

**Australian Journal of Emerging Technologies and Society**

Vol. 5, No. 2, 2007, pp: 103-118

## **Transforming Media Markets: The Cases of Malaysia and Singapore**

Andrew T. Kenyon, Centre for Media and Communications Law, The University of Melbourne, Australia

Tim Marjoribanks, School of Political Science, Criminology and Sociology, The University of Melbourne, Australia

---

### **Abstract**

This paper examines contemporary transformations in media markets in Malaysia and Singapore. In both countries, dominant models of 'old' media-government relations are being contested by the emergence of 'new' online and independent media. Our analysis is grounded in new institutional approaches towards the study of news media and political communication. We argue that while legislation and law, in particular defamation law, and informal and formal organisational relations influence the possibility of public debate through the media, internet-based media are emerging as a potentially critical new voice in journalism in both countries. At the same time, analyses of these potentials need to avoid technological determinism. Rather, there is a need to examine the social, political and economic contexts, and the media markets, in which the technologies are emerging.

**Keywords:** Media markets; defamation law; new media; Malaysia; Singapore

## Introduction

This paper examines contemporary transformations in media markets in Malaysia and Singapore. Within these countries, the government-media relations that constitute the foundations of media markets have traditionally centred on issues of media responsibility, social cohesion and nation-building, for example, under 'development' and 'Asian values' models of the media (Heng 2002). With political, economic, legal and social changes emerging alongside the shift to an 'information age', these dominant models are being contested. In both Malaysia and Singapore, governments continue to exert significant forms of control within media markets, including around media ownership, production and content. The emergence of online and independent media, able to make use of digital communications technologies, however, appears to be transforming existing media markets and is creating the potential for more broadly-based public debate.

This paper explores the contested parameters of such transformations. It does this through a theoretically informed comparative case study analysis of media markets in the two countries. It considers relations between governments and 'old' media, including newspapers and broadcast television, and examines the growth of 'new' internet-based media in a context of emergent digital communications and civil societies. The analysis is grounded in new institutional approaches towards the study of news media and political communication (Benson 2004a; 2004b). Such approaches seek to avoid the conception that technologies determine news media practices or that media organisations operate independently of their contexts. Rather, new institutional approaches require an analysis that is 'relational', that is, one which examines the relations of media organisations with other key actors in their organisational field. Here, an organisational field is defined as 'the interorganizational, professional, social and indeed cultural space within which journalists situate or orient their action and interaction' (Benson 2004b: 311).

Key actors in the media market organisational field include media, government and political organisations. Technologies and the law are significant elements in the media field that both constrain and enable the range of actions available to organisations. In other words, the key insight of the new institutional approach is that organisations are embedded in sets of relations in institutional environments, or 'the socially constructed normative worlds in which organizations exist' (Orru, Biggart & Hamilton 1991: 361). How these environments unfold is related to the particular relations that constitute those contexts, and requires analysis to proceed on a case-by-case basis (Marjoribanks 2000). The importance of the new institutional approach for analysis of media markets is that it emphasises the embeddedness of organisational relations in specific social, political, legal and economic environments. In so doing, it provides a framework for analysing both continuities and transformation processes in media markets. This approach also suggests the significance of undertaking comparative research, as an important means of exploring and understanding commonalities and variations in the relations that constitute media markets (Benson 2004a; 2004b).

This analytic framework points to the relevance of debates around the transformation of social, political and economic relations in the context of newly emerging information and communication technologies. Early debates around the emergence of new information and communication technologies, including new media technologies, tended to be polarised between utopian perspectives which considered the technologies to be the foundation for unlimited political freedoms, and dystopian views, which considered technologies to be the basis for ever increasing forms of surveillance and political control (Flew 2005a). As recent contributions to these debates suggest (Chalaby 2000; Keane 1999), emerging social and

political practices around new media tend to fall somewhere between these two positions. In particular, and in accordance with the new institutional approach adopted in this paper, they suggest that understandings of emerging technologies need to be located within a grounded analysis of pre-existing and emergent political, legal, economic and social relations and practices.

At the macro level, Castells's model of the network society provides a significant understanding of these relations and practices. Castells argues that '[n]etworks constitute the new social morphology of our societies, and the diffusion of networking logic substantially modifies the operations and outcomes in processes of production, experience, power and culture' (Castells 1996: 469, quoted in Flew, 2005a: 16). He argues that new information and communication technologies are critical to the emergence of these networks, and that as a result of this, control of the production and dissemination of information and knowledge is a key source of power in contemporary societies. The shift to networked forms of organisation has clear implications for media markets, as control of media production processes becomes increasingly important economically, as well as politically and culturally, in global, regional and local markets. As Castells has further argued, in network societies, political and media practices become virtually inseparable, making ongoing analysis of their organisational relations vital (Castells 1996).

