of eight daily newspapers. Three of these are Chinese - *Lianhe Wanbao*, *Shin Min Daily News* and *Lianhe Zaobao* (total circulation of 440.300), three are English - *The Straits Times*, *The New Paper* and *Business Times* (503.800), one Malay - *Berita Harian* (56.200) and one Tamil - *Tamil Murasu* (7.800). All of these newspapers are published by SPH. Of periodicals there are several, the largest ones being the *Radio & TV Times* (Chinese), *Weekend East* (English), *8 Days* (English), and *Flight International* (English).

<sup>95</sup> Foreign sources include among others, governments and any person who is not a citizen of Singapore.

*Any publication containing news, intelligence, reports of occurrences, or any remarks, observations or comments, in relation to such news, intelligence, reports of occurrences, or to any other matter of public interest, printed in any language and published for sale of free distribution at regular intervals or otherwise, but does not include any publication published by or for the Government*

(NPPA , Part I – Preliminary)

No newspaper can be published without a permit, and the Minister “may direct that the newspaper shall be printed in such language as may be specified in the permit” [14].

The regulations in Singapore are to a large extent based on pre-emptive censorship. In addition to the NPPA, there are several other laws that have impact on publication (see appendix no. 3). For instance: The Internal Security Act gives the Government power to prohibit or limit publications. Under these regulations, discussions in the press of alleged government corruption or nepotism are not tolerated. The Undesirable Publications Act gives the possibility of arrest without warrant for any person suspected of violating the act. Since most of the media are government controlled, the need for action against domestic publications is limited, but there are reports that violations have occurred. John Schidlovky, Director of Freedom Forum Asian Center, has argued:

*In Singapore, authorities maintain a rigid lock on information and have penalized their own monopolistic press for reporting information the government deems unsuitable – such as economic statistics.*

(Freedom Forum 1994)

When it comes to *content*, newspapers in different languages do differ, each catering more to the ethnic/cultural interests and tastes of its readers. There is nevertheless a substantial overlap in content between papers, and a bilingual reader will only gain marginally, information-wise, in reading two or more papers in Singapore. According to Kuo (1991:112) this is in fact a result of all the papers being published by the same company.<sup>96</sup> In a survey on the press and public trust conducted in 1994, the people who read The Straits Times were found to be more critical of the coverage of the government than those who did not. The least critical readers were found among the readers of the Chinese paper Lianhe Zaobao. According to the researchers the difference is more likely to be explained by the two types of readers than the content of the papers. Also more “concerned readers” will read the newspapers as government “bulletins” (Hao 1996:119; Chua 1995:199).

#### 4.1.2 Broadcasting

Singapore International Media PTE Ltd, is a government-linked holding company that has near monopoly on broadcasting. It operates all four Television channels and 10 of the 15 domestic radio stations.<sup>97</sup> In addition, one can receive Malaysian and Indonesian broadcasting (U.S. DS 1998:2/a).

<sup>96</sup> Content analysis done in the West suggests that common ownership results in less editorial independent newspapers (McQuail 1992:130).

<sup>97</sup> A new TV channel, *Channel News Asia*, an all news and business channel, was launched March 1, 1999 (Information Square March 1, 1999). Out of the remaining five radio channels two are owned by the Singapore Armed Forces Reservists’ Association (SAFRA) and two by the National Trade Union Congress. Both organizations have close ties to the Government. The only radio station not under government control is the BBC World Service. The SBA publication “Envision” reported in their April-June Issue that three new radio stations would be launched in 1998, including a “Financial Station” (Envision 1998:15).

Also when it comes to broadcasting it can be said that the information programs on TV and radio are overlapping in terms of content, but to a lesser extent than in the newspapers. The Singapore Broadcasting Authority Act gives the SBA power to regulate both licensing and content of the broadcast services [6]. All broadcasting apparatuses are subject to licensing [32]. As with newspaper companies, no person can hold more than 3 percent of ordinary shares without governmental approval [45]. The possession of uncensored videotapes is a crime. According to Baratham (1992:4) the governments especially sees sexual explicitness as a manifestation of Western decadence and something contradictory to traditional Asian values. Individual collections are randomly screened.<sup>98</sup>

## 4.2 Regulations on Foreign Media – “Responsibility to neutralize”

Lee Kuan Yew has on several occasions expressed his view on the role of the press and limits of press freedom. In a speech at the general assembly of the International Press Institute in Helsinki 1971, he told the listeners that Singaporeans might listen to a wide range of programs, from Voice of America to Radio Peking. And from time to time foreign agencies used local proxies to set up or buy into newspapers “not to make money but to make political gains by shaping opinions and attitudes”. He concluded:

*My colleagues and I have the responsibility to neutralize their intentions. In such a situation, freedom of the press, freedom of the news media, must be subordinated to the overriding needs of the integrity of Singapore, and to the primary purposes of an elected government.*

(Lee Kuan Yew 1971)

In an address to the American Society of Newspaper Editors on April 14, 1988, he explained his view further. He insisted on Singapore’s right to reply to articles in the foreign press, as well as restricting the circulation of publications that try to interfere with Singapore’s internal politics (Lee Kuan Yew 1988). He continued:

*We allow their [American] papers to sell in Singapore so that we can know what foreigners are reading about us. But we can not allow them to assume a role in Singapore that the American media play in America, that of invigilator, adversary, and inquisitor of the administration.*

(Lee Kuan Yew 1988)

In the following I will present the three main measures that are used against the foreign media, namely *limitations on circulation, manipulation of working conditions, and law suits.*

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<sup>98</sup> All broadcasting activities are subjected to the SBA Act. Therefore a further discussion on the restrictions of content will be presented in the next chapter, when Internet content regulations is discussed.

### 4.2.1 Limitations on Circulation

Generally one can say that there is a strong regulation and censoring of foreign media. There are bars on the import of several publications, and the publications that are present are expected to be only observers, not participants, in Singapore's domestic politics.

Section 15 in the NPPA states that "No newspaper printed in Malaysia shall be published, sold, offered for sale or distributed in Singapore", but a permit can be given. A permit is also required for sale and distribution in Singapore of any offshore newspaper [16]. Any person entering Singapore can be searched for foreign papers [19], and the authorities have the power to examine packages [20]. Subscribing to any "declared" foreign newspaper may give up to six months in prison and a fine [21], and there is a public register of newspaper applications and permits [23].

If the government feels that a foreign publication has interfered with domestic politics, they can "gazette", or cap, circulation of it. The NPPA [17] gives the Minister authority to "declare any newspaper published outside Singapore to be a newspaper engaging in the domestic politics of Singapore". In 1986, the Minister of State for Communication and Information outlined three ways in which a foreign newspaper can interfere in domestic politics<sup>99</sup>:

*(a) if over a period of time, a foreign publication carries a series of articles on race and religion and attempts to influence people's opinion that a particular race is being discriminated against;*

*(b) when, in reporting of key institutions e.g. our courts, it casts doubt on the independence of the courts and maligns the integrity of the judiciary;*

*(c) when it imposes its own ideas of press freedom without understanding the nature of Singapore society*

(quoted in Sing 1990:140)

The restrictions on sale and distribution give the Minister powers to grant foreign newspapers "such numbers of copies as he thinks fit, and may require such copies to be marked in such manner as he may direct".<sup>100</sup> It is illegal to make any profit from a restricted paper [18]. Limitations have been put on publications like the Economist, Far Eastern Economic Review, Asiaweek, and, the Asian Wall Street Journal (Seow 1990:4; Freedom House 1997<sup>b</sup>).<sup>101</sup> Cosmopolitan was banned after publishing an offensive article. The article gave tips to women on how to commit adultery and not get caught (The Netly News Des. 4, 1996).<sup>102</sup>

Other media, like video tapes, television programs (for instance an episode of *Friends*), movies, and music are also subject to import censoring. Foreign broadcasting services are addressed under Part IX of the SBA Act. Any foreign service considered unacceptable in terms of content or quality by the

<sup>99</sup> Domestic Politics is defined by the Court as relation to the political system, the ideology underpinning it, public institutions that are a manifestation of the system, and the policies of the government that give life to the political system (Sing 1990:141).

<sup>100</sup> According to Sing (1990:139), the foreign newspapers could not be regulated under the legislation preceding the NPPA, because under other Acts (like the Undesirable Publications Act or the Sedition Act), the newspapers would have been banned.

<sup>101</sup> For a detailed discussion on these and other cases see (Seow 1998<sup>a</sup>), page 140 – 200.

<sup>102</sup> In 1995 the local women's magazine industry was given a warning by the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA). They were told not to print articles that could promote sexual permissiveness through discussion of casual sex, premarital and extramarital sex, and deviant sexual practices (Lee 1995:30).

SBA, can be proscribed by the Minister [41].<sup>103</sup> Singaporeans who supply decoding equipment, or publish program schedules and details of proscribed programs or services (directly or indirectly) are liable for 3 years in prison and a \$ 40 000 fine [42]. All *books* coming into Singapore have to be vetted by the “undesirable publications department”. Undesirable books fall into three categories: *banned books*, *detained books* (meaning that the books can be held by the authorities indefinitely and can be removed from the possession of individuals, even if the ownership itself is not a crime), and “*unsuitable books*” (which distributors are “discouraged” from stocking) (Baratham 1992:4). In an amendment to the *Undesirable Publications Act* in 1998, the government redefined the term “publication” to include CD-ROMs, sound recordings, pictures and drawings generated by computer graphics. Those who are caught trafficking in obscene publications can be fined up to \$ 10 000, and/or jailed up to two years (Information Square Des. 19, 1998).

In 1990 a tightening of the regulation was enforced, and a law requiring foreign publications that report on politics and current events in Southeast Asia to register, was passed. The publications must now pose a huge bond and name a person in Singapore responsible. This caused the Asian Wall Street Journal to stop circulation.<sup>104</sup> In 1991 it reversed its stand, obtained a license and was allowed 2500 copies.<sup>105</sup> The law also entitles the government to respond to any allegations or information about Singapore. Both Time and Asiaweek have in such cases originally refused the government’s intervention in editorial processes. But later they both reversed their stand and published the disputed letters from the government intact (Lee Kuan Yew 1988).

Restricting circulation is not considered depriving Singaporeans access to information, since a few hundred copies of the restricted magazines will be available. The idea is that anyone who needs information in them can make a photocopy for him or herself, at a public office. The National Solidarity Party commented:

*...the PAP has adopted a monopolistic and suppressive policy on freedom of speech and publication (...) seized every opportunity to restrict the distribution and circulation of foreign publications in Singapore, thereby unjustly depriving the people of their rights to gain access to information.*

(NSP Manifesto: article 8.1.1).

When it comes to broadcasting, citizens are banned from owning satellite dishes. Insisting that the preservation and transmission of “cultural values” is a question too important to be entrusted to the market, the government launched a cable system that gives ability to screen out “objectionable material”. The cable TV is run by the state-owned Singapore Cable Vision (SCV) (Rodan 1998:72).

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<sup>103</sup> A foreign broadcast service is defined as “a broadcasting service which transmits from a place outside Singapore and are capable of being received in Singapore” (SBA Act Part IX, 41/4).

<sup>104</sup> The Asian Wall Street Journal had already had a “close encounter” with the Singapore government in 1987 when its circulation was slashed from 5000 to 400 a day. This happened after the Journal refused to publish in full the Singapore government’s reply to one of its articles (Kwang et. al. 1998:217).

<sup>105</sup> This represents a major cutback. Singapore was their second largest single-country market.

## 4.2.2 Working Conditions

Another tool for controlling the foreign media relates to the working conditions. Journalists from foreign publications are required by law to apply annually for renewal of their employment permit. Other restrictions have taken the form of the denial of requests from several major publications to station correspondents in Singapore, and deportation for those who are already there (U.S. DS 1998:2/a; Kwang et. al. 1998:217; Sing 1990:143).<sup>106</sup> In July 1997, Far Eastern Economic Review reported that they were now permitted to station a full-time staff reporter in Singapore. In addition, the number of copies allowed circulated was raised from 6,000 to 8,000 per issue.<sup>107</sup> The Review's editor, Nayan Chanda welcomed the decision, but added, "We look forward to the day when circulation of the FEER in Singapore will be set by the market, rather than government restrictions" (July 10, 1997). According to Seow (1998b), the immigration authorities in Singapore maintain a computerized "black list" of correspondents and publishers.

