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OBLITERATING THE POLITICAL: ONE-PARTY IDEOLOGICAL DOMINANCE AND THE PERSONALIZATION OF NEWS IN SINGAPORE

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Abstract: Political issues are typically covered by quality dailies as hard news; in the case of the Straits Times, hard political news acquires a human-interest feel, despite journalists’ efforts to follow hard news conventions and to inject controversy into their coverage. While in liberal societies, this phenomenon has been attributed to commercialization, I argue that in Singapore, this human-interest element could be traced to the ideological dominance of the one-party government. In the absence of alternative frames, the official framing of national issues as questions of personal morality becomes the dominant ideological frame for journalists. There are two significant consequences of the shift from a political to a moral frame: the distinction between hard and soft news is blurred and media discourse becomes de-politicized.
INTRODUCTION: IDEOLOGY AND NEWS GENRE
Singapore is no ordinary authoritarian country. On the one hand, it is undeniably authoritarian, being listed among the company of Vietnam, China, North Korea and Myanmar as states that do not endorse the Union of Civil Liberty; and on the other, it has been praised and upheld as a paragon by leaders of the free world. President Bush highlights Singapore as ‘an example for .. the world of the transforming power of economic freedom and open markets,’ while PM Blair considers Singapore the best illustration of the parallel achievements of economic success and social cohesion.

The descriptions heaped upon Singapore, e.g. ‘popular dictatorship’ and ‘soft authoritarianism’, indicate that ‘although clearly authoritarian, Singapore is not a dictatorship but a hegemonic state, in the Gramscian sense… it is based not simply on coercion, but also consensus (Castells 1988: 78). Singapore has also been called ‘a classic case’ of hegemonic authoritarianism, where a relatively institutionalized ruling party monopolizes the political arena (Diamond 2002: 25).

How is this monopolization of the political or ideological arena achieved and how does it impact journalism? An analysis of the Straits Times’ news coverage would throw considerable light on these questions. As a quality daily where journalists claim and do comply with professional standards of journalism (such as following a hard news format and injecting controversy into news coverage), the resultant human-interest feel of political news points to the influence of one-party ideological dominance on journalism. It is my argument that in the absence of competing frames, the People’s Action Party’s (PAP) representation of national issues as questions of personal morality (e.g. what Singaporeans, not the government, ought to do) monopolizes the ideological arena and exerts visible influence on media discourse and news genre: (i) news genres are blurred as hard news becomes dominated by the (human-interest) focus on personal morality; and (ii) media discourse is depoliticized by the focus on moral (rather than political) controversy.

To delineate the impact of hegemonic authoritarianism on news, I outline the contemporary debate around news and democracy, then I describe and explain the shape of news in Singapore.

NEWS AND DEMOCRACY: THE POLITICAL POTENTIAL OF HARD AND SOFT (HUMAN-INTEREST) NEWS
In debates about the relationship between news and democracy, the classical paradigm is what Peck (2000: 232) calls the critical modernist, which criticizes the failure of the media to
live up to the modernist ideals of ‘provid[ing] people (conceived foremost as “citizens”) with the quantity/quality of information necessary to formulate reasoned judgments and make informed decisions about public issues’. Within this paradigm, hard news, defined by Patterson (2000: 4) as ‘coverage of breaking events involving top leaders, major issues, or significant disruptions in the routine of daily life’ is considered a crucial component in the formation of a democratic culture. News that fails this standard is generically classified as ‘soft news’. Not surprisingly, soft news tends to be negatively defined as news that is ‘more sensational, more personality-oriented, less time-bound, more practical, more incident-based than other news’ (Patterson 2000: 5); as news that is ‘disconnected from the contexts of our lives (Bernstein 1992: 22); and as news that shifts ‘away from issues to people’ (Allan 1999: 190). Even when it is defined positively as human-interest based – news that appeals to or interests everyone – soft news tends to be associated with tabloids and dismissed as an obstacle to democracy.

The ‘softening’ of news has been linked to commercialization. Bourdieu contends that commercialization has deprived the field of journalism of its relative autonomy, causing journalists to focus on ‘those things that are likely to arouse curiosity but require no analysis’ (1998: 51) rather than on ‘the democratic goal of informing or educating people by interesting them’ (p. 4). Similarly, Franklin (1997: 4) laments that ‘entertainment has superseded the provision of information; human-interest has supplanted public interest; measured judgment has succumbed to sensationalism; the trivial has triumphed over the weighty; the intimate relationships of celebrities … are judged more “newsworthy” than the reporting of significant issues and events of international consequence. Traditional news has been undermined by new values; “infotainment” is rampant.’