A critical feature of the network society analysis relates to processes of media convergence, which can be understood as 'the bringing together of the computing, telecommunications, and media and information sectors' (Flew 2005a: 10). Convergence materialises through the coming together of multiple media forms in one platform, increasingly interconnected industry structures, and the integration of media products and services (Flew 2005a). While processes of convergence offer significant possibilities for societal transformation, and for changes in media markets more specifically, such transformations do not operate independently of the societal contexts from which they emerge, but are deeply embedded and implicated within them. As such, processes of convergence represent the exercise of political and economic power that can result in the creation of new forms of inequality, just as they may provide a basis for new forms of liberation (Mosco 1999). Analysis of convergence also points to the significance of processes of remediation, whereby new media forms simultaneously borrow from and seek to go beyond earlier forms of media (Bolter & Grusin 2000). Processes of convergence and of remediation are critical in the context of the current paper, in particular to the extent that they reveal that '[n]o medium today...seems to do its cultural work in isolation from other media, any more than it works in isolation from other social and economic forces' (Bolter & Grusin 2000: 15).

Developing these points, in the context of the network society and convergence, John Keane has argued that even as communication systems move from images of scarcity to images of 'communicative abundance', so 'communicative abundance contains new contradictions and produces public conflicts' (Keane 1999: 168). Jean Chalaby (2000) has shown, for example, that while new media can be mobilised in political struggles for new forms of freedom, in so doing it often provokes forms of resistance from political elites concerned that their power bases are being threatened. As Chalaby (2000) goes on to note, elite resistance can include legal, administrative, violent, economic and technological action. Such arguments about the network society, convergence and remediation suggest that to understand relationships between media markets and emerging media technologies, there is value in critically examining the institutional contexts in which such technologies emerge.

This paper investigates the contested relations of 'old' media and government and the emergent relations associated with 'new' media. It suggests there is space, even if it exists only in relative and somewhat uncertain terms, for greater public speech in the changing media environment. In this way, the paper also argues that while digital media forms offer new opportunities for civil society in both Singapore and Malaysia, they do not do so independent of old media, but are simultaneously enabled and constrained by their emergence in specific institutional contexts.

## **'Old' Media and Government: Contested Relations**

A comparative analysis of emerging trends in media markets in Singapore and Malaysia is significant for a number of reasons. In particular, while Malaysia and Singapore have their own distinctive political, economic, legal and social histories, there are also important features that they share in common. Both states were British colonies, with Malaysia becoming independent in 1957 and Singapore in 1965. In recent decades, under the rule of nationalist parties, both nations have experienced significant periods of economic growth and political stability. The post-colonial era in these countries is notable both for being grounded in models of developmental capitalism and for mobilising 'Asian values' as a key but contested discourse that highlights 'values that relate to cultural good, civic life, regional community and modernisation' (Yue 2006: 21). At the level of political leadership in both countries, arguments about values have been used to challenge what are seen as inappropriate dimensions of democracy and of individualism as practiced in western societies, with significant implications for media regulation in the post-independence context (Thompson 2001). More recently, the 1997 Asian financial crisis and processes of globalisation, along with the emergence of digital information and communication technologies, have challenged existing institutional relations. The political leadership in both countries has sought to promote themselves as at the leading edge of innovation, in particular through a focus on creative industries as a form of economic, political and social development (Chua 1999; Leo & Lee 2004). By undertaking a comparative case study analysis, we can provide insights into the institutional relations that influence the contested processes of transformations in media markets in the two countries.

### **Malaysia**

While social, political and economic transformations are occurring in Malaysia, government-media relations remain closely connected, and in many instances are challenging for media independence and for public debate. Mainstream Malaysian newspapers and television broadcasters have an ongoing history of extremely close links with the governing parties. In print media, major newspapers include three English language dailies, two Malay-language dailies, five Chinese-language dailies, and two Tamil-language dailies. In broadcast media, *Radio Television Malaysia* is the public service broadcaster which provides two free-to-air television channels. In addition, there are four privately owned free-to-air television channels, and a growing number of private subscription-based channels. It is also possible to identify a number of media groups in Malaysia that control most of this mainstream media. These groups include Media Prima Berhad, Star Publications (Malaysia) Berhad, Utusan Group (Malaysia) Berhad, Nanyang Press Holdings Berhad, Sin Chew Media Corporation Berhad, KTS Group, Penerbitan Sahabat (M) SDN Bhd, and Tamil Nesan. While there are numerous media organisations in Malaysia, once their controlling interests are identified, it becomes evident that media ownership is highly concentrated, with the government being a major stakeholder. Indeed, Malaysian news media are largely owned or indirectly controlled by the 14 political parties which constitute the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN: National Front), which

has been elected to office in every election since independence (Bolongaita 2004; Means 1996).