## 4.2.3 Lawsuits

As documented in the previous chapter, the PAP uses lawsuits to bankrupt opposition members. For several years, government leaders have also used defamation suits and Contempt-of-Court proceedings to discourage public criticism and intimidate the media. In the following one such case is addressed:

In 1995, Dr. Christopher Lingle (a visiting academic scholar), the Asian editor of the Herald Tribune, the Paris-based publisher, and a Singaporean printer and distributor were fined for *Contempt-of-Court* after publishing an article about Asian Government's security (appendix no. 4).<sup>108</sup> The article did not explicitly mention Singapore, but claimed that some governments were "relying upon a compliant judiciary to bankrupt opposition politicians or buying out enough of the opposition to take control democratically" (Lingle 1994). The court interpreted this as a reference to Singapore security, and said that the article was published to "scandalize the Singapore Judiciary". Lee Kuan Yew stated that the article defamed him and his country and that Lingle's political commentary was not a legitimate comment under the right to free speech (NML Winter 1995:18).<sup>109</sup> Lingle left Singapore before the trial and would not return for the proceedings. All his assets were seized and he was tried and convicted *in absentia* and fined \$ 10.000 for contempt of court (Means 1996:111).<sup>110</sup>

<sup>106</sup> According to the Singapore InfoMap, there were in 1996 a total of 197 accredited correspondents in Singapore. Together, they represented 74 foreign news agencies, newspapers and broadcasting stations. The largest group of correspondents is formed by Japanese, Americans and Germans.

<sup>107</sup> The government in Singapore cut circulation on the FEER in 1987. Their circulation was then almost 10 000 copies per issue.

<sup>108</sup> The International Herald Tribune had two encounters with the Singaporean government in 1995: Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong won a defamation suit against the IHT and was awarded \$678 527, after the Tribune had published an article suggesting that Lee was appointed to his post on account of his father (NML, Fall 1995:28; Emmerson 1995:99). The article "The Claims About 'Asian' Values Don't Usually Bear Scrutiny", said "...Dynastic policies is evident in 'Communist' China already, as in Singapore, despite official commitments to bureaucratic meritocracy".

<sup>109</sup> One of the defendants in the case told me that what was written could in fact be considered liable under British law, but not under American. The defendant also told me that Lingle had never told if he in fact were thinking about Singapore.

<sup>110</sup> In the civil court Singapore's three top leaders were awarded \$100.000 in damages. The Tribune settled out of court for \$300.000, but Lingle was pursued for full settlement.

The irony of this case is that in order to link Lingle's remarks to Singapore, the prosecutor admitted that Lee Kuan Yew and the PAP had an established track record of suing opposition politicians for defamation. He insisted that there was no other country where this happened, and identified eleven opposition leaders who had been financially ruined by legal actions initiated by the PAP (Emmerson 1995:98; Lingle 1995:194).

After the case against Dr. Lingle, he stated that he was disappointed with the IHT for its apology and with the Western media for not coming out against Singapore for its harsh reactions to what should be protected speech (NML Winter 1995:19). In a response to an article by Mahbubani in Foreign Affairs, Lingle claimed that "Asian Values may be an illusion concealing the iron grip of petty despots" (Lingle 1995:193-194). There were however a few "Western" organizations that followed the case.<sup>111</sup>

#### 4.2.4 Consequences

Singapore tries to control the foreign media through different measures. But how effective is the control? This question is especially interesting when comparing to Western based international media, who pledge to follow the Western ideals of the press.

Sing (1990:145) makes the point that with so many obstacles in their path, the foreign press may be justified in taking the view that it may not be worth reporting on Singapore. The closure of three bureaus may be an indication of this view. But most seem to take the more pragmatic approach as expressed by the IHT's President Richard Simmons: "We will continue to report in the country but we will obviously be aware of the laws that relate to reporting. There will be increased awareness [of potential libelous material] on the part of the editorial staff" (NML Fall 1995:29).

In 1990, Lee Kuan Yew told the many Western journalists based in Hong Kong that their days were numbered. By the end of the decade (referring to the transfer of Hong Kong back to China), they might gratefully accept sanctuary in his "orderly but sterile" island and agree to work under his rules (FEER Nov. 8, 1990). He has also pointed out that by voting him back in 1988, after Singapore restricted FEER, Time, the Asian Wall Street Journal and Asiaweek, Singaporeans had endorsed this policy:

*The Singaporean is intelligent, sophisticated and knowledgeable. That is why he voted for the same government time and again and gave me 61 percent of the votes in 1988, after I had a row with the AWSJ and the Review and the Asiaweek and the Time magazine.*

(Lee Kuan Yew, quoted in Seow 1998<sup>a</sup>:189)

Of all the different measures implemented against foreign media the practice of *gazetting* seems to be most effective. All the Western papers that have been gazetted have capitulated within a matter of days. For instance, Time had their circulation cut from 9000 copies per week to 2000, because they had

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<sup>111</sup> For instance did *Human Rights Watch* put out an alert (Nov. 22, 1994), recommending people to send appeals to the Singaporean government.

published an edited reply from the secretary of the Prime Minister. Within a fortnight they printed the reply in full, but added an editorial footnote, that it did “not agree with all the corrections cited...but prints this letter in the spirit of full discussion of issues” (Seow 1998<sup>b</sup>). The Economist also printed a letter of reply after having their circulation cut. In an explanation to their readers, they argued that they always tried to obey the laws of countries in which they publish, and not to publish the letter would deprive readers in Singapore of a chance to buy the Economist (Aug. 7, 1993).

International media companies are eager to secure a position in the Singaporean, and subsequently the Asian market. They are therefore more or less accepting the government’s demand on direct control over content. There is money to be made, and publishers and cable service providers are placing “Business before Cathedral”, offering apolitical or “family oriented” material. The CNN has even gone so far as to alert Singapore Cable Vision of potentially sensitive material, and screening coverage (Rodan 1998:72).<sup>112</sup>

Over the years there has been some evidence of a move towards liberalization. In 1973 there was a proposal of forming a Press Council to act as a “watchdog” body, but it was not followed up (Sing 1990:146). The writer Gopal Baratham reported in *Index on Censorship* (1992:4) that one of his own novels were rejected by Singaporean publishers in 1987 on the grounds that it was seditious, but was sold in Singapore five years later.

## 4.3 Views on regulation

### 4.3.1 *The Government on Media Regulations*

Understanding Singapore’s extensive regulation of the media means understanding the ideas of Lee Kuan Yew. As the “father” in Singaporean politics, he has personally had a great deal of influence on the regulatory framework that is used in Singapore today. Or as Seow puts it: “Studying the subjugation of the Singapore media is a political study of Lee Kuan Yew in action” (1998<sup>a</sup>:ix). When studying Lee’s speeches and statements it becomes clear that two main principles keep reoccurring. First of all, the mass media should be there to reinforce, not undermine the cultural values and social attitudes that the government is trying to inculcate in the people. The media should be a force that the authorities can rely on and use for their own purposes, and should not question political dispositions. Secondly, foreign media has no place in Singapore’s domestic politics. Underlying both of these principles is the wish for common national values, and fear of foreign influence that might spark off disturbances and agitation. Lee has several times stated “Freedom of the press...must be subordinated

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<sup>112</sup> This was for instance done during the coverage of the Michael Fay case in 1994. Michael Fay was a U.S. teenager residing in Singapore, found guilty of vandalizing cars. For this he was sentenced to caning, something that resulted in international media coverage, and public debate in the USA. This case also provides a good example of the argument made by Triandis (1995:14) that the American position emphasizes sympathy for the individual (focusing on the pain Fay would endure). The Singapore position recognizes that the society has been injured. The event is therefore interpreted very differently in individualistic and collectivist cultures, depending on the *Kulturbrille* (cultural glasses) used.

to the overriding needs of the integrity of Singapore, and to the primacy of purpose of an elected government” (quoted in Chua 1995:198).

Lee’s son, Deputy Prime Minister and Brigadier-General Lee Hsien Loong, explained the underlying rationale for government regulation of the press in a speech to the 40<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Federation of Newspaper Publishers in 1987. He said that there were three reasons why the press ought to be regulated (quoted in Sing 1990:132):

1. The press influences and shapes the values and attitudes of people.

Messages conveyed through the press may legitimize and glamorize values and lifestyles, many of which are irrelevant to Singapore and its efforts at nation building.

2. The press can be used to further subversive activities.

3. Irresponsible reporting can inflame racial and religious sentiments and cause riots.

BG Lee’s statement shows that the government holds a strong belief in the powerful consequences of media coverage. They argue that there is anecdotal evidence that media can have negative effects: “...the mass media can affect a people to an extent where, over a sustained period, they not only determine social behavior but also spark off political action” (Lee Kuan Yew 1971). Also, Singapore’s role as a “Newly Industrialized Country” makes the control of its media even more important:

*For developing countries the mass media, developed in the West, presents a specially sensitive problem. Its impact is bad enough in developed countries. Most Western democracies have problems getting majority governments (...)...the mass media, particularly the TV, has an insidious and dangerous way of influencing values and changing behavior patterns. (...) The most dangerous part of the mass media is its power of suggestion.*

(Lee Kuan Yew 1972)

Through campaigns like “Courtesy Campaign”<sup>113</sup>, “Speak Mandarin Campaign”, and the previous mentioned “Graduate Mother Campaign”, the government itself has taken advantage of the “power of suggestion”, with an extensive use of the media (Singapore Infomap).<sup>114</sup>

#### 4.3.2 Professionals on Media Regulations

One of my informants in Singapore was a news journalist. The journalist’s main task was to edit the news coming in from all over the world, and in practice working as a *gatekeeper* for a news agency. After we had talked a while, I asked about one of the defamation cases (PM Goh versus Mr. Jeyaretnam), and of the opposition generally in Singapore. The answer startled me, when I was told:

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<sup>113</sup> The Courtesy campaign has been going on for over 20 years, and is now focusing on Internet etiquette and hand-phone and pager courtesy.

<sup>114</sup> For a study on a government campaign, Lazar (1993) who has done an interesting analysis of the “marriage campaign” is recommended. By doing a critical discourse analysis she gives useful insight on the rhetoric of the PAP. The study also provides a good introduction to the gender relations in current Singapore. See also Chua (1995: 21, 64-65) on the “graduate mother” campaign.

*Of course the opposition has the same opportunities as the PAP. Everyone can vote for them if they want to. But – what would you do if you had the choice between the unintelligent, filthy, extremist troublemakers in the opposition, and the smart, intelligent, and capable PAP?*

I was very surprised by this description of the leaders of the opposition and said that for me this sounded like a stereotype. I went on to ask if the media's portrayal might have been somewhat negative and one-sided, inasmuch as the media is controlled and owned by the government. The answer was that, No! – This would not be the case; the media told “the truth” and was objective! Besides – Everybody knew that the people voting for the opposition just did it out of pity! For a western media student, trained in the concepts of *agenda setting*, *manufacturing of consent*, and *content analysis*, the notion that the media would tell simply “the truth” was disturbing. This incident can be seen as just another example of the cultural difference that exists between my informants and myself (cf. the methodological discussion). There is, however, documentation suggesting that journalists are generally very pro-government. In Chua's view, the journalists in Singapore consist only of “a national journalist body, which is unapologetically pro-government, especially in the senior editors' ranks” (1995:198). There are for instance several examples that journalists have filed affidavits in support of the defamation suits filed by the PAP.<sup>115</sup> This might seem as a paradox if one considers the PAP's general view of journalists. In the words of Lee Kuan Yew:

*...all the bright students go into engineering, the sciences, medicine, economics, and so on. The not-so-bright go into political science and sociology. When they can not get a good job, they go on to journalism.*

(quoted in Seow 1998<sup>a</sup>:25)

Lee is also known for instructing newspaper editors on the word or words to be omitted or used, and lecturing them on the meanings in a given article (Seow 1998<sup>a</sup>:203).

At the Freedom Forum conference on Asian Values and the Role the Media in Society in 1994, Cheong Yip Seng, the editor in chief of the English/Malay Newspaper Division of The Straits Times, added to the discussion on the press vs. the government:

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<sup>115</sup> Tang Liang Hong documents 46 such cases on his web site <http://www.ozemail.com.au/~tangtalk/unusal.htm> (accessed March 28, 1999).