Besides critiquing soft news for failing to provide information necessary for subjects of democracy to function, critics also point out the ideological effects of soft news. For instance, Curran, Douglas and Whannel (1980: 305) argue that the seemingly apolitical nature of human-interest news makes it a particularly effective site where ‘ideological significance is most successfully concealed’ while Fowler (1991: 46—65) argues that the ‘illusion of informality, familiarity and friendliness’ associated with soft news actually masks differential social power.

Disagreeing with such criticism, critical postmodernists argue that hard news is a genre that universalizes elite conception of news and politics, one that reproduces ‘the habitat of the masculine, educated middle class, the habitat that is congenial to the various alliances formed by the power-bloc in white patriarchal capitalist societies’ (Fiske 1992: 49). By
contrast, popular news may be more accommodating towards non-expert voices because it ‘makes no attempt to smooth out contradictions in its discourse’ (Fiske 1992: 52). It thus constitutes a vital site where people can generate their own meanings and where the dominant ideological order can be de-stabilized. Compared with the ‘believing subject’ of hard news, soft news produces ‘disbelieving subjects’ who are able to ‘see through’ news (Fiske 1992: 49), ironic readers who pick and choose what they want to believe and defiant readers who do not read the news they know they should be reading (Bird, in Sparks 2000).

In response to the charge that soft news fails to live up to its task of informing citizens, many emphasize the information and democratic potential of soft news. Bernstein (1992) argues that good journalism is and must be popular; news has to be made accessible to people. In this regard, popular news makes high-minded ideas accessible and more memorable to people who would otherwise not consume news, e.g. Baum (2003) explains how viewers tag new pieces of information emotionally. For instance, in non-tabloid newspapers in Scandinavia, ‘the popular profile of newscasts … often helps to illuminate social and political issues’ and contribute to the social and political involvement of citizens (Gripsrud 2000: 298). Finally, theorists also argue that soft news addresses the human need for melodrama (e.g. through gossip and folklore, Cf. Langer 1998) and has an ‘evocative power’ and a ‘positive capacity to be powerfully revelatory, especially of the specific forms of interconnectedness between human agency and wider social and political processes and structures’ (MacDonald 2000: 261).

Together, these rebuttals have transformed significantly the debate about news and democracy, leading critics of soft news to revise their theses, particularly to reject the simple binary categories of soft and hard news and to examine what these categories might represent. Among the many attempts to rehabilitate the dual demands on the news to be popular and political, Spark’s articulation is perhaps the most cogent and influential. For him (1992: 39), what was problematic about soft or tabloid news is that it was a genre where ‘the personal is not only the starting point but also the substance and end point’. By obliterating ‘the political’ and relying on ‘the personal’ as an explanatory factor, tabloid news blocks readers from developing the ability to grasp the abstract nature of social totality that is ‘neither constituted through immediate individual experience nor entirely comprehensible in those terms’ (p. 41).

This reformulation changes the question that must be posed about the news media’s role in democratization. Rather than ask how to make news ‘hard’ and eradicate soft or personal aspects, the real question is how the personal and the political can be linked without
obliterating the political as an explanatory framework. Sparks’ intervention into the debate influences significantly the conceptualization of this paper. The shift in the categories of analysis from ‘hard/soft news’ to the qualities of ‘personal/political’ is not merely a matter of using different labels but rather represents an attempt to repudiate assumptions of any automatic relationship between soft news and de-politicization. What is at issue then is not merely the collapse of hard and soft news in Singapore but more importantly, whether this collapse is one where the political is obliterated by the personal, i.e. whether this blurring of genres serves to enhance or to blunt the political potential of human-interest news.