Beyond issues of ownership, the government has sought other ways to engage with the media. A range of legal measures have stifled 'old' media in Malaysia, linked to the history of British colonialism, in which the British colonial administration used legal measures such as licensing and censorship to contain media (Anuar 2000; Khattab 2004). These legal measures include the *Official Secrets Act 1972* which 'prevents journalists from accessing information in any official document labelled as secret', the *Internal Security Act 1960* which allows detention without trial, and the *Broadcasting Act 1988* that gives the Minister of Information significant control over television programming and broadcasting licences (Brown 2005; Khattab 2004). The *Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984* (PPPA) regulates the use of printing presses, the printing, production, reproduction and distribution of publications, and the importation of publications from abroad. The PPPA imposes a number of restraints in relation to these activities, and prescribes strong penalties for their breach, including jail sentences. The PPPA gives 'the home minister "absolute discretion" in awarding and revoking permits, and to disallow any judicial review of the process' (Brown 2005: 41). According to Anuar (2000: 186), such use of the law has long-term effects on journalistic practice.

In the years post-independence, 'the importance of mass media, particularly radio and newspapers, gained prominence given the government's preference that they should be useful tools of national development' (Anuar 2000: 183). Anuar argues, however, that mainstream journalism in Malaysia has gradually been transformed. While a model of 'development journalism', defined as journalism contributing to national development by reporting both government successes and failures, was adopted in post-independence Malaysia, mainstream media now focuses primarily on positive stories to the benefit of the political elite (Anuar 2000: 184). This outcome appears to be related, in part, to newsroom culture in Malaysia, where close links between political leaders, editors and publishers make it difficult for journalists to investigate political leaders (Anuar 2005; George 2006).

In addition to the organisations and professionals directly involved in news production, including media organisations, government and journalists, a range of other organisations are increasingly involved in the Malaysian media market, and are contesting the boundaries of that market. Critical among these are a range of civil society organisations, concerned with opening up discussions around media freedoms. For example, Aliran was founded in 1977 as Malaysia's first human rights group, and first multi-ethnic social justice movement. While it remains non-partisan, it creates relationships with other social justice movements, such as Charter 2000, the Malaysian citizen's media charter for an independent news media. Aliran publishes its own monthly magazine, and provides alternative news content for major media, providing a counter point to official government news sources. Charter 2000 itself was created through the actions of a group of Malaysian individuals and organisations who sought to raise public awareness concerning Malaysian media. It established a set of demands to realise media freedoms in Malaysia, including a proposed *Freedom of Information Act*, repealing various legislation considered to be too restrictive of media, establishing an independent Media Council, legislating to ensure accountable, independent publicly owned media, and media reform to promote more professional and ethical standards (Charter 2000). The significance of such organisations, and of the networks between them, is their potential to challenge long established relations that dominate the media market. As we explore below, this potential is intimately connected to the possibilities of emergent technologies.

There is also an important foreign media presence in Malaysia, which faces significant restrictions, in particular when covering stories on Malaysia itself. In addition to concerns about content shown on foreign media, the Malaysian government imposes controls on foreign journalists and publications, primarily through the PPPA (Means 1996; Rodan 2004). The government has also legislated to restrict the reach of satellite broadcasting from outside the country, in particular by limiting the sizes of satellite dishes allowed, thereby 'effectively preventing reception from outside the country' (Brown 2005: 42).

In summary, in Malaysia's 'fettered democracy' (Netto 2002), mainstream media coverage of government policies is usually uncritical, while political opponents face limited reporting, particularly over calls for political reform. Print media entrants with more independent coverage have faced strong commercial pressures from established rivals that have significant links with government (Reporters sans Frontières (RSF) 2004). Within broadcasting, selective privatisation has not increased diversity and it remains tightly controlled. While it is evident that there are strong limitations on media in Malaysia, it is also important to recognise that dynamic but contested elements have emerged more recently (Brown 2005; George 2006). Tensions are revealed as the dominant pre-existing relations that constitute the organisational field of the Malaysian media market—and which are embedded in a post-independence development logic—are confronted by the possibilities for change as civil society organisations increasingly mobilise new media technologies in their strategies. Before analysing these trends, however, we examine the relations between 'old' media and government in Singapore.

## **Singapore**

While Singaporean politics is dominated by the governing People's Action Party (PAP), the country is undergoing a complex, if partial, transition towards greater democratisation (George 2002). Singapore appears well served by a large number of newspapers and broadcast television channels: there are at least 21 local newspapers, including titles such as the *Straits Times* (English), *Berita Harian* (Malay), *Lianhe Zaobao* (Chinese), and *Tamil Murasu* (Tamil). In addition, there are ten broadcast television channels. However, the government exercises far-reaching control of the media (Birch & Phillips 2003). Following a series of mergers and closures from the 1980s onwards, all major newspapers in Singapore are owned by Media Corporation of Singapore (MediaCorp), an organisation owned by the government investment company, and by Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), which has close government ties. The same applies to broadcasting, although cable television provides some foreign news channels. Media content tends to be government-focused with little attention given to political opponents (Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) 2000).

In 2000, the media market underwent slight deregulation in an attempt to introduce limited forms of competition. For example, SPH was granted a licence for two television stations and set up SPH Media Works, and MediaCorp Press Pty Ltd was granted a licence for a newspaper to compete with SPH and began publishing the free afternoon tabloid *Today*. However, more recent developments suggest a shift back towards an enforced media monopoly (Edge 2004; Lee & Willnat 2006). For example, the introduction of controlled competition resulted in financial losses for both SPH and MediaCorp, and SPH signed an agreement with MediaCorp to merge their TV and free newspaper operations in an attempt to avoid losses and increase shareholder value.