*There is no such thing as total freedom of the press. Nor do any journalists anywhere advocate a totally free press. The degree of freedom enjoyed is determined by political and commercial considerations (...) This tradition is universal; it happens both in the East as well as in the West. (...) If, for example, you are fortunate enough to have a government that is clean – and effective in enhancing the well-being of citizens – it makes no sense not to support it. [I disagree with] the conventional wisdom that a newspaper's credentials can only be established when it regards government as an adversary, regardless of the quality of that government. (...) The Singapore government has a very robust attitude toward the press. It has strong beliefs about what the press ought to do. I think officials are entitled to their opinion, and they're entitled to do what they think is best for the country as a whole.*

### 4.3.3 The Public on Media Regulations

According to Kwang et al., the views expressed by journalists and media professionals are just a reflection of the attitudes of the people in Singapore. They argue that surveys have shown that few voters rate press freedom high on their list of priorities. “The notion of the press as a fourth estate of government, out to check the executive at every turn, was not one that held much sway with the people, who looked to the authorities to bring material progress and development”. In other words – people did not accept the Western conventional idea of a press that is free to publish “anything” (1998:211-223). In the type of study conducted here it is not possible to analyze the attitudes of the general public. Nevertheless, three other studies, one by the SBA and two by other scholars, reveals some interesting tendencies.

On November 9 of 1996, the Singapore Broadcasting Authority released results on their program feedback survey.<sup>116</sup> One of three issues addressed in the survey was censorship standard. About 80 % of the respondents were satisfied with the level of censorship control on sex and violence in locally produced drama. For foreign-produced dramas, the numbers were 57% for sex and 63% for violence. The SBA interpretation is that the respondents are generally conservative. They concluded that they would continue to maintain “a balanced approach to censorship of sex and violence especially in locally produced programs” (SBA Nov. 9, 1996). The press release does not mention what the viewers think of the censoring of other types of programs, and in other areas than porn and violence. Since no independent polling of public opinion is permitted, it is hard to gauge how much public values and beliefs have been reshaped to fit the views of the government (Means 1996:113). One must also consider that surveys like this one do not reveal any “third-person effect”: the tendency of people to exaggerate the influence of mass communication on the attitudes and behavior of others (“I can handle personal freedom, *they* cannot”). The potential result of such an effect is a legitimization of media censorship (Emmerson 1995:104).

Another survey was conducted in 1994 by Hao, a lecturer with the School of Communication Studies at Nanyang Technological University. Hao's findings show that the Singapore public is

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<sup>116</sup> The survey was conducted in 1995/96, and involved face-to-face interviews with a representative sample of 1000 TV viewers in the age range of 15 to 65.

basically satisfied with the overall performance of the local press, but that the discerning public (e.g. the well educated) questions the press' credibility when covering domestic politics and government affairs. The coverage of the opposition parties was the only area in which there were more people who saw bias and prejudice than who did not (Hao 1996:116). The survey concluded that as the education level and income will rise further, the Singaporean public would become more critical. Holaday and Kuo (1993), who did a study on the media in the 1991 election, support these findings. They found a relation between what is *not* in the media, and what Singaporean voters think about. When certain issues were pushed in the foreground by the media, some readers looked around these issues for what they believed was masked out or concealed. Only 40 percent of the voters said that the newspapers were fair in their reporting of the election. Especially did Lee Kuan Yew's principle of "reporting events impartially, but provide a definite perspective", create a credibility problem. Vote awareness of what was not in the media included "human rights", "freedom of expression", and "the authoritarian style of government". In other words, there are Singaporeans with a "critical ability".<sup>117</sup>

#### 4.4 Towards a Framework for a Singaporean Media Model

Today the media is regulated through a number of laws. Most of them fall into the category of being "security laws", "defamation laws", or laws aimed at enforcing "responsible journalism" or the "right to reply". But, the laws must of course be viewed in the light of the practices. Sussman (1997) makes the point that the greatest threats to freedom of expression are sophisticated new legal approaches to limiting press freedom. Even if Western laws are being used to regulate the press, the "worst interpretations of the law" will often be used in non-liberal regimes around the world. George (1998), a journalist in *The Straits Times*, has identified three levels of control over the traditional media in Singapore. The first level is made up of various national security laws. The second level is the NPPA, which according to George is used to take "control behind the scenes". Both the NPPA and the SBA Authority Act are rather explicit and detailed. The empirical evidence presented in this chapter shows that these laws are being enforced. The third level, also addressed in this chapter, is according to George a level often ignored by commentators, namely the *consensual* side of the PAP hegemony. This chapter has addressed this issue by revealing how journalists in Singapore have a strong sense of national loyalty, manifested in a loyalty towards the government leaders.

Singapore regulates both domestic and foreign media. The justification lies in the need for national unity and stability, seeing the media as a vital part in the nation building process. This would suggest a *developmental model* for the media, where the media is expected to support the government, and provide them with a powerful tool to create political consensus. Thus the media shall work as a centripetal

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<sup>117</sup> *Critical ability* is a term introduced by Hadley Cantril, used to describe the capacity of not taking the media at face value.

force, centralizing and unifying. The media is therefore subjected to a *political logic*<sup>118</sup>, where a powerful and organized PAP controls the communication, and works against the Western ideal of an autonomous press.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Lee Kuan Yew often states that people in Asia must decide whether they prefer more freedom and less economic gains, or more economic gains and less freedom (Idid 1996:155). This argument does not only apply to political freedom, but also the freedom of the media. He postulates that there is a significant relationship between the wealth of a country and freedom of the media, the same way that Western development theory does. However, as Western scholars point to democracy as a condition for economic development, Lee –and other Asians – turns the argument “upside down”. It is interesting that when this question arises, scholars who side with Lee, all use the same empirical examples to prove their point; Singapore has showed the world that democracy and freedom of expression are *not* absolute conditions for reaching a “Western” level of development. At the same time, countries in Eastern Europe are proof that implementing democracy can lead to a decline in material goods and economical development (e.g. Bell 1995:34; Devan et al. 1994:23; Woon 1994:16). On the other hand, there are many examples of rich nations enjoying press freedom and poor nations with little freedom. Hence Lee’s dictum that the more the freedom the less the economic gains is not applicable across cultures. As a result, some even end up postulating that there is no consequential relationship between the wealth of a country and freedom of the expression.

In light of the Asian Values debate, the message from Singapore – and other Asian nations – is clear: The role of the media in Asia must differ from that in the West, because cultural values differ. But within Asia, the countries vary; from the totalitarian regime of Burma to Communist China and the more Western like democracies of India and the Philippines. In between these political systems (when it comes to freedom of expression) one can place Singapore, along with Indonesia and Malaysia. These three nations have since the Vienna outburst been the loudest agitators for the Asian values and the “Asian Way”. But, to refer to Asian Values in “traditional” media presumes a shared values system for journalists and media organizations in Asian Countries. It also presumes a difference from shared values of countries in the West.

Government leaders in South East Asia often criticize what they call the “Western model” of journalism, in which the media is free to report the news as they see it. The Western human rights norms are based on the idea that individuals, as well as the media, have a right to free expression and political participation. This notion is not always accepted in Asian societies. Their main argument is that the media, especially the domestic media, should act “responsibly” (U.S. DS 1998:article 2/a). Lee Kuan Yew argues that applying liberal values to present-day Asia – where so many people are illiterate

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<sup>118</sup> This thesis relies on McQuail’s definition of *logic* as a framework of meaning in which elements of a phenomenon are coherently related to each other and a consistent pattern of action and thinking can be identified. A logic indicates priorities and draws attention to what is significant (1994:377).

– would result “only in a mess (...) This free-for-all, this notion that all ideas should contend and there will be the blinding light out of which you will see the truth – ha!” (Financial Times July 12, 1996). Lee has also addressed the double moral standards of the Western world:

*...but when we ban communist literature, the Western press applauds. Nobody questions the rightness of that policy. These are dual standards the West imposes on us. If freedom of the press is not affected by banning most Communist Chinese publications, then why not ban Western publications?*

(Lee Kuan Yew 1972)

The Singaporean society is still, by and large, conservative, and does not share the liberal ideas of media freedom. Even if there are examples of Singaporean audiences who feel that the present media landscape could do with fewer regulations, it is a fallacy to assume that they want to do away with all forms of media control. The collectivist ideology is not just a PAP invention, but is said to lie in the value system of most Asians (cf. Hofstede 1984). For those who want fewer regulations, Yeap (1994:210) suggests that the Asian audiences should understand their governments’ need for some control to keep market forces in check. He predicts that Asian audiences will accommodate government mediation in their media preferences, so long as the authorities are firm and, more important, transparent in imposing constraints.

These views are all part of the overriding debate of the universality of human rights in general, and freedom of expression in particular. Singapore dismisses the idea of universality, referring to culture, others will argue that freedom of expression is an absolute, birth given right. This discussion will not be addressed further in this thesis.

In conclusion I will note that it is virtually impossible to formulate consistent “theories” of the press, most of all because every society has its own political ideology and underlying conflicts of interest (McQuail 1992:65). The defined goal for this chapter was to discover the *location* of the media freedom – *whose freedom it is, from whom, to do what?* According to the Singapore media model, the freedom of the media lies in the hands of the government. This is a freedom *from* instability, conflict and criticism, in order to create a consensus-based political climate that can work effectively in the pursuit of nation building. The justification of the PAP is that their elected government has its mandate from the people, while nobody elected the media. While the Western model is designed to protect the press from governments, the Singapore system protects the government’s freedom to govern without the interference of the media.

Chua (1995:211) argues that the failure of the national mass media to provide room for public opinions ultimately will be counter-productive to the support of the PAP regime. Today it drives readers to seek other, foreign, sources for information. In 1995 he predicted that censorship of new and alternative sources also would be counter-productive, because it would confirm the public that the foreign media must be saying something right. So far, the PAP government has managed to keep both domestic and foreign media on a strict leash. But the revolution within the telecommunications area

poses new challenges to the political leaders in Singapore. Especially is the Internet, and the “free flow of content”, disturbing. In the next chapter the political control over the media and the legitimization behind it, will be addressed in relation to the Internet, when content regulation is studied.

## 5 Censoring the Internet

The previous chapters have established the non-liberal character of politics in Singapore. Extensive networks of political control are in place and a culture of fear about such practices exists. Thus, according to the hypothesis set out in the introduction, the impact of monitoring and censoring is likely to be strong. It has also been established that the legitimization for the control lies in political and cultural stability and economic development.

In relation to the Internet, the wish of combining economic development with political control seems like a paradox. The regulation of traditional media, where content is controlled through national laws, a “compliant judiciary”, and working conditions, seems difficult to apply to the global character of the Internet. Microsoft’s Bill Gates formulated the Singapore dilemma:

*They [the government leaders] are going to try to have their cake and eat it too, because joining cyberspace is essential to the role they play as a major hub in global commerce. They want to be connected globally, but maintain local values. They will have to work out this co-existence of two colliding worlds.*

(quoted in Murray et al. 1996:169)

Information technology has an important economic function, and Singapore has no intentions of letting their censorship policy be self-defeating politically and economically. At the same time the PAP leaders are eager to continue their tight control of the political arena, limiting the information flow. This chapter discusses how Singapore has addressed this dilemma, and what solutions have been implemented, both in legislative, practical, and technical terms. It will also show how the government’s coercion on the political arena and with the traditional media, has impelled stability in such a way that coercion in relation to the regulations on new media becomes unnecessary.

### 5.1 Information and Communication Technology in Singapore

The widespread application of Information and Communication Technology (ICT), was promoted by Singapore’s economic planners as early as the beginning of the 1980s. ICT was seen as strategic in the restructuring of the economy toward a “higher value-added production”, and in 1980 the Committee on National Computerization (CNC) was established (Rodan 1998:70). Singapore was linked to the Internet via Technet<sup>119</sup> in October 1991. In 1992, the National Computer Board presented “IT2000 – A Vision of an Intelligent Island”, a detailed strategic statement. The economic rationale behind the IT2000 plan was grounded in recognition that geography would matter less in the future, and that

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<sup>119</sup> A TCP/IP-based network set up by the National Science and Technology Board to serve the research and academic communities in Singapore.

Singapore's role as a broker between South East Asia and the rest of the world might change (Rodan 1998:70).

Commercial access to WWW was officially established in July 1994 (Soh et al. 1997:218). Singapore was the first country in the world to have a national homepage (<http://www.sg>). This site is highly developed and contains a lot of different information about Singapore. Singapore also takes part in the development of secure electronic commerce. The world's first Visa Card purchase on the Internet by using the Secure Electronic Transaction (SET) protocol was conducted there in 1997. The transaction was unusual because it relied upon several different vendors' technologies (Mansell et al. 1998:215).