MacDonald’s analysis offers us insight into the politicizing or depoliticizing potential of different styles of combining the personal and the political. Arguing that ‘not every hint of the personal is a capitulation to trivialization and emotional indulgence’ (2000: 251), she identified instances when human-interest stories encourage and discourage learning. Human-interest news diverts attention and blocks learning when personalization leads to spectacle and sensationalism, such as by portraying individuals as victims or villains. By contrast, it can deepen viewers’ understanding of social issues when it links personal issues to statistics – presumably a metaphor for social structure – and when they emphasize social rather than individual solutions. In particular, she highlights the political potential of the genre of testimony, ‘where engagement between personal account and social or political process is perceptible’ and where ‘the situatedness of testimony, its contingency on circumstances beyond those of the speaker’s own making or temperament, always remain visible’ (2000: 261).

Peck’s (2000) analysis of Oprah Winfrey’s talk show and its Book Club brings an important caveat to MacDonald’s argument about the political potential of human-interest stories. Peck argues that making the link between the personal and the political is not enough; this link has to be thoroughgoing. Peck observes that Oprah’s show and club has concerned itself with social structural issues such as race and gender inequality. However, it fell short of its democratic/political potential, because it encouraged its audience ‘in the direction of self-love’ (2000: 243). If Oprah appeared to embrace diversity – such as by promoting female-centric issues and African-American authors – her program was one that, nonetheless, ‘posits society as a product of the ideas in our heads, rejects any notion of socio-historical determinations on individual thought and action, universalizes the autonomous, self-possessed individual who is master of her own fate, and embraces plurality as long as it is based on individual rather than structural “difference”’ (Peck 2000: 247).
Peck’s argument sharpens firstly, the distinction between ‘connection to macro context’ and ‘connection to policy’ in the sense that personalized news can be connected to macro-contexts without being tied to policies; and secondly, it reminds us that issues can be connected to policies (e.g. as problems) without solutions to those issues necessarily being framed at the same level or policy (e.g. as personal solutions instead). Both of these clarifications are vital for grasping the shape of news in Singapore. They allow us to ask just how ‘political’ is news in Singapore – can it be (about) political (topics) and de-politicized at the same time?

REMOVING POLITICS: REGULATING THE MEDIA AND SHAPING PUBLIC DISCOURSE

The Singapore media operates in an environment that is highly structured by the state, not only in terms of regulation, degree of liberalization of media industry but also ideologically, through government projects to influence journalistic practices and mould public discourse.

In terms of regulation, the Newspapers and Printing Press Act and the Undesirable Publications Ordinance allow the government to refuse the annual renewal of license to practice journalism and to censor or ban publications that are ‘likely to cause ill will or misunderstanding between the government and the people of Singapore’ (Borkhurst-Heng 2002: 566). Media technologies are also regulated. Rodan (1997) observes that the PAP goes to extraordinary lengths to demonstrate their technical capacity to monitor usage of the Internet by scanning public Internet accounts and argues that such practices have a chilling effect on local politics.

The PAP exerts tremendous influence on the newspaper industry through its decisions to selectively centralize and liberalize. In 1978 there were 11 dailies and by 1985 there were only seven, despite a significant increase in readership. Today, Singapore has 8 dailies in four languages serving a population of 4 million. This has been the direct consequence of a series of mergers and closures during the mid-1980s that created a controlled newspaper monopoly under the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) with government endorsement. In 2000 under the ‘Media 21’ initiative (to strengthen local media industries to compete globally in the 21st century), the SPH’s monopoly was broken with the approval of a government-owned Media Corporation of Singapore to publish newspapers; in turn, the SPH was granted the right to compete in broadcasting. By September 2004, this project of liberalizing the media had clearly failed; economically, the Singapore market did not generate sufficient advertising revenue to sustain competitive corporations while politically, scholars observed that the
period of liberalization had only generated tabloids ‘devoid of critical content’ (Borkhurst-Heng 2002: 564) and argued that liberalization ought to be understood as a strategy to shore up the credibility and popularity of a government controlled media industry (Rodan 2003: 509).

Besides regulating the media, ideological projects are also undertaken to influence journalistic practices. During the 1990s, Southeast Asian journalists were encouraged to imagine an Asian model of journalism (also called ‘development journalism’) based on ‘nation-building’ rather than Western ‘watchdog’ journalism. For instance, President Aquino (Philippines) exhorted journalists to build up rather than tear down, while Malaysian PM Mahathir argued that media are not elected but privately owned and thus have no business criticizing the government.