Government influence over media appears to be related to three critical dimensions, namely, legal regulation, the close relationship between the government, media ownership and

management, and the threat of legal action. A striking feature of the government's approach is that the media is considered to be an aid to government in the process of nation-building. Rather than freedom of the press from government, the approach in Singapore is 'freedom of government from the press' (Lee 1987). The expectation is for the media to conform to an agenda determined by government, meaning much of the mainstream media uncritically informs the public of government messages (Lee 2005).

Davies (1999: 79) argues the government's desire to control the media can be traced to 1959, when the PAP won the Singapore elections after a campaign in which it spent considerable energy criticising the media—particularly the *Straits Times*—for maligning their party. The government justifies its approach to the media as being a product of the historical transition from British rule to independence, and has repeatedly demonstrated its willingness to restrict media that it considers has crossed the line in reporting on 'sensitive' issues (Davies 1999). This approach to the media has resulted in significant political consequences, including 'creat[ing] a culture of self-censorship among media practitioners who, in their role as gatekeepers of information to the public, manage and control the coverage opposition parties receive' (Lee & Willnat 2006: 2-3).

There is extensive legislation regulating the media in Singapore, including the *Newspaper and Printing Presses Act 2002 Rev* (NPPA), a range of other media-related legislation, common law and internal security legislation. Such legislation includes the *Undesirable Publications Act 1998 Rev*, the *Societies Act 1985 Rev*, and the *Sedition Act 1985 Rev*. Crucially, the government has been prepared to use the law to challenge the media. Government use of legislation such as the *Official Secrets Act 1985 Rev* to restrict information flows and the *Internal Security Act 1985 Rev* to detain critics has combined to restrict media speech. The threat of both civil and criminal defamation litigation appears to be a major cause of concern for journalists and commentators in Singapore, raising the possibility of self-censorship through a chilling effect. The term 'chilling effect' is used in legal and media sociology literature to capture the process through which media does not publish stories about certain organisations or individuals for fear of being sued, resulting in damage to the quality of public debate about political and public interest issues (Dent & Kenyon 2004; Kenyon 2006).

As in Malaysia, it is not only through overt use of legislation that the government seeks to influence media. In the context of print media, control of the press is based crucially on processes of 'political co-optation' and 'auto-regulation' (Lee & Willnat 2006: 9). Political co-optation 'aims to win over formidable and outspoken critics by roping them into the "inner circle" of political management', while auto-regulation 'seeks to regulate and police criticisms by ensuring that they are articulated via government mediated channels or are preemptively quashed even before they are raised' (Lee & Willnat 2006: 9).

Moving from domestic to foreign media, there is substantial access to foreign media in Singapore, including Dow Jones and Reuters. Nevertheless, foreign media outlets and foreign journalists are closely regulated in Singapore. All foreign news publications which report political matters in the region must register with the Singapore government and are required to lodge a bond. The government may and does limit the circulation of foreign print publications, while foreign broadcasters may be 'gazetted' (or restricted) if they comment on domestic matters. In addition, foreign publications critical of the Singapore government are often threatened with defamation suits (Chee 2001).

In turning to civil society organisations in Singapore, it is notable that 'Malaysia has an appreciably broader political society and thicker civil society than Singapore' (George 2005: 912). There are no equivalents to Aliran in Singapore, while prior to the emergence of the

internet, there were almost no independent political publications. As a result, the pre-internet media market in Singapore was influenced by civil society organisations to a much lesser extent than in Malaysia (George 2005).

Despite these institutional and organisational restrictions on the independence of the media:

The fact that there are real limits to press freedom does not negate the fact that there is also real space. How journalists make use of this available space becomes an especially interesting question as society, government and the media itself undergo important transformations (George 2002: 178).

Central to these transformations, in both Singapore and Malaysia, is the emergence of digital media technologies, and it is to new media that we now turn.

### **'New' Media and Government: Emergent Relations**

National governments in both Malaysia and Singapore have been active in seeking to position their nations at the forefront of economic and societal transformations associated with the emergence of digital media technologies. They have done this through explicit cultural and media policy measures, grounded in the language of new economy and creative industries, clearly connecting with debates around convergence and the emergence of a network society. In this context, creative industries strategies have the self-proclaimed goal of 'merg[ing] arts, technology and business as a way of ensuring a nation's competitiveness within an integrated global economy' (Yue 2006: 17-18). Indeed, while governments around the world frame creative industries and cultural policy agendas in terms of 'cultural citizenship' aimed at promoting social inclusion, this strategy is centrally linked to 'commodity production and wealth creation by commercial means' (Flew 2005b: 244). Processes of convergence and of remediation thereby become central to policy making. As we examine the emergence of new media in both Malaysia and Singapore, it is critical to note that it is occurring in an institutional context within which governments consider digital technologies and media as key drivers for economic growth. At the same time, these emerging trends have the potential to conflict with policy concerns emerging out of the 'old' media context, in particular, the concern to restrict political debate and political intervention in the name of promoting economic growth and post-independence nationalism.