The Internet proliferation in Singapore has seen an enormous growth. Having 240.000 users in 1996, there were in 1998 over 520.000 users.<sup>120</sup> About half of these are individual dial up subscribers. In the same period of time the number of locally based web sites went from 900 to 4000 (SBA 1998:1). Regular use of the Internet involves 5–10% of the population, giving a participation rate that rivals the United States and is ahead of Australia (Rodan 1998:76). The national aim is to increase the number further and that all Singaporeans have access to the Internet by the year 2000 (interview TAS July 23, 1998).<sup>121</sup>

## 5.2 Step Two – Singapore One

Today the Internet is out of its crib and one is starting to see a blurring of the lines between Telecommunications, Networking, Broadcasting, and Information Technology. In order to stay competitive in this “age of info-communicational convergence”, Singapore early formulated goals for their broadband development (interview TAS July 23, 1998). Their vision was an “Intelligent Island”:

*In our vision, some 15 years from now, Singapore, the Intelligent Island, will be among the first countries in the world with an advanced nationwide information infrastructure. It will interconnect computers in virtually every home, office, school, and factory. The computer will evolve into an information appliance, combining the function of the telephone, computer, TV and more. It will provide a wide range of communication means and access to services. The vision of the IT2000 is based in the far-reaching use of IT.*

(SNCB 1991)

With political will to nurture the multimedia broadband industry in Singapore and expedite the efforts of the private sector in providing multimedia services and applications, the Singapore One project was announced by Minister for Communications Mr. Mah Bow Tan, June 3, 1996. After a Government funding of \$ 82 million, Singapore One was launched a year later. Being the world's first national broadband network, it is hoped to position Singapore as the center of innovation and leadership in the

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<sup>120</sup> Internet users in Singapore have generally comprised teenagers and young adults. When it comes to uses, messaging and browsing are performed more frequently than downloading and purchasing. For a study of the users and uses of the Internet in Singapore, see Teo et al. 1997.

<sup>121</sup> When the policy makers originally planned for interconnecting all Singaporean households to an interactive medium, it was not the Internet, but *Television* they had in mind. *Television* – the world's first interactive video-text system – receives and reacts to instructions from a user through a phone line and sends back text, graphics, or photographs through the phone or radio waves. Singapore Telecom commercially launched the *Television* in 1990. By 1992 this nation wide interactive information service had 10.000 subscribers (Rodan 1998:71).

prolific use of broadband. Or, as the commercial says: “Singapore One transforms our lifestyles so that we can enjoy a better quality of life” (1-Net Singapore:5). It is planned that all 744,000 households in Singapore will eventually get access to the broadband network as soon as a cable is laid to reach every household.<sup>122</sup> Also international investors and developers have showed interest for the Singapore One project. On October 15, 1998, IBM launched a research center in Singapore to develop applications for broadband networks. The center will cost about US\$ 5.5 million per year (Reuters Oct. 15, 1998).

### 5.2.1 Infrastructure

*Singapore One*<sup>123</sup> is considered a key component of the IT2000 Masterplan that aims to transform Singapore into an “Intelligent Island” by the year 2000. It is built on a core broadband network that connects Singapore’s business district, as well as neighborhoods, via local access networks. In effect this comprises both an infrastructure of high-capacity networks and switches, and applications and services. Using the Asynchronous Transfer Mode (ATM) technology, the network can carry voice, audio, video, and data information.<sup>124</sup> Today this is primarily used within the nation, but through linking with overseas networks in Japan, USA and Canada, Singaporeans can access the rest of the world. The ATM switches are operated by 1-Net Singapore Pte Ltd<sup>125</sup>, and customers include Singapore Telecom (SingTel), Singapore Cable Vision (SCV) and all the Internet Service Providers.

There is today three ways of access to Singapore One. Direct ATM connection is available for content providers, service providers and large corporations and organizations. ADSL (Asymmetric Digital Subscriber Line) is available nationwide and is operated by Singapore Telecom. Using the telephone line, a user can download video programs on demand. Cable modem connection can be used in homes and offices wired for cable television. The Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) issued a Direction in 1996, making all developers and owners of new houses and apartments responsible for installing Master Antennae Television (MATV) systems that comply with the Singapore standard (SBA April 29, 1996). The cables carry both Cable TV signals and Singapore One data. Most homes in Singapore were wired in 1998, and the cable connection is expected to be available nationwide within year 2000. In addition to these possibilities, one is also exploring wireless ATM connections.

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<sup>122</sup> Five key government agencies are responsible for driving *Singapore One* (Building the future:4): *The National Computer Board* – Responsible for the creation and delivery of applications and services, encouraging industry participation, supporting development efforts e.g. *The National Science and Technology Board* – drives broadband technology research and development by companies and institutes to create new services and multimedia applications for *Singapore One*. *Telecommunication Authority of Singapore* – drives infrastructure development and facilitates the realization of a cost-effective broadband infrastructure. *The Economic Development Board* – responsible for industrial planning and development and promotion of investments in manufacturing and services. *The Singapore Broadcasting Authority* – regulates and promotes the broadcasting industry and “aims to make Singapore a dynamic broadcasting hub”.

<sup>123</sup> <http://s-one.net.sg/>

<sup>124</sup> The Network architecture is built on ATM technology, runs at 622/155 Mbps, has six broadband access nodes, and two central offices (Interview with TAS July 23, 1998).

<sup>125</sup> 1-Net is a consortium comprising Singapore Communications Investments (owned by Singapore’s Telecommunication Authority), Singapore Telecommunication Ltd, Singapore Cable Vision Ltd, Pacific Internet Pte Ltd and Cyberway Pte Ltd.

### 5.2.2 Services

Singapore One delivers broadband multimedia content in four main areas: government, business, education and home.

The *government* service includes a Government Online Video Library that provides a video-on-demand service offering government related videos (e.g. healthcare, national education and recruitment). An open academy is said to provide “a total online learning environment”, and a multimedia application from the Ministry of Defense, provides information on the “First 100 days in army” through videos and 3D walkthroughs. Singaporeans can also do their income taxes and register for Junior Colleges and higher education online. The *information* part of Singapore One provides among other services online magazines, television programs, interactive news reviews, an intelligent web travel guide with a digital street directory of Singapore, a multimedia gallery, and historical sites that among other things broadcast seminars over the Internet.

Several different online services are related to *education* e.g. *Curriculum ALIVE*, a multimedia learning and revision software for primary students. Here, thematic-based stories are used to facilitate language learning skills. One has also integrated 1800 interactive learning activities per subject per level. This means that children can do their homework and training online, working on subjects that correspond to their textbook. Also, educational TV and video programs and music can be accessed. Adults can e.g. receive IT Business Training, use a virtual laboratory or attend the virtual college offered by Singapore Polytechnic. The *entertainment* section contains a variety of games and chats, movies and music. There is also a section for “places of interest” with online museums, Zoo and updated information on events in Singapore. Here one can meet other virtual pet owners in the PostPet Park, play Mahjong with online friends, have a conference, read interactive comic books or join the “Active World” where online users interact and communicate in a real time, 3D virtual environment. One can also play music from a personal jukebox in CD-quality sound. In the *mall section* one can go for a three dimensional shopping experience, select a maid from the maid’s bio-data and video archive, purchase different kinds of tickets, order groceries, or have a house virtually painted before one decides on the real life color. Singaporeans can also plan their wedding in full detail, including partner matching if they do not yet have a suitable groom or bride.

In the *business section* one can find the BookNet EC System that enables the book community to trade electronically, a self-serve electronic commerce bureau, a builder’s network exchange, and a national electronic product catalogue. In the *finance* section, one can find various banking and insurance options. E.g. Singaporeans can inquire their account balance, and pay their bills and stock trading transactions.

### 5.2.3 Future trends

Singapore One is now considering introducing broadband wireless services and direct-fiber-to-the-home technologies when viable. On the research side the launching of SINGAREN – *Singapore Internet Next Generation Advanced Research and Education Network* – is expected to boost the development further. In 1998 Singapore One had over 10 000 registered subscribers. With the prospect of nationwide deployment, more than 400 000 users are expected within the next five years.

Also on the content side one can expect interesting developments. For instance did the Supreme Court launch its first *technology court* as early as 1995. The court features a computer network that allows access to information on the Litigation Support System for Presentation. The network links various positions within the court, enabling solicitors to present their case via multimedia and imaging tool. Oral testimonies can be digitally recorded, and witnesses can communicate with the court via video conferencing, instead of physical presence (Singapore Infomap). The future vision, “Court Vision 21”, is planning to create virtual courts, where everything is digitalized and fed into the judge’s computer. With the help of “litigation support software”, like SING – Sentencing Information Guide System – the judge need not to be in court, but can review evidence on his personal computer. Singapore has already implemented computer-based systems for hearing applications for bail, eliminating the time and money spent on bringing a prisoner to court (Murray et al. 1996:162).

Having a population with great linguistic skills, especially in English, there is no indication of Singapore falling behind in the development of the technology. The pragmatic PAP has for decades rationalized the primacy of English on the basis of its utility for science, technology and commerce (and therefore essential for economic development) (Chua 1995:65). Their effort seems to pay off also when it comes to the Internet and other new forms of information and communication technology.

## 5.3 Political control of Internet content

As the previous chapter documented, the media regulations in Singapore are extensive as well as effective. Lee Kuan Yew has explained the government’s view on how Singapore’s distinctive features makes it necessary to control the flow of information in order to maintain national harmony and consensus. But how does the government approach the Internet, a medium said to provide a seemingly uncontrollable free flow of information?

### 5.3.1 Regulatory Paradigm and framework

If one wants to study regulation and censoring of the Internet, the most logical starting point would be to look at the analogies that regulators have attempted to use. Internet combines the traits of traditional communication media. This causes problems for censorship because it becomes difficult to classify it, and to decide who regulates it and how. In other words, there is a problem of *regulatory paradigm* (Ang 1997). There are several regulatory regimes that might be identified. The most usual are

classifying Internet as a *telecommunications service* (because one major use is electronic mail), as a *computer service* (because one needs a computer to access the Internet), and as a *broadcasting service* (because of the availability of information through Usenet groups and Web-sites) (Ang et. al 1996:74).

Singapore early defined the Internet as a *broadcast medium*.<sup>126</sup> By doing this, the nation had a legal framework ready from the beginning. The Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) administers this framework. The SBA was formed in 1994 as a statutory board under the Ministry of Information and the Arts. It has as its main objectives to “–develop quality broadcasting, build a well-informed and culturally rich society and make Singapore a dynamic broadcasting hub” (SBA 1998:1). On their own web page<sup>127</sup>, the SBA has as its first mission to “ensure that broadcasters maintain balance, variety and a certain level of quality in their programming, which is in line with the public tastes and national objectives”. All broadcasters in Singapore are subject to SBA’s program and advertising codes said to be there to protect Singapore’s values system. There is also a *general program directorate* where two of the objectives are (objective 1): To ensure that broadcast programs/content meet the expectations and social concerns of Singaporeans, and (objective 6) to encourage the public to assume greater responsibility in their consumption of broadcast media<sup>128</sup>. Censorship policy is there to allow for “free-flow of information and creativity while preserving social and religious matters” (<http://www.sba.gov.sg/>). In addition to the laws administered by the SBA, the Internet is also regulated through technical measures, and through campaigns and industry consultation.

### 5.3.2 *The key principles of SBA*

SBA’s regulations of the Internet are based on several underlying key principles. This includes an emphasis on issues concerning Singapore, a focus on the pornography on the net, an open dialogue with the industry, and a “light touch approach” in regulation services on the Internet. The regulation itself consists of a three-prong approach: legal measures, protection through technical and practical measures, and public education/self-regulation. Their aim is to “legislate, promote and protect” (interview SBA July7, 1998). A *National Internet Advisory Committee* (NIAC) was formed in August 1996 to advise SBA on the regulation and development of the electronic information services, and assist in the development of a regulatory framework for the Internet (NIAC 1997:1). The Committee has three sub-committees that address industry development, public education and legal matters (SBA 1997:36).

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<sup>126</sup> This definition has been criticized by several international organizations like Human Rights Watch (Aug. 13. 1996). Part of the criticism concerns the nature of Internet, and that, unlike TV or radio broadcasting, Internet does not push material to the viewer, but simply makes material available on demand. In addition all participants have the possibility to publish their views.

<sup>127</sup> <http://www.sba.gov.sg>

<sup>128</sup> The other objectives concern high value of programs (2), keeping Singaporeans well informed (3), provide an environment where FTA-channels remain anchor channels for Singaporeans (4), to instill a sense of social responsibility and public spirit in broadcasters (5), and to have research capabilities (7). (<http://www.sba.gov.sg.orgstruc.html>)

The Committee members are selected from “a wide cross section of our society”, and serve for two years.<sup>129</sup>

In the following I will address the three regulation approaches from the SBA, namely legal measures, protection through technical and practical measures, and public education/self-regulation.

## 5.4 Legal frameworks

SBA regulates the Internet through two legal frameworks, the *Internet Class License Scheme* and the *Code of Practice*, both introduced in July 1996. Both are a part of the Singapore Broadcasting Authority Act, Chapter 297.