It is debatable whether governments succeed in re-defining the goals and ethics of journalism. Natarajan and Hao (2003) argue that Channel News Asia’s coverage does not differ significantly from CNN while Romano (1999) claims that in Indonesia, journalists are generally skeptical of attempts to ‘Asianize’ their profession and consider investigative (Western) journalism as something beneficial to society. However, there is some indication that Asian Journalism has succeeded in eroding the hegemony of investigative journalism in Singapore. By 1995, ‘Asian Values’ appeared to have so legitimized nation-building journalism that the local Chinese press could occupy the moral high ground to criticize the local English press for ‘suffering from a psychological burden of needing to be critical to be seen as credible or professional’ (Fernandez and Leong 1995). This was a comment that was unthinkable before the Asian Journalism project, when Singapore was in its modernization phase and actively imitating Western models.

Besides targeting journalistic ethics, the PAP also influences journalistic practices through shaping public discourse. Over decades of one-party PAP rule, the PAP’s strategy of managing dissent in the public sphere has become more sophisticated. Here, I will delineate the variety of PAP strategies (from coercion to ideology) of containing public discourse.

The types of discourse that can freely circulate in the public sphere are limited by the Internal Security Act, which gives the government the power to detain without trial; and the Societies Act, which makes it illegal for groups of more than four to gather without being approved as a society. Potentially dissenting institutions and voices are either contained or absorbed. Trade unions were weakened with the formation of the PAP-backed National Trade Union Congress as an umbrella organization for all labour unions while religious groups were prevented from straying beyond the religious realm by the Maintenance of Religious
Harmony Bill. Non-institutional criticisms were absorbed institutionally through the Nominated Member of Parliament scheme, which aimed to ‘reduce the circulation of dissenting voices outside the official political sphere and agenda’ (Tremewan 1994: 71) by admitting non-politicians (who are nominated by the public) into the political process. For dissent that may be too everyday to incorporate, the PAP has realized that it needs to ‘respond decisively, convincingly and stylishly,’ such as by sending members of the PAP Youth Wing into cyberspace to debate, ‘correct’ and convince (Rodan 1998: 8).

Ideologically, the PAP manages dissent by defining what constitutes national values and interests and de-legitimizing contrary ideologies as national threats. Here, I focus on the Singapore 21 project (henceforth S21), because it represents the most sophisticated ideological strategy to date.

‘Singapore 21’ originated as a PAP election slogan to describe its vision for Singapore in the 21st century. Upon the PM’s re-election in November 1996, the slogan was transformed into a nationwide project to mobilize ‘people from all walks of life to give their ideas of what kind of Singapore they want’ (ST 20 Oct 1997). Between 1997-1998, S21 committees talked to 1700 people face-to-face, conducted 70 focus group interviews, commissioned an expensive independent survey that involved 2355 people and reached many more through its websites and multi-lingual feedback channels.

These staggering logistics were obviously meant to present the event as highly inclusive and its findings as representing a true consensus. More than an exercise in democracy, S21 was a sophisticated project to close off politics while encouraging mass participation – by building procedural and ideological closures into the participation process. Politics is removed firstly by omitting opposition parties from the process. When asked by a journalist whether opposition politicians would be invited, a PAP minister answered, ‘I do not want to see the discussions become political debates where each person has a particular ideological point of view. I do not think we will have a very productive discussion this way’ (ST 20 Oct 1997).

Politics is removed secondly through framing, specifically through defining what is the problem (and thus solution) and de-legitimizing other definitions of the problem. In the years 1997-1998, many Southeast Asian governments were struggling to manage the political challenges brought on by the Asian Economic Crisis. In Indonesia and Malaysia where the crisis was attributed respectively to corruption and to the speculation of western investors, these ways of framing the crisis respectively legitimized political change and anti-globalization policies. In Singapore, the attribution of causality was more indirect (with the
crisis being emphasized as ‘Asian’) and can be inferred by analyzing how S21 defines what constitutes threats and needs of Singapore, or how it frames ‘the five dilemmas’ confronting the nation:

1. Internationalization/regionalization versus Singapore as home
2. A less stressful life versus retaining drive
3. Attracting talent versus looking after Singaporeans
4. The needs of senior citizens versus the aspirations of the younger generation
5. Consultation and consensus versus decisiveness and quick action.