#### **Malaysia**

Internet-based news media are challenging earlier understandings of media roles, and are at the cutting edge of journalism in many parts of Asia. In Malaysia, independent internet-news media have grown substantially, and offer a space for relatively open public discussions. An important example is the subscription based daily on-line newspaper, *Malaysiakini*, which reports receiving 50,000 visits daily (and three million page views monthly), and is arguably Malaysia's only independent news organisation. Such sites became popular as partisan reporting of the reform movement alienated people from traditional media forms. According to Anuar, it is through such 'websites that many Malaysians found avenues to articulate their views and grievances that would normally not see the light of day in the mainstream media' (Anuar 2000: 188). Similarly, organisations such as Aliran run their own websites, and provide alternative news content for organisations like *Malaysiakini* (George 2005). At the same time, it is important to recognise the potential impact of a 'digital divide', with Khattab noting that access to the subscription-based *Malaysiakini*, for example, 'seems confined to the young, educated, urban Malaysians' (Khattab 2004: 171).

The emergence of digital media is linked to the policy strategy of the government to present Malaysia as a location for high-tech investment. As George has noted, in relation to both Malaysia and Singapore:

[t]he internet's introduction in the mid-1990s represented a fundamental discontinuity in [the] decades-old approach to media management...The internet's perceived economic value dominated the authorities' policy formulation, subordinating the goal of political control that had historically shaped media policy (George 2005: 907).

In Malaysia, the Multimedia Super Corridor project (MSC), linked to the broader *Vision 2020* and the goal of creating an Asian Silicon Valley in Malaysia, included a *Multimedia Bill of Guarantees* with a pledge not to censor the internet (Brown 2005: 46). In addition, the government's goal of promoting internet development as a crucial component of economic and social development, has meant that print licensing provisions do not apply to the internet, and sections of the *Communications and Multimedia Act 1998* requiring some service providers to obtain licences are not being enforced. These processes are part of a broader development strategy on the part of the Malaysian government, the result of which has been that 'the Malaysian case is one of the most systemic and substantive socio-economic and cultural transformations via ICTs in any country' (Wong 2003: 290). Indeed, the MSC was identified by then Prime Minister Mahathir as 'a pilot project for harmonising our entire country with the global forces shaping the Information Age' (Quoted in Wong 2003: 295). As Wong observes, '[c]learly, the MSC is more than a technical project-it is a social transformation project and is deeply implicated in discourses of post-industrial high tech futures' (Wong 2003: 295).

While seeking to attract investors to Malaysia through the promise of access to a technologically advanced and open society, pledges such as those included in the *Bill of Guarantees*, and the apparent protection of freedom of expression offered by the *Communications and Multimedia Act 1998* do not provide complete protection from regulation. In particular, the government has issued frequent reminders about the possibilities of applying existing laws to seditious or defamatory information online (George 2005). In 2003, for example, authorities confiscated *Malaysiakini's* computers in the course of investigations around its publication of a reportedly seditious letter, while people associated with various websites and use of email have been detained without trial. In addition, government ministers at times have warned that what is illegal in print form is illegal online, and a minister in the Prime Minister's Department has been quoted to the effect that: 'It goes without saying that even the *Sedition Act* could be applied' (Anuar 2000: 189). Such instances do not only have an impact on the specific case, but also send a strong message to other media organisations (Brown 2005; Chalaby 2000).

Although such threats exist, the emergence of independent media has been supported by reform initiatives from journalists and civil society groups (Rodan 2004: 154). Indeed, the emergence and development of the reformasi movement from 1998 onwards became crucially linked with online media. In part, this is because the internet has escaped direct regulation as a result of deliberate government policy, and it also created a means for cooperation to develop among civil society organisations (Brown 2005).

While there is potential for online media to 'challenge' mainstream media, most online news sources are not heavily resourced. Even *Malaysiakini* has experienced difficulties in sustaining financial support, for example through advertising, and in 2002 it introduced subscription rates (Brown 2005: 47). RadiqRadio, another internet service, attempted an innovative solution to the financial question, without using subscriptions, by also operating as

a radio station based in the Indonesian island of Sumatra to avoid the need to get a Malaysian broadcast licence. As reported by Brown, however, RadiqRadio 'appears to have failed to sustain itself and its website has gone offline' (Brown 2005: 48). One result of resource challenges is that while some online media seek to 'inform' the public, much online media focuses on critically engaging with news as reported by mainstream media, rather than being in a position to develop 'new' news content.

Although issues around resources and audience levels are significant, the wider context remains important:

What in fact matters is not the overall level or average level of internet use in any quantifiable sense, but the qualitative success with which agents of change exploit specific aspects of the technology within a broader offline strategy (George 2005: 916).