### 5.4.1 Class License Scheme

The Class License Scheme<sup>130</sup> contains the regulatory requirements for both Internet Content Providers (ICP) and Internet Service Providers (ISP). ICPs are defined as *information providers* on the World Wide Web and include web authors, web publishers, and web server administrators. ISPs include Internet Access Service Providers (IASP) that function as main “gateways” to the Internet, and Internet Service Resellers (ISR) which obtain access from IASPs and resell such access to the public. Singapore allows only three service providers: *SingNet*, *Pacific Internet*, and *Cyberway*. All three ISPs are owned by large government-linked companies (Reid 1996:201). Widespread public access had become available when SingNet (a part of Singapore Telecom) began operation in July 1994. Pacific Internet was before its privatization in September 1995 named Technet, and provided access services exclusively to the local research and academic communities. Cyberway started operating in March 1996 (Teo et al. 1997:326). According to SBA officials, this is sufficient to cover the demand, and there are no plans of giving license to other potential service providers.

The Class License Scheme automatically applies for both ISPs and ICPs. The Class License Scheme also binds individuals who put up personal web pages *if the pages in question concern business, political or religious issues*. This requires them to register with the SBA, a registration that includes giving particulars about the web site:

*An Internet Content Provider who is or is determined by the Authority to be -*

*a. a political party registered in Singapore providing any programme on World Wide Web through the Internet; or*

*b. a body of persons engaged in the propagation, promotion or discussion of political or religious issues relating to Singapore on World Wide Web through the Internet, shall register with the Authority within 14 days of 15th July 1996 or, in the case of an Internet Content Provider who provides the service after 15th July 1996, within 14 days after the commencement of its service, or within such longer time as the Authority may permit.*

(Class License Scheme Article 3)

<sup>129</sup> All of the 19 members of the 1996 – 1998 Main Committee hold leading positions in the community, e.g. Directors, MPs, Professors, or Principals (<http://www.sba.gov.sg/wnew.html>).

<sup>130</sup> The Singapore Broadcasting Authority Act (Chapter 297) *The Singapore Broadcasting Authority (Class License Notification 1996)*.

The registration "...serves to emphasize the need for the content providers to be responsible in what they say" (SBA 1998:2). All together the Scheme contains a total of 16 articles.<sup>131</sup> Any licensee or content provider must assist the Authority in the investigation into: "i. any breach of its license; or ii. any alleged violation of any law committed by the licensee or any other person; and iii. produce such information, records, documents, data or other materials as may be required by the Authority for the purpose of the investigation" (article 8). In effect this means that the licensee must keep detailed records on subscribers and their Internet use (Rodan 1998:81).

When it comes to content, the licensees are required to ensure that their services:

*...complies with such practice as the Authority may issue from time to time; and are not used for any purpose and does not contain any program, that is against the public interest, public order or national harmony; or offends against good taste or decency.*

(Class License Scheme, Article 11)

Practices not allowed are described in the 13<sup>th</sup> article of the Scheme:

*A licensee who provides any licensable broadcasting service referred to in paragraph 3 (a) to (e) of the Notification, shall -*

*ensure that its service is not used for, or in furtherance of, games and lotteries, the conduct of which is an offence under the Common Gaming Houses Act (Cap.49), unless the licensee is exempted from the provisions of that Act;*

*avoid the broadcast of horse-racing analyses, commentaries or tips, other than horse-racing results, for the purpose of gambling;*

*ensure that its service is not used to advertise, provide or otherwise promote -*

*- astrology, geomancy, palmistry; or*

*- any other type of fortune-telling device;*

*ensure that its service is not used for the solicitation of prostitution, or for any other immoral activity;*

*ensure that any professional advice, or any specialist consultancy service, offered on its service is offered by persons with qualifications recognized by the relevant professional bodies in Singapore;*

*in the case of the broadcast of sound recordings, ensure that only sound recordings that are acceptable to the censorship section of the Ministry of Information and the Arts are broadcast; and*

*in the case of the broadcast of films or video recordings, ensure that only films and video recordings that are approved by the Board of Film Censors are broadcast, unless the film or video recording is one to which the Films Act*

*The licensee must also remove or prohibit the broadcast of any program included in its services, if told so by the SBA (article 14).*

#### 5.4.2 Code of Practice

One of the main duties of the SBA is to ensure that no broadcasting service includes anything that is against "...public interest or order, national harmony or which offends against good taste or decency"

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<sup>131</sup> The full text can be read at <http://www.sba.gov.sg/internet.html>

(SBA Authority Act, Cap. 297). The first and foremost dictum in the Authority Act says that: “A licensee shall use his best efforts to ensure that prohibited material is not broadcast via the Internet to users in Singapore” (Cap.297, article 2). The Act consists then of two main parts, where the former spells out the obligations the ISPs and the ICPs have under the Code of Practice, and the latter describes what kind of material that is prohibited.

Among the obligations under the Code is a requirement to deny access to sites notified by the Authority as containing prohibited material. Also one is not allowed to subscribe to Internet Newsgroups that are likely to contain prohibited material, or any newsgroups that the Authority might command. When it comes to chat-groups and other related discussion forums, the ICPs must ensure that the themes discussed are not prohibited under the content guidelines. Programs and services for public display (e.g. bulletin boards) are also included, however this “does not apply to any web publisher or web server administrator in respect of programs on his service for which he has no editorial control” (Cap.297, article 3/5). Under the Act the SBA has the power to impose sanctions if the code is defied.

### 5.4.3 Content Guidelines

The Content Guidelines, dated July 1996, spell out what kind of material that is considered to be violation of the law. According to the guidelines, the following topics are banned<sup>132</sup>:

#### Public Security and National Defense

- a) Contents which jeopardize public security or national defense.
- b) Contents which undermine the public confidence in the administration of justice.
- c) Contents which present information or events in such a way that it alarms or misleads all or any of the public.
- d) Contents which tend to bring the Government into hatred or contempt, or which excite disaffection against the Government

#### Racial and Religious Harmony<sup>133</sup>

- a) Contents which denigrate or satirize any racial or religious group.
- b) Contents which bring any race or religion into hatred or resentment.
- c) Contents which promote religious deviations or occult practices such as Satanism.

#### Public Morals

- a) Contents which are pornographic or otherwise obscene.
- b) Contents which propagate permissiveness or promiscuity

<sup>132</sup> This is the same material that is banned from books, magazines, newspapers, movies and public forums.

<sup>133</sup> The SBA are only concerned with material which may incite racial or religious hatred among the races in Singapore. All religious groups in Singapore are subject to government scrutiny and must be legally registered. Some religious groups, like Jehovah’s Witnesses and the Unification Church, are banned (US State report 1997:article c).

- c) Contents which depict or propagate gross exploitation of violence, nudity, sex or horror.
- d) Contents which depict or propagate sexual perversions such as homosexuality, lesbianism and pedophilia.

This list of prohibited material has been the center for extensive debate within Singapore. However, the debate has revolved around the specific rules, not whether or not such guidelines should exist. In other words, most critics have not seen this as a violation of the freedom of expression principle, or asked for democracy. (One exception is the Secretary-General of the Singapore Democratic Party, Mr. Chee, who was quoted by Reuters (July 11, 1998) saying “It’s just another way that the government is trying to control the free flow of information in this country”). When the Internet Code of Practice first was released, the SBA received several inquiries about “borderline cases” from the industry as well as private persons (interview with SBA July 23, 1998). The Code was criticized for being vague and overly broad. This problem was also pointed out by the National Internet Advisory Committee (NIAC) in their 1996/1997 report. As a result new guidelines were presented October 1997. They read as follows (Cap.297, 4/article1-4):

1. Prohibited material is material that is objectionable on the grounds of public interest, public morality, public order, public security, national harmony, or is otherwise prohibited by Singapore laws.
2. In considering prohibited material, the following factors should be taken into account:
  - (a) whether the material depicts nudity or genitalia in a manner calculated to titillate;
  - (b) whether the material promotes sexual violence or sexual activity involving coercion or non-consent of any kind;
  - (c) whether the material depicts a person or persons clearly engaged in explicit sexual activity;
  - (d) whether the material depicts a person who is, or appears to be, under 16 years of age in sexual activity, in a sexual provocative manner or in any other offensive manner;
  - (e) whether the material advocates homosexuality or lesbianism, or depicts or promotes incest, paedophilia, bestiality or necrophilia;
  - (f) whether the material depicts detailed or relished acts of extreme violence or cruelty;
  - (g) whether the material glorifies, incites or endorses ethnic, racial or religious hatred, strife or intolerance.
3. A further consideration is whether the material has intrinsic medical, scientific, artistic or educational value.
4. A licensee who is in doubt as to whether any content would be considered prohibited may refer such content to the Authority for its decision.

As we can see there has been a large focus on specifying the pornographic part of the Code. The issues of national and public security as well as racial and religious harmony are still represented in the first article of the Code. These issues are, however, just as “vague and overly broad” as they were. Singapore Democratic Party’s secretary general, Chee Soon Juan did in a statement welcome the curbs on pornography, hate literature, and criminal activities, but also asked “What does regulation and licensing of political parties, think-tanks, Islamic, Christian and Buddhist associations have to do with sex, hate and crime?” He emphasized that the real agenda was political control to “help buttress the PAP’s total domination of Singapore’s politics for a few more years” (quoted in Rodan 1998:83).

When I confronted the representatives from SBA with the criticism made by the opposition and by several human rights organizations towards the content rules, a senior management executive on policy did not find this to be problematic. As the representative pointed out to me – the rules concerning the Internet are no different than the rules that go for the rest of Singapore’s media and inhabitants. For instance, in the fourth part of the constitution concerning the “Fundamental Liberties”, we find a lot of similarities (see appendix no. 2). A Singapore lawyer made the same point to the Netly News: “How can we argue for Net freedom without attacking the existing laws?” (Netly News Des. 4, 1996).

The SBA claims that they are primarily concerned with the distribution of objectionable material, and not the private use of Internet. But this is contested by examples of the opposite. For instance, in 1996 the Government arrested and convicted a Singaporean for downloading child pornography, making all citizens keenly aware that the government has the ability to monitor all their use of the Internet (U.S. DS 1997:article 2/a). Here we see an example of how the pre-emptive censorship in Singapore can work in tandem with the punitive: one punishment serves as a warning to others.<sup>134</sup> This practice has its roots in Confucianism. The concept of rule by example is an important part of the Confucian tradition, and is based on the notion that all people should be educated to appreciate virtue and to show deference to those who are their superiors in virtue. Rule by example should be enough to create civil order in a society, something that legitimizes severe punishment (Pye 1985:41). SBA’s representatives were very eager to point out to me that one is practicing a “light touch approach” when enforcing regulations. In practice this means two things: First of all one is to consider the context in which any allegedly offensive material is found. Material presented in good faith, incidental or material that is used for educational, artistic, scientific, or medical purposes might not be a breach of the code. Secondly, an offender will be given a chance to rectify the violation before SBA takes any action.

#### 5.4.4 Other laws with impact on Internet

When the government in 1996 transferred the regulatory responsibility for the Internet from the Telecommunications Authority of Singapore to SBA, it signified that no legal distinctions are made between the Internet and other media. One of the most interesting consequences arise from the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, where it is stated that the editor, and the author *as well as* the distributor and the printer can be prosecuted for defamatory or libelous material (cf. the previous discussed “Lingle-case”). This makes service operators and content providers analogous to newspaper editors (Rodan 1998:81).<sup>135</sup> For instance: the National Solidarity Party has a disclaimer on their WWW

<sup>134</sup> During my research trip, summer of 1998 the Singapore news reported on a case where a youngster had admitted to using the forbidden drug ecstasy. When he got his sentence it was clear that the next time *anyone* did the same, he would be punished much harder because one sentence should serve as a final warning for the whole community.

<sup>135</sup> This law has resulted in many access providers (like Cybercafes) reconfiguring their newsreaders so that customers can only browse and not post material on newsgroups (Rodan 1998:82).

political discussion board, stating they are in no way responsible for the views, comments and actions of the users. But the regulations do in fact render the party responsible for the content on this site (Rodan 1998:84). Having the “Lingle-case” in mind, it is clear that the consequences can be serious.