While online media in Malaysia faces profound challenges, it is playing a critical role, both in transforming the media market and in broader processes of contested political change in Malaysia.

### **Singapore**

The Singapore government is keen to promote Singapore as a high technology hub, providing potential investors with access to the whole of Asia (Yue 2006). Documents such as the 2002 *Creative Economy Cultural Development Strategy* lay at the foundation of an explicit government agenda to transform its cultural industry into a creative economy, while the 2003 government report *Changing Mindsets, Deepening Relationships* is a statement of intent to remake Singapore as a global media city (Leo and Lee 2004; Yue 2006). A key feature underlying such strategies is further economic development, which has been supported by significant investment of government resources (Rodan 2003). In the early 2000s, the Singapore government indicated that the creative industries, including media, could contribute up to 6 per cent of GDP by 2012, an increase from between 2.8 and 3.2 per cent in 2000 (Leo & Lee 2004). This strategy has had flow on effects for people living in Singapore, with the government providing every household in Singapore with an internet address. As Yue notes, the rate of domestic internet connection in Singapore 'outstrip[s] the United States and Japan. This policy has earned Singapore the status of the world's first digital economy' (Yue 2006: 20). Lee and Willnat argue that:

[t]oday, with 99% of households and businesses connected to a nationwide broadband network and more than 66% of the population computer-literate, Singaporeans are considered more tech-savvy than Americans, Britons or Australians' (Lee & Willnat 2006: 13).

At the same time, the Singapore government requires that ISPs register with the Media Development Authority. In 2003, for example, there were three licensed internet access providers in Singapore, Pacific Internet, SingNet, and StarHub Internet, and all were government-controlled (Lee 2003).

Some mainstream media publishes independent commentaries on domestic issues, but greater public debate is found online (RSF 2004). The digital arena appears to be more significant than the 'managed' space for speech at the physical 'Speakers' Corner', although internet sites risk difficulties with defamation and related laws. Internet discussion sites such as Sintercom (Singapore Internet Community), supported by developing civil society groups (Bolongaita 2004), face tremendous pressure from government. Sintercom itself, established in 1994, was able to evade internet regulation requirements by describing itself as a 'civic

organisation' rather than a political one, but in 2001 it shut down in the face of increasing pressure to register. While a new Sintercom site was established in 2002, it was conducted through a server external to Singapore and the editor remained anonymous (Rodan 2003). Other sites, including TalkingCock, have sought to avoid registration by similar strategies, arguing they are purely satirical humour sites, and not political sites.

In addition, a number of political parties have sought to use the internet to communicate with the public. The opposition National Solidarity Party launched a website in 1995, provoking a response from the PAP which launched a 'Young PAP website' (Lee & Willnat 2006: 13). Mainstream media has also moved quickly online, with both SPH and MediaCorp, through the AsiaOne and Channel NewsAsia web portals, commanding high audiences (Lee 2005). This illustrates how, in discussions of online media, it is vital to recognise that not all websites are oppositional, and indeed many of the most popular sites clearly represent the agenda of the government.

Further regulatory responses have come from the government, for example, seeking to restrict online publication of 'prohibited material', defined as objectionable on broad public interest and public morality grounds (Lee & Willnat 2006: 14). The government has also passed a range of measures aimed at online media, including requiring 'content providers with "political messages" or "political advertising" to register with the Internet regulator, the Media Development Authority' (Lee & Willnat 2006: 15). Further, 'the government has also "authorized" the Singapore police and other state agencies to conduct regular checks on ISP accounts of public users' (Lee & Willnat 2006: 16; see also Rodan 2003). As Rodan (2003) argues, government internet regulation is related to at least two issues. First, 'the worry that the internet might increase the capacity for competition with the ruling party by enabling its critics to get around the dominance of the government-controlled domestic media'. Second, 'the PAP was worried about the potential of the Internet to foster a genuine civil society by challenging the officially enforced compartmentalization of political engagement and by facilitating collective political action' (Rodan 2003: 515).

In summary, the Singaporean government has an equivocal approach to the internet (Lee 2005). It considers the internet an important means of technological development, but it has also acted swiftly against what it perceives to be unfavourable online media coverage. Analysts have suggested that results in forms of self-censorship online, based on fear of government reprisal (Lee 2005). While the Singaporean government seeks more explicitly to regulate online media, Lee argues that, 'it is only by going on-line that one may be able to creatively and critically discuss...the mediated politics of journalism and civil society in Singapore' (Lee 2005: 3). Websites located both within and outside Singapore provide significant critical news reports and investigations on Singapore (Rodan 2003: 517). The result is at least the potential to create important linkages between digital technologies, agents of change, and broader offline strategies.

## **Conclusions: Media and Public Debate**

The cases of Malaysia and Singapore reveal that a broad range of factors exist that influence both the relationship between the media and government, as they come together to form media markets, and the possibilities for media to operate as a site of public debate. While legislation and other forms of law regulate media speech, there are significant formal and informal relationships and practices that influence the possibility of mediated public debate. Particularly notable here is a chilling effect, where media organisations learn from experiences in other media forms about what is and is not possible. Even in the context of emerging digital media, while governments in both countries have adopted a language of

non-regulation as a means of attracting investors, in everyday media practice significant forms of formal and informal regulation are emerging. This is indicative of the critical point that new media technologies do not emerge in a vacuum. They are developed and introduced in specific institutional contexts, which have a profound influence on their operation. In the case of both Singapore and Malaysia, a significant feature of these contexts is that government policy in relation to promoting new media technologies creates at times a direct conflict with longstanding policy regulating media speech, which in turn represents shifts in where governments see economic futures lying. As such, the analysis in this paper shows the significance of the concepts of convergence and remediation. In particular, while new media forms are emerging and are challenging existing media forms, they do not so in isolation, but operate precisely through their connections to existing media. Such processes also suggest the relevance of network society analyses, in which key sites of social and political struggle emerge around who controls the production and dissemination of information, while also pointing to the increasingly close relations between political and media practice.

Still, internet-based media can well be seen as journalism's leading edge in Malaysia and Singapore. In Malaysia, the subscription-based online daily *Malaysiakini* is an example of the emergent internet media offering a democratic space (AMIC 2000) for vigorous public debate (Balraj 2003). Similarly, in Singapore, what Reporters sans Frontières as called 'the only real freedom' for media is found on-line (RSF 2004). Analyses of these potentials need to avoid technological determinism. While digital technologies are crucial in providing an opportunity for more diverse voices to have media access, so too are the social, political and economic contexts, and the media markets, in which the technologies are emerging. In particular, the emergence of civil society organisations and new forms of journalistic practice are critical if the potential of digital media to provide a space for public debate is to be realised.

There appear to be certain commonalities in the media markets of Malaysia and Singapore, and they face similar contested processes of transformation linked to the emergence of digital media technologies and civil society organisations. At the same time, variations also appear, which can be linked to the specific political, legal and economic contexts of each country, and affect the potential of the media to be a site of public debate. Such commonalities and variations in processes have a significant impact on the organisational field of the media market, where 'the interorganizational, professional, social and indeed cultural space within which journalists situate or orient their action and interaction' (Benson 2004b: 311) are undergoing processes of contested transformation. Factors such as formal and informal regulation, the emergence of digital media technologies and their relationship with political and social transformation, are suggestive also of the value in detailed analysis on these issues in the contexts of these two countries. They are also suggestive of the range of issues that could be considered in analyses of media markets, and of transformations in media-government relations in other countries, both in the Asia-Pacific region and beyond.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors thank the ARC Discovery-Project Grant scheme for its support of this research (DP0662844). We acknowledge the contribution of our co-Chief Investigators, Tim Lindsey and Amanda Whiting, and the research work of Naomita Royan. We also thank the reviewers and editors of AJETS for their constructive comments. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 'Media: Policies, cultures and futures in the Asia Pacific Region' conference

at Curtin University of Technology, Perth, Australia, 27-29 November 2006, and we thank participants for their feedback.

## References

- AMIC (Asian Media Information and Communication Centre) (2000) *Media and Democracy in Asia*, Asian Media Information and Communication Centre, Singapore.
- Anuar, M. (2000) 'Malaysian Media and Democracy', *Media Asia*, 27(4), pp. 183-90.
- Anuar, M. (2005) 'Journalism, National Development and Social Justice in Malaysia', *Asia Pacific Media Educator*, 16, December, pp. 63-70.
- Balraj, S. (2003) Malaysia. In *Asian Communication Handbook 2003*, Goonasekera, A., Lee, C.W. & Venkatraman, S. (Eds), AMIC and NTU: Singapore, pp. 168-75.
- Benson, R. (2004a) Bringing the Sociology of Media Back In, *Political Communication*, 21, pp. 275-92.
- Benson, R. (2004b) Why conceptual models and "big" institutions matter: A response to David Altheide, Nina Eliasoph, William Gamson, and Todd Gitlin, *Political Communication*, 21, pp. 311-14.
- Birch, D. & Phillips, M. (2003) Civic or civil contingencies? Regulating television and Society in Singapore. In *Television, Regulation and Civil Society in SouthEast Asia*. Kitley, P. (Ed) RoutledgeCurzon: London.
- Bolongaita, E. (2004) 'Southeast Asia', in Transparency International, *Global Corruption Report 2003*, pp. 140-52. <http://www.transparency.org/publications/gcr> Date accessed: 1 November 2006.
- Bolter, J.D. & Grusin, R. (2000) *Remediation. Understanding New Media*, MIT Press: Cambridge, MA.
- Brown, G. (2005) The rough and rosy road: Sites of contestation in Malaysia's shackled media industry, *Pacific Affairs*, 78(1), pp. 39-56.
- Castells, M. (1996) *The Rise of the Network Society*, Vol. 1 of *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Blackwell: Malden, MA.
- Chalaby, J. K. (2000) New media, new freedoms, new threats, *Gazette*, 62(1), pp. 19-29.
- Charter 2000 (2000) Charter 2000 website [www.aliran.com/oldsite/charter/index.html](http://www.aliran.com/oldsite/charter/index.html) Date accessed: 10 October 2006.
- Chee, S.J. (2001) Pressing for Openness in Singapore, *Journal of Democracy*, 12(2), pp. 157-67.
- Chua, B.H. (1999) Global Economy/Immature Polity: Current Crisis in Southeast Asia, *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 23(4), pp. 782-795.
- Davies, D. (1999) The Press. In *The Singapore Puzzle*. Haas, M. (Ed), Praeger: Westport, CT, pp. 77-106.
- Dent, C. & Kenyon, A.T. (2004) Defamation law's chilling effect: A comparative content analysis of Australian and US newspapers, *Media & Arts Law Review*, 9(2), pp. 89-111.
- Edge, M. (2004) Pie Sharing or food fight? The impact of regulatory changes on media market competition in Singapore, *International Journal on Media Management*, 6(3 & 4), pp. 184-93.