There are other laws that have impact on the Internet use and users. An example of such a law is the *Public Nuisance Act*, which makes it an offense to tell fortunes in any matter that causes or is likely to cause a public nuisance. This means that Internet content and service providers must monitor sites with geomancy, palmistry, astrology and fortune telling (South China Morning Post Sept. 20, 1996). Other important laws that apply to the Internet are the *Penal Code*, *Defamation Act*, *Sedition Act*, and *Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act*<sup>136</sup>. The SBA has highlighted that these laws apply as much to communications on the Internet as they do to the traditional print and broadcast media (SBA March 3, 1996). In line with this policy, electronic newspapers targeting subscribers in Singapore must be registered and subject to the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act. By subjecting Internet to the same laws as other media, the government exerts extensive pressure on the licensees to foster self-censorship and caution in trying to avoid objectionable content (Rodan 1998:81). The Government can also use the powers given to them under the *Internal Security Act*. Law enforcement officers may search persons, homes and property (like a computer) without a warrant if they decide that such a search is necessary to preserve evidence (US State Report 1997:1/f). Other measures include a toll-free “hotline” the public can call if they discover anything illegal, or if they want to complain about a site. There is also a ten-person body within the SBA who actively “surf” the net for content in violation with the code. In an UPI-report (July 11, 1996), a SBA management executive was quoted saying “We have a dedicated unit, which is monitoring the Net for web pages carrying political or religious discussions. Currently there are about 10 people doing it – they are required to search the Internet for two or three hours daily”. This report is contrary to the impression given to me during my talks with the SBA. I was told that the main issues for the regulators are sites containing pornography.

## 5.5 Technical and practical measures

The Internet poses a technical challenge to the regulators because it provides access to information through a variety of means, including email, telenet, World Wide Web, gopher, and newsgroups. In the following both technical and more practical measures will be addressed, including filtering of content, newsgroup, email, and server censoring, access regulation, encryption, and surveillance.

### 5.5.1 Filtering

The most extensive regulation applied in Singapore is the filtering of content. The Internet Service Providers have always been subjected to a strong encouragement from the SBA to implement content

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<sup>136</sup> The *Religious Harmony Act* from 1990, made illegal what the Government deems to be “inappropriate involvement of religious groups and officials in political affairs”. The act also *prohibits judicial review of its enforcement or of any possible denial of rights arising from it* (US State Report 1997: article 2/c).

classification systems. Especially SBA has asked the ISPs to use the *Platform for the Internet Content Selection* (PICS) system developed by the World Wide Web consortium. The PICS system labels web sites on a scale according to the degree of sex, violence, obscene language etc. This makes it possible for parents to set the access levels for their children. One of the special features of PICS is that it allows a digital encrypted signature to be placed within the ratings code. This acts as a authenticating seal, containing a “checksum” for the Web page, created by taking all the information and running it through a specific algorithm. The checksum figure can be recalculated automatically when the page is requested, and if the page content has changed since it was rated and approved, the request will be denied and the rating withdrawn.<sup>137</sup>

The irony of the PICS system is that it aims to place control over what is read and seen in the hands of the individual (e.g. the parent). But it can also be used by outside bodies with specific political, moral or commercial interests to label documents or web pages. Thus it is possible to use the PICS labeling to block access to the entire Internet, except from a limited number of predetermined sites (“white pages”) (Kruger 1998:13). Index on Censorship Online describes the PICS system as providing a “rock-solid defense against such public-spirited chicanery – using strong encryption technology of precisely the kind that governments the world over are trying to keep from their people” (Issue 2:1998).

One of the most recently endeavors is a new filter implemented by the three IASP, that is supposed to make it easier for parents who do not know how to install or maintain their own filters. The initiative came from the Minister of the Information and the Arts, BG George Yeo, who announced in Singapore’s Parliament that he would direct the IASP’s to provide an optional *Family Access Network* (FAN) that would filter out all pornographic sites (SBA 1998:3). CyberPatrol manages the list.<sup>138</sup> To block out objectionable sites on the server, and not the user’s end, has been a high priority, not only for the Government, but also for the three service providers. SingNet is reported to have invested more than \$ 5 million in server equipment to make this possible. The SingNet server now blocks out more than 20.000 “X-rated” sites (The Straits Times May 13, 1998). SingNet told the The Straits Times that the main reason for doing this was that with normal software “any clever kid can un-install it and be able to access the sites”.

When questioned, SBA officials told me that all this was a part of their “parenting approach” policy. The parenting also seems to include nursing the grown-up parts of the population, considering the children are not the only ones getting their surfing filtered. One of the most “famous” SBA efforts is the direction of the ISPs to completely block public access to different sites around the world

<sup>137</sup> For a more detailed study of the PICS system and its censoring potential see Kruger 1998.

<sup>138</sup> CyberPatrol has been criticized for blocking out sites that are not pornographic. Among these are the Electronic Frontier Foundation (even if they display their blue ribbon on their site), the MIT Student Association for Freedom of Expression, the Jewish Bulletin, the HIV/AIDS Information Center of the Journal of the American Medical Association etc. Cyber Patrol was a plaintiff in the legal challenge of the American Communication Decency Act ([www.peacefire.org](http://www.peacefire.org)).

(Reuters Sept. 20, 1996). These sites – which is said to be highly impact pornographic – are blocked via *proxy servers*, large capacity computers capable of filtering out requests for Internet sites banned by the SBA. This is not considered to be censoring by the government, but another effort to hinder undermining of public moral and security, and religious and racial harmony. After several reactions from citizens and foreign media, the Internet Advisory Committee did express concern over the clandestine list, and advised the SBA to provide the number and type of sites (NIAC 1997:article 10). When I asked the SBA about these sites, I was told that the number was 100. It was made clear to me that the list will not be made available to the public, but that they could reveal to me that most of the sites were US based. The list is meant as a statement of societal values and they added that they hoped that the list had been completed, and that the industries own regulation measures would make future SBA interventions superfluous. This would be their policy in spite of the fact that “a lot of people” wanted them to make the list longer. I then confronted the SBA with their press release dated June 11. 1996, where it was stated that the SBA wanted to concentrate on regulating the information that is “readily and easy accessible” by members of the public as a start. When I asked the SBA what kind of regulations they had in mind for the future, they once again emphasized industrial sub-regulation and public education. Their representatives told me “we are not trigger-happy”.

As a measure of effectiveness, the SBA says that it has not taken any action against anyone for objectionable content on the Internet (SBA 1998:3). This does not mean that there have been no violations. Usually the service and content providers have taken the matters into their own hands, and erased the sites in question. This might be because they are running on a license, and do not want to jeopardize their future position or income, not to mention be in violation of the license scheme. Nicholas Lee, the leader of Pacific Internet, one of the IASP’s explained the policy like this:

*Users or a browser have to set their browser to use a proxy which is a proxy that we use and the proxy will then make the request on behalf of the subscriber. So, for example, if you wanted to visit Playboy, you say, okay, I want to go to Playboy is not on our okay list and we send you a message which says, “I’m sorry, we can’t get Playboy”.*

(BBC Sept. 15, 1996)

Those people that have been prosecuted have been charged of breaking other laws than the Authority Act, like the laws on the possession of pornographic material and the film distribution law (Interview July 23, 1998). For instance, Mr. Lai Chee Chuen was fined \$ 61.500 for using the Internet for “pornographic purposes” (Berita Harian Oct. 12, 1996). At the same time he was fined \$ 500 for possessing a Penthouse magazine (The Straits Times Forum Pages Sept. 28, 1996).

This corresponds with the policy expressed by Minister of Information and the Arts, George Yeo in 1995 “We can not screen every bit of information that comes down the information highway, but we can make it illegal and costly for mass distributors of objectionable material to operate in Singapore” (Reuters July 7, 1995).

### 5.5.2 Newsgroup Censoring

Traditionally one of the main targets of Internet censorship has been *Usenet*, a system that can be accessed from the Internet, and contains discussion groups, picture databases, newsgroups, and talk (HRW:1996). In Singapore the Unix shell used by Singapore Telecom has been deliberately crippled to remove some functions. Subscribers now have to use a menu to access Internet services. The ISP's censor Usenet groups by filtering out those with suggestive names. One also sets conditions for usage, revoking certain services from users' accounts (e.g. electronic mail, Usenet access, file transfer capabilities, remote communications), or even denying login access totally (Ang et al. 1996:77; Rodan 1998:78).

It is widely believed that the government monitors individuals on discussion groups (Rodan 1998:78). On their site "Myths and Facts about SBA and the Internet"<sup>139</sup>, the SBA comments on the claims that they censor and delete postings, especially on the newsgroup "soc.culture.singapore". "SBA does not censor or delete postings from newsgroups. Newsgroup postings "disappear" because ISPs regularly remove old postings to save storage capacity on their news servers." In July 1996, the AP-Dow Jones News service reported that a certain posting criticizing some lawyers was "yanked off" by the SBA (June 19, 1998).<sup>140</sup> The SBA told me that they often made the ISPs aware of postings that they (or people calling in to them) saw as controversial or offensive, but that they did not order them to remove them. However, they could not give me a single example where postings addressed by the SBA had not been removed immediately.

The Singapore authorities have also taken action against postings that have been published under false name. According to my informants in the SBA, this is illegal in Singapore. The public became aware of the SBA's view on the matter when an unknown user posted hundreds of messages to the *sos.culture.singapore*<sup>141</sup> newsgroup under the name of Lee Kwan Yew. The postings were in the mode "We are small and vulnerable. Without regulations, we will be quite like Hong Kong, oops, fuck, bad example, they are actually doing quite all right - SM Lee Kwan Yew, Republic of Singapore" (Hotwired Sept. 5, 1996).

In the 1996/1997 annual report from NIAC, the problem with vulgar postings on newsgroups is discussed. Apparently the SBA had expressed a concern over the rise in vulgar postings and impersonations on chat groups. The Committee's advice (article 17) was that the ISPs should use their own initiative to deal with such postings, rather than having the SBA to step in and censor. SBA has also strongly encouraged the Internet Content Providers to take discretionary actions against abusers of chat channels, and make sure that the discussion themes on them are in accordance with the Code of Practice (Industry Guidelines, article 24).

<sup>139</sup> <http://www.sba.gov.sg/netreg/myth.html>

<sup>140</sup> The posting on the newsgroup was apparently made by a disgruntled client who claimed he lost a case even though his lawyers said he would win it. The lawyers in question were a part of one of Singapore's oldest law firms.

<sup>141</sup> Over 10 000 messages were posted on this newsgroup from mid-1994 to mid 1995, proving it to be a popular forum (Rodan 1998:78).

In addition to the SBA and the ISP's there are other parties that monitor the newsgroup discussion. Asiaweek (Oct. 11, 1996) featured an article on the "Young People's Action Party" – PAP's youth organization. According to the article, leaders in the organization monitor and participate in the Internet discussions (especially the ones on *sos.culture.singapore*), defending PAP's policies and viewpoints. They also "bring 'hot' topics of conversation to the attention of the Arts Minister George Yeo", but claimed that they did not divulge the names of those who post their opinions. When the Young PAP's requested people to input opinions on their web site, some users alleged that the PAP would exercise censorship. The Young PAP's presence in discussion groups is also a part of a strategy to "draw in the Internet generation". Minister Yeo have commented on the issue, reasoning that even if the Young PAP members say that they are much hated for their participation in on-line discussions, the hate must be an "affectionate" one (Information Square Nov. 8, 1998).

It is interesting to see how the rule of "right to reply" used towards foreign newspapers, also seems to be used towards the newsgroup postings. There have been appearances of spokespersons from MITA on the groups, attacking government critics and playing a defensive role for the PAP position (Rodan 1998:79). It is important to note that public Internet discussions of *politics* have been deemed illegal because they might involve non-members (Rodan 1998:82).<sup>142</sup> On the National Solidarity Party web-site, the Party disclaims responsibility for views, comments, and actions of the users, but they are still considered responsible by the SBA (Rodan 1998:84).

### 5.5.3 Limiting Internet Access from Public Offices

In public offices, there is a difference in access possibilities. For instance: at the National University, there are different servers for staff and students.<sup>143</sup> The student will get more heavily censored material than the staff. In the 1997/1998 annual report from NIAC, there is one whole section dedicated to "practical measures to manage Internet access in schools and libraries". Fourteen concrete suggestions are made, including monitoring of the log files to check the user access to web sites, and locating computers where they can easily be monitored by staff and other appointed officials. Also a more extensive use of FAN (Family Access Network) is recommended.

### 5.5.4 Email and Server Censoring

A controversial issue is the monitoring, and censoring of private email. Today, the authorities say they have a regulatory policy where they refrain from conducting searches, but this has not been the case in the past. In 1994 the authorities disclosed that they had searched individual accounts (HRW 1996<sup>a</sup>).