- Flew, T (2005a) *New Media. An Introduction*. 2nd Edition. Oxford University Press: South Melbourne.
- Flew, T. (2005b) Sovereignty and Software. Rethinking Cultural Policy in a Global Creative Economy, *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 11(3), pp. 243-60.
- George, C. (2002) Singapore: Media at the Mainstream and the Margins. In *Media Fortunes: Changing Times: ASEAN States in Transition*, Heng, R.H.K. (Ed). Institute of Southeast Asian Studies: Singapore, pp. 173-200.
- George, C. (2005) The internet's political impact and the penetration/participation paradox in Malaysia and Singapore, *Media, Culture and Society*, 27(6), pp. 903-20.
- George, C (2006) *Contentious Journalism and the Internet: Towards Democratic Discourse in Malaysia and Singapore*. Singapore University Press in association with Washington University Press: Singapore.
- Heng, R.H.K. (Ed) (2002) *Media Fortunes: Changing Times: ASEAN States in Transition*. Institute of Southeast Asian Studies: Singapore.
- Keane, J. (1999) Public life in the era of communicative abundance. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 24(2), pp. 165-78.
- Kenyon, A.T. (2006) *Defamation. Comparative Law and Practice*. UCL Press: Abingdon.
- Khattab, U. (2004) Wawasan 2020: Engineering a modern Malay(sia): State campaigns and minority stakes', *Media Asia*, 31(3), pp. 170-77.
- Lee, H.L. (1987) "When the Press Misinforms". Speech to the 40<sup>th</sup> World Congress Newspaper Publishers, 26 May 1987, Singapore: Information Division, Ministry of Communications and Information.
- Lee, T. (2003) Internet use in Singapore: Politics and policy implications', *Media International Australia Incorporating Culture and Policy*, 107, pp. 75-88.
- Lee, T. (2005) Online Media and Civil Society in the 'New' Singapore. Working Paper No. 123, Asia Research Centre: Murdoch University, October.
- Lee, T. & Willnat, L. (2006) 'Media Research and Political Communication in Singapore'. Working Paper No. 130, Asia Research Centre: Murdoch University, April.
- Leo, P. & Lee, T. (2004) The "New" Singapore: Mediating Culture and Creativity, *Continuum*, 18(2), pp. 205-18.
- Marjoribanks, T. (2000) The "anti-Wapping"? Technological innovation and workplace reorganization at the *Financial Times*. *Media, Culture and Society*, 22(5), 575-93.
- Means, G. (1996) Soft authoritarianism in Malaysia and Singapore. *Journal of Democracy*, 7(4), pp. 103-17.
- Mosco, V. (1999) New York.Com: A political economy of the "informational" city. *Journal of Media Economics*, 12(2), pp. 103-16.
- Netto, A (2002) Media in divided societies: Malaysia. *Media Asia*, 29(3), pp. 179-83.
- Orru, M., Biggart, N.W. & Hamilton, G.G. (1991) Organizational Isomorphism in East Asia. In *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis*. Powell, W.W. & DiMaggio, P.J. (Eds). University of Chicago Press: Chicago, pp. 361-89.

AJETS Vol. 5, No. 2, 2007, pp: 103-118

RSF (Reporters sans Frontières) (2004) *Annual Reports 2004*. <http://www.rsf.org/> Date accessed: 1 November 2006.

Rodan, G. (2003) Embracing electronic media but suppressing civil society: authoritarian consolidation in Singapore. *The Pacific Review*, 16(4), pp. 503-24.

Rodan, G. (2004) *Transparency and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Asia: Singapore and Malaysia*. RoutledgeCurzon: London/New York.

Thompson, M.R. (2001) Whatever happened to “Asian values”? *Journal of Democracy*, 12(4), pp. 154-65.

Wong, L. (2003) Creating space in the global economy: Building a high tech dream in Malaysia. *Prometheus*, 21(3), pp. 289-301.

Yue, A. (2006) The regional culture of new Asia. Cultural governance and creative industries in Singapore. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 12(1), pp. 17-33.