Servers have also been searched. A scanning for GIF-files<sup>144</sup> on the users' home areas, revealed that out of 80.000 pictures, five (5) were defined as pornographic after Singapore law (Ang et al. 1996:76;

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<sup>142</sup> As discussed in chapter three, only members of registered political parties are allowed to engage in politics.

<sup>143</sup> The staff can use a so-called "corporate leaseline", which is "safer" from intrusion in terms of secret information (like banking and other financial tasks).

<sup>144</sup> Graphical Interchange Format

Rodan 1998:77). After businesses expressed great concern over the security of their information, the authorities said that they would reverse their policy. When I asked officials about these practices, they seemed most unwilling to discuss the matters, and on one occasion the ongoing interview was interrupted, and I was – with no explanation offered – showed the door. However, the SBA commented on the case of the GIF-files by saying that this happened before they got the new laws.

Contrary to what some might perceive, SBA do not impose a tight set of rules for the Internet. SBA's purview only covers the provision of material to the public. We are not concerned with what individuals receive, whether in the privacy of their own home or at their workplace. Corporate Internet access for business use is also outside the scope of the regulators, as is private communications, e.g. electronic mail and Internet Relay Chat (IRC)

(SBA 1998:3)

In May 1999 it was reported that all customers of Singapore Telecom (SingTel), had their accounts scanned secretly. The scanning was initiated after hackers had broken into the Internet accounts of 17 subscribers. The scanning was performed by government officials, and was considered as an “extra service” by SingTel representatives. The secrecy of the scan was contributed to not wanting to make people nervous (digi.no May 16, 1999).

### 5.5.5 Encryption

Import of scramblers, encryption hardware or software capable of re-arranging signs, signals, writing, sounds, or intelligence for the purpose of secrecy, is controlled by the Trade Development Board. Written approval must be obtained before the import is allowed into Singapore. The Global Internet Liberty Campaign has classified Singapore as a “red” country, meaning that they have instituted “sweeping controls in cryptography, including domestic use controls” (GILC 1997). According to their 1997 survey, there is only a small number of countries where strict domestic controls are in place. Apart from Singapore, they mention only Belarus, China, Israel, Pakistan, and Russia. In their view, government regulation of cryptographic security techniques endangers personal privacy. Rodan (1998:75) makes the point that it is the monitoring potential of the Internet that gives rise to ambiguous positions by governments on encryption technologies designed to safeguard privacy. The mere use of encryption can serve to arouse the suspicion of authorities.<sup>145</sup>

### 5.5.6 Surveillance

When Singapore started to plan for a wireless communication network, one also planned mobile computer access to information services throughout Singapore. This plan included wiring of public

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<sup>145</sup> Today, there are two basic types of encryption: symmetrical (private key) and asymmetrical (public key). In symmetrical encryption the same key is used for both encryption and decryption. In asymmetrical encryption, a public key is used for encryption and a private key for decryption. It is not possible to derive one key from the other (Banisar et al. 1998:163-164).

places, and it was proposed that television cameras be fitted at corridors, lifts, public parks, etc. for monitoring purposes (Rodan 1998:70).

In May 1996, the three ISP's reached an agreement to establish a Singapore Internet Backbone. This would mean that traffic between local ISP's no longer had to be routed via the United States (Rodan 1998:77). A side effect would be an increase in the potential for the authorities to monitor the Internet traffic. The self-contained system enhanced the capabilities of the authorities to follow the traffic of information. Combined with the fact that Singapore Telecom enjoys monopoly over phone lines in Singapore, there is now only one way in or out of the country when travelling on the "information superhighway". A further consideration is that all Singaporeans must produce a numbered identification card in order to take out a domestic account for the Internet (Rodan 1998:77-78). This means that the Internet has the potential to assist authorities in identifying government critics (Rodan 1998:75), and survey their activities and areas of interest.<sup>146</sup> According to the United States Department of State (1997), surveillance has been going on for years, and it is believed that the authorities routinely monitor citizens' telephone conversations and use of the Internet.

Monitoring is a relatively easy form for political control, and it is not necessarily apparent that it is occurring. One can for instance tap the phone line linking a user to an ISP, or inspect messages to and from particular individuals as they pass through an ISP. The editor of Australian PC World discussed the privacy of the individual user on the Internet:

*...if anyone wants to go to the trouble, it's possible to trace all your activities on the Internet, and discover everything you've looked at, how long you looked at it on-line, and what you're downloaded to look at off-line. (...) ..anyone with any technical skill can easily read you email. Far from preserving our anonymity, the Web makes us far more exposed. There's no getting around it. The more we use machines like telephones and computers for communicating, the more we're susceptible to surveillance. If you want to remain anonymous, you have to go low-tech.*

(quoted in Rodan 1998:75)

Rodan (1998:75) claims that the potential to exploit what mechanisms there are for monitoring or blocking information in the Internet is mediated by social and political structures. The findings in the previous chapters indicate that with the financial and political state Singapore is in, exploitations of such mechanisms have the government's support.

## 5.6 Selfregulation and "Softregulation"

### 5.6.1 Industry Consultation

During my interview with the SBA representatives (July 23, 1998), the need and wish for industry self-regulation was strongly emphasized. It was made clear to me that instead of imposing new regulations, the main priority now was to encourage the industry to take further actions to self-regulate and set

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<sup>146</sup> For a study on electronic surveillance in contemporary western societies see Lyon 1994.

their own standards. As a consequence the ISPs have all implemented “Acceptable Use Policies” for their customers.

The industry consultation is done both through formal and more informal channels. The most regular feedback is probably from NIAC, a body where many of the members are representatives from the industry. The SBA underlined that “It is not the people in the SBA that decides these matters [what should be censored], we have advisory committees that decides what is right and wrong” (interview July 23, 1998). In addition, SBA has put up a feedback channel on their website<sup>147</sup>. The plan is to:

*...maintain an open channel of communication with the industry and the public so that we can fine-tune our policies to promote and facilitate the growth of the Internet while regulating its content to protect society's concerns.*

(SBA 1998:2)

Parts of the industry have expressed concern over the extensive regulations. This concern was consigned by the NIAC when they ascertained that “Much of the Industry’s concern over SBA’s regulations have been due to misconceptions and second guessing the Authority’s intentions” (NIAC 1997:article 34).

In the NIAC-report for 97/98, the committee outlines three stages that the Industry is recommended to adopt: The first stage concerns the labeling of web-sites. Noting that the number of sites has been growing rapidly, the local industry is recommended to label their web-sites. In addition to the mentioned PICS-system, the NIAC encourages the Content and Service providers to use a classification system developed by the Recreational Software Advisory Council (RSAC).<sup>148</sup> The second stage deals with the industry code of practice. The NIAC wants a task force consisting of “key industry players” such as Singapore IT Federation, and the Internet Service Providers to study the code of practice in other countries, and come up with a code for Singapore that the Industry can implement. The third and final stage is called the “Industry Accreditation Body”. The recommendation is that the industry sets up an accreditation body to administer the Industry Code of Practice, and labeling of web sites. Finally, the NIAC calls upon the industry to take a more active role in self-regulation and “thereby help promote the healthy and responsible use of the Internet”.

### 5.6.2 Public Education – the “parenting approach”

The Singapore Broadcasting Authority has put a lot of effort into informing the public. This is done through exhibitions and organized discussions, and by working with schools, libraries and community organizations. One has also formed an interagency group with representatives from both the public and private sectors, to encourage the representation of Singapore in Cyberspace. What seems to be the

<sup>147</sup> <http://www.sba.gov.sg/wnew.html> (accessed April 24, 1999).

<sup>148</sup> According to Kruger (1998:15) the countries that have expressed the most interest in the RSAC system is Singapore, China, Norway, Canada, and Spain.

most important effort is what they call their “strives to educate parents on the tools that are available for them to better supervise their children’s use of the Internet” (SBA 1998:2). A “Tips For Parents” page on their web-site provides concerned parents with information on various precautions to take<sup>149</sup>. Among the tips we can find “Encourage your kids to share with you their online experiences”, “inculcate proper netiquette”, and “Use filter programs which are commercially available”.

## 5.7 Ways around censoring

One of the questions that often arises in relation to Internet regulations, is the effectiveness of it. In this sense it is useful to consider rival explanations and possibilities.

There are many lessons from all over the world that suggests that technical censorship does not work well. E.g: the ARMM<sup>150</sup> program deleting anonymous messages to Usenet groups, affected the working of other connected computers. Algorithms used to search for censored words are bypassed by encryption or counter-technology (Ang et al. 1996:76). Filters tend to slow down access and add to costs. Even if access to newsgroups is cut off to customers, technological literate individuals can find a publicly accessible news server that carries the censored newsgroup. One can also take out an account with an ISP in a different country or employ third parties to pass on contributions to, and postings on, newsgroups. In order to prevent this, the authorities can block access to a particular server, but then they also block a wide range of other services available on the banned server. This assumes that the authorities are fully aware of the content available on the web pages (Rodan 1998:73-74). It is also possible for political subgroups to create their own opposition environment on-line. The popularity of certain newsgroups in Singapore, combined with the governments desire to survey these groups, may indicate such a development.

Also, from the regulator’s side, there are potential problems. For instance: software can be used to block general access to specified material. Some use key words and filter out material generated by searches for them. However this may result in filtering out material that is not targeted (e.g. The ISP America Online’s filter process was unable to differentiate between pornographic material related to the word “breast” and discussions on breast cancer and breast feeding) (Rodan 1998:74).

The SBA has addressed the effectiveness of their implementations, stating that as the Internet evolves, the regulatory framework will evolve with it. They recognize that it is impossible to have full control of the traffic on the Internet, and that it is not their intention to try to do so (SBA March 3, 1996).

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<sup>149</sup> This site can be found at <http://www.sba.gov.sg/tips.html>

<sup>150</sup> Automated Retroactive Minimal Moderation

## 5.8 More communication technology – less communication?

This chapter has analyzed how the government in Singapore controls the Internet. If we are to view these regulations in a more global context, they seem to fall into two categories. On one hand you have “moral” regulations, like restrictions on pornographic content. This type of censorship can be found all over the world, also in the “liberal democracies of the West”, where freedom of expression and information has a strong position. The government in Singapore also denies *political* discussions, the same way they do in the traditional media. The fact that there have been reports of email and logfile surveillance, and scanning of servers, has a suitably chilling effect. Observers, both inside and outside Singapore, tend to see the regulations as a manifestation of an “Orwellian horror vision”.

If a general framework for regulation might emerge needs to be seen. So far there are too few experiences, and too few studies. Still, a suggestion can be made as to the general regulator roles, what substantive rules they are subjected to, and sanctions and mechanisms used.

**Table 3 – Possible Regulatory Framework**

General Regulator	Substantive Rules	Sanctions	Mechanism
The actor him/herself	Personal ethics/	Self-sanction	Self
Second party controllers	Contractual provisions	Various self-help mechanisms	PICS, RSACi, filter software
Hierarchically organized social forces	Social Norms	Social sanctions	Code of Conduct
Hierarchically organized non-governmental organizations	Organization rules	Organization sanctions	Industry selfregulation
Governments	Law	State enforcement, Coercive sanctions	Law

*Framework adapted from: Ang 1997 and Ellicson, (1991)*

Usually governments try to regulate the Internet by the mechanism of law. But legal frameworks tend to be confusing, because of the lack of national boundaries on the Internet. The effectiveness is also questionable. The Government in Singapore has taken a regulatory role that includes mechanisms like filter software, code of conduct, and self-regulation. Depending on the level of media freedom, other nations can apply different levels of regulation.

Singapore's regulations of the Internet are extensive. Whether or not they also are *effective* is difficult to measure in a policy study like this, but information from the SBA and the media in Singapore indicate that the regulations are indeed working to the satisfaction of the government. Even if there are technical ways around the filtering, it seems like most people in Singapore are discouraged from trying

to break the laws. The punishment is severe, and there seems to be a general acceptance for the content rules. In this respect, the Internet arena is no different than the arenas of politics or traditional media. The PAP government has impelled stability in such a way that coercion has become unnecessary. *Internet's great potential for surveillance will only add to the stability.*

From an outsider's point of view, it seems as the streamlining of the Internet, both in technical and political terms, has made it a tool for governmental information, not public discussions. The PAP's legitimization lies in the need to protect the nation against potentially harmful and disruptive situation. This is a cultural argument based on the notion that freedom of expression is not a fundamental right, but an individual right that must be subordinated for the greater good of the society. Many Western scholars have taken the instrumentalist view, where the cultural argument is seen as just an excuse for conduction of political control and repression, and maintain current power structures. If this is the case, the PAP maintain their power structure despite, and maybe also because of, the "democratization tool" Internet.

## 6 Singapore's regulation and beyond

A single case study like the one conducted here, raises questions about the extent to which the Singapore policies can be applied elsewhere, in a different national context. In what ways can Singapore become a role model for Internet regulations? In this respect, the descriptive parts of this study might be seen as the first stage in an international comparative study.

As a conclusion to this thesis, I will discuss ASEAN- and international organization's reaction to the Internet regulations implemented by SBA, and in which ways Singapore is likely to gain increased influence in the world society.

### 6.1 Regional and International Reactions

In the introduction, the vision of the Internet as a democratization tool was addressed. For many, the Internet is seen as a medium of chaos and uncontrollability, where unintended consequences lead to processes that run amok. Many governments in Asia have argued that the Internet is selling more pornography and entertainment than real "education" (Loo et al. 1998:130). The Asian countries differ in the extent of media freedom, but there are signs of development towards a more coherent strategy of dealing with the Internet.

In September 1996, SBA organized an ASEAN<sup>151</sup> Forum on the Internet (AFI). The objective of the forum was twofold: One – to facilitate ASEAN's exchange of information and knowledge on Internet issues, problems and expertise, and two – to identify possibilities for regional cooperation on Internet (SBA Sept. 2, 1996).<sup>152</sup> This resulted in an agreement where the member nations acknowledged the value of Internet as a communication and information resource. The ASEAN should "harness its potential to protect the ASEAN heritage and identity within the region as well as the rest of the world" (SBA 1997:36). They also agreed that regulations and laws were necessary, and that:

*...the trans-border nature of the Internet opens individual countries to external influences, hence the importance of safeguards against easy access to material which runs counter to our traditions and culture. ASEAN urges other nations, especially the West, to understand this concern.*

(SBA 1997:36)

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<sup>151</sup> Association of South East Asian Nations

<sup>152</sup> For a study on the Internet development in Asia, see Ang et al. 1996.

The meeting affirmed the nations' view that government regulations must play an important role in safeguarding national values (SBA Sept. 4, 1996). To help with this, one decided to meet regularly "to help each country formulate and fine-tune its regulatory approaches" (Reuters Sept. 4, 1996).<sup>153</sup>

But, Singapore's regulation has also resulted in international criticism. After the ASEAN meeting, several human rights organizations expressed concern over the outcome:

*...We are concerned that a number of delegates to the meeting reportedly expressed support for Singapore's recently established Internet Code of Practice (...) The regulations have already resulted in arbitrary censorship of at least one newsgroup message. They will surely induce a chill on on-line speech in Singapore, and, as evidenced by the ASEAN decision, they will affect online speech throughout the region.*

(HRW 1996-08-13)

Human Rights Watch also discussed ASEAN's concern for preserving cultural values and opposed censorship as a means of ensuring respect for cultural norms. One of the issues that have been subjected to discussion is the restraint on religious and political sites. The requirement for registration has been seen as a form of censorship, although the SBA have stated that by asking them to register they simply ask them to behave responsible because "anonymity breeds irresponsibility" (SBA June 11, 1996). Still, the Human Rights Watch addressed Singapore's regulations in a letter to Minister Yeo. Here, they point out that Singapore's example is likely to be followed by other countries and that

*...the Internet, which held such a promise as the world's first truly global medium, will be nothing more than a set of country-specific networks where local prejudices and fears are reinforced by technology (...) We are particularly concerned that restrictions have been placed on Singaporeans who wish to discuss religious and political ideas online. It is only through unrestricted discussions of such serious topics by all members of society, not matter how unpopular their views, that these subjects become less explosive. Forbidding discussions – in effect, treating its citizens like children – will, on the other hand, ensure that dangerous topics remain just that.*

(HRW Aug. 13, 1996)

In a joint advisory dated August 28 1996, thirteen organizations<sup>154</sup> called upon the Singapore government not to cut themselves off from the "new global online library", and indicate trust in the "ability of Singaporeans to choose what is right for Singapore and for themselves". The political dissident Chia (1996), has argued that much of the content on the Internet represents "private" individual expression, and that Singapore's regulations are a powerful suppressant on individual expression.

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<sup>153</sup> The protection of national cultural values against Western media influence is not a new debate. In 1980 the MacBride Commission urged for a strengthening of Third World independence in the field of information gathering and transmission and measures to defend national cultures against the formidable one-way flow of information and entertainment from Western capitalist nations. (The MacBride Commission was an International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems between the Western and Third World Countries, set up by UNESCO. The commission consisted of "fifteen wise men and one woman", among them media guru Marshall McLuhan (Watson 1993:106)). Critics such as Chomsky and Herman have likewise discussed how Western transnational media agencies set the public agenda on the global arena, and are used as tools in the manufacturing of consent and public ideology (Loo et al. 1998:132).

<sup>154</sup> The following organizations have signed the advisory: Electronic Frontiers Italy, American Civil Liberties Union, Center for Democracy and Technology, Electronic Frontiers France, EFF- Austin, Electronic Frontiers Australia, Electronic Frontier Canada, Elektronisk Forpost Norge, Electronic Frontier Foundation, Electronic Privacy Information Center, Fronteras Electronicas Espana, HotWired, Voters Telecommunication Watch.

On the other side, the SBA emphasize that there is no conflict between SBA's regulation, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Quite the contrary: they are supportive of freedom of expression and the individual's right to privacy (SBA Nov 27, 1997). In Minister Yeo's words: "There is no censorship. So the People Action Party has a political web site, the National Solidarity Party has a web site"(BBC Sept. 15, 1996).

The Advisory Committee voiced concern over the international criticism in their report. It was made clear that "all those who support Singapore's role as an international Internet Hub" should work to erase the negative aspects on Singapore's international image (article 28).

## 6.2 Singapore as a role model: Three possible ways

There is today no global control agency for the Internet. A wish for a regulatory body and an international "code of conduct" has been expressed in the United Nations, but so far with no result. One of the reasons is that several member countries (like Syria and Iran) have emphasized that information should not be used to undermine other people's faith and culture (UN Press Release PI/949:3). At the same time, one can register the merger of regulatory measures on national and organizational levels, within the traditional borders of the national state and international organizations (see e.g. HRW 1996<sup>a</sup>; Staksrud 1997).

The development indicates a wish for general applicable solutions to regulate Internet content in non-liberal states. On this background, three ways in which Singapore can become a powerful role model comes to mind.<sup>155</sup>

### 6.2.1 Fight against "cybercolonialism"

Loo et al. (1998) discusses how Asian governments are at risk of contributing to "Cybercolonialism" by regarding themselves as victims on the captive end of global information flow. The regulation implemented by the Singapore leaders takes an *active* role, using cyberspace for diversity and cultural discourse, in the sense of providing an alternative to the Western dominance. The Intelligent Island image has been built without compromising the "shared values". The PAP leaders discloses to other governments how the public does not have to be exposed to information that undermines cultural sovereignty. In this sense control of Internet content is seen to be a form of "liberalization" from "neo-colonial" cultural products and ideas.

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<sup>155</sup> An emphasize must be placed on the distinctive features of Singapore. Not only do they have a living standard uncommon in non-liberal states, they also have a long history of political stability. The pragmatic style of PAP manifests itself in an ability to "get things done", making it attractive to foreign investors. Also, their geographical features are special. Located on a relatively small island, strategically placed in South East Asia, it is a natural arena for commerce, also within ICT. The geography also diminishes many problems concerning widespread wiring and telecommunications access for the general population. Other states does not have these advantages. Mansell (1998:25) presents statistics on how convergence and "catch-up" in telecommunications will take a decade for e.g. European developing countries and West Asia. In Eastern Europe, China, South America, convergence will take a generation (10-15 years). Worst off is Northern African states and developing Oceania (30 years) and Sub-Saharan Africa and Central Asia, where convergence is out of sight (50 – 100 years).

Singapore has also given other nations ideas on how to focus on the production and dissemination of their own cultural and political products online. In other words: The new medium turns out to be a political tool in itself. In Deputy PM Lee Hsien Loong's words: "Far from being afraid of the Internet we are using it to put our point of view across...and hold our own in cyberspace" (quoted in Asiaweek Oct. 11, 1996).

Idid (1996: 155-156) have postulated that the advent of the Internet will reduce somewhat the question of the freedom of the press in Asia, because everyone will be affected by the development now taking place on the information superhighway. The development of Internet can become the "savior" of freedom of expression. Singapore's regulatory instruments may affect freedom of expression in a negative way, keeping already established power structures in place.

### *6.2.2 Technical Solutions and Software production*

The technological development and measures can enable other ASEAN nations to regulate Internet, by following the example set forth by Singapore's authority. To influence other nations in this area is a formulated goal for the Singaporeans, the NIAC annual report from 96/97 states: "Singapore should aim to become an 'influence hub' in the region"(article 27).

One of the main areas in which Singapore can contribute, is through software production and export. In 1990 Singapore exported software worth of US\$ 89 million, and had a growth rate of 43 percent (Mansell 1998:138). The strong encouragement towards domestic industry to develop regulation tools indicates further growth.

There is evidence of other ASEAN nations starting to filter content "the Singapore way". Especially interesting is China, who's regulatory attempt has received world wide attention. Leaders in China have said that they want to "emulate Singapore", and have sent representatives to the island to learn (Rodan 1998:87; Fortune Aug. 4, 1997). September 14, 1996, Economist reported that Chinese users had been blocked out of over 100 sites. These include American Newspapers, Tibetan exiles, the Taiwanese government, Playboy and Economist itself.

Also other ASEAN nations have entered the regulatory arena. In 1998 the Malaysian government established a special patrol whose objective is to supervise web sites and newsgroups that comment on the arrest of former Deputy Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamend. The patrol is to search for information and messages that can influence national security as it is defined in the Internal Security Act. Four people (three computer specialists and one bank chief) were reported arrested, accused of spreading rumors on the net (Nettavisen Oct. 7, 1998). In Vietnam the government requires ISPs and users to register with the authorities, and ISPs are obliged to allow monitoring of Internet traffic by the government. Those who send or receive illegal data are held liable (Mansell 1998:221). At the same time the communication curriculum in Asia is itself becoming more globalized. In the 1990s many Asian governments have tried to place communication in a broader, global context (Hukill 1994:200).

### 6.2.3 *Economic development vs. Cultural values*

The third way Singapore can become a role model is through economic growth. Singapore has for the last decade been touted as an alternative model of economic development, and the government sees itself as highly modern and successful. The widespread application of information and communication technology was a strategy towards a “higher value-added production” economy, a strategy that have made Singapore the worlds most competitive economy in the world (SEDB 1998).

Hukill (1994:200) points out that the restrictive control to which systems and services of communication technologies are often reduced to in many Asian countries, is partly due to the implementation of more negatively-oriented and control minded policies. The leadership is afraid of the rapidly changing communication scene. They feel a need to control the communication in order not to be overrun culturally, socially and politically. Negative control as a reaction to a communication and information influx is, according to Hukill, eventually self-defeating economically. By solving the dilemma between economic growth and preservation of cultural values in relation to new information technologies, Singapore stand as role model also in this respect.

## 6.3 Singapore as a role model for Singapore

Singapore might stand as a role model for other nations in many respects, but in the end their policy have been developed to fit the needs of Singapore. Kausikan (1997:26-28) argues that every country is characterized by a unique set of circumstances. Therefore every country must find its own specific solutions to the problems of governance. He claims that Singapore does not hold itself up as a model for anyone, and thus “each nation must find its own best social and political arrangements by means of a pragmatic and continuous process of experimentation”. There cannot be a Singapore model that is applicable anywhere but in Singapore. In accordance with the pragmatic style of the PAP government, the appropriate test of Singapore’s Internet regulation is therefore whether it works for Singapore, and serves the interests of Singaporeans.

As the previous chapters have shown, the single-most significant feature of political control in Singapore involves the obstruction of organizational bases for the political opposition and others with critical views of the PAP. When concluding about effects of the political control of the Internet, it is this criterion, rather than the possibilities of individual expressions alone, one must address (Rodan 1998:76). And censorship was never intended to be 100 percent effective; it was intended as a political statement. The Internet in Singapore is by large dominated by the government, through legislation, content, control, surveillance, and public education. Against liberal expectations of the Internet as a force for the erosion of authoritarian states, this study agrees with Rodan (1998:89) in suggesting a different proposition; that the technology might also be used for consolidating a climate of fear and intimidation. It can also disseminate propaganda and information in favor of the authorities. This suggests that future research on Internet developments, regulatory or otherwise, must be based in

cultural and political variables, not on technical know-how, and telecommunication infrastructure. Information on the Internet does not flow in a vacuum, but in a political space that is already “occupied”.

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