These five dilemmas were presented by the PM as the response by a small fragile nation to the challenge of surviving in a competitive global economy. In a speech launching the S21 project (ST 7 June 1997), a neo-liberal frame was clearly present: the global economic system was presented as an unchangeable and universal condition facing ‘all countries’ and that national survival depended on the resilience and attitudes of its citizens to ‘not let [our] work ethic weaken’, rather than on the state interfering with the free market and serving as a bulwark against the effects of globalization. The task of S21 is, in the PM’s words, to ‘prepare Singaporeans for [the] unknown future’ by making them understand why Singaporeans need to be:

1. willing to travel overseas and globalize national brands
2. less reliant on government, take ‘responsibility to keep [themselves] employable and productive through continuous learning’ rather than opt for leisure
3. accept foreign talents competing for local jobs
4. responsible for maintaining and caring for aged parents
5. accept that consultative government is a luxury that must be sacrificed in periods of crises

What is noteworthy firstly is, while challenges were defined as being national and global in scope, solutions were framed at the level of personal dilemmas. There were no discussions of policies (what the government needs to do); and politics becomes de-politicized or reduced to personal choice (what individuals ought to do). Ministers spoke explicitly of the need to ‘step away from the existing reliance on top-down government initiations to address national issues’ (ST 20 Oct 1997): ‘We do not want to generate a list of things which the Government and other government agencies have to do … but for the community, voluntary organizations
and even the individuals and families … reflecting attitudes which they should hold on various national issues’ (ST 20 Oct 1997).

Secondly, the dilemmas are presented so that the correct personal choice is obvious. Rather than explore what issues citizens wanted addressed, S21 sought to (help the government identify how it can) help people to do (what the government thought was) the right thing. This can be seen in the S21’s commission of an independent survey to examine citizens’ attitudes towards the PAP’s vision and what obstacles prevented them from following its vision. For instance, even though the survey found that 44.9% of Singaporeans wanted the government to limit the number of foreign talents in Singapore (ST 19 Aug 1998), the government’s response to this finding was to encourage Singaporeans towards long-term education so as to prepare themselves to better compete against foreign talents.

The S21 project illustrates the Singapore regime’s ‘hegemonic authoritarianism’. Alternative articulations of national reality, threats and problems are removed through a combination of repressive and ideological methods while official frames are actively popularized through mass participation. By encouraging citizens to articulate popular anxieties and then re-articulating these anxieties within the context of global challenges that require specific (neo-liberal) solutions, the PAP cleverly encourages mass participation without allowing it to have policy and political consequences.

What are the consequences of the PAP framing on media and public discourse? In terms of public discourse, there is anecdotal evidence from Taiwanese and Hong Kong officials’ expression of envy that the PAP has been able to rally citizens to ‘tighten their belts’ and ‘swallow the bitter pill’ of austere policies aimed at restructuring the economy, in contrast to their own protesting populations. In terms of media discourse, the PAP appears not only to have succeeded in blocking alternative definitions of reality but also to have impacted news genre: the dominance of its ‘soft’ personalizing frame appears to trigger a collapse of news forms in Singapore.

**ANALYSIS: THE DE-POLITICIZATION OF NEWS**

In this section, I analyze the *Straits Times* coverage of S21 between the years 1997-1998. In a country nicknamed as ‘Campaign Country’, S21 represents a phase within an ongoing program to inform, educate and dialogue with citizens. What distinguishes S21 from other projects is the colossal effort to encourage mass participation and include voices of ‘people from all walks of life’. As a typical campaign, S21 offers an opportunity to observe the popularization of PAP ideology. As an unusually inclusive campaign that encouraged mass
participation, S21 during the forum years of 1997-1998 represents an opportunity for the vocalization of alternative framing by marginalized sources and potential for the politicization of social issues. Did alternative articulations exist and if so, how were they represented by journalists? I have chosen to analyze the *Straits Times* (henceforth ST) because it is the most read daily, with a circulation size of 389,248. Founded in 1845, it has a good reputation, having been named ‘Newspaper of the Year’ by the Australian-based Pacific Area Newspaper Publishers’ Association in 2002.

The articles analyzed in this essay were generated by a Lexus-Nexus search of the ST with the keywords ‘Singapore 21’ in the period 1997-1998. Thirty-seven articles were found (24 news, 13 non-news). While the size of this sample makes it impossible to make use of statistical inference, the significance of this event – as a rare opportunity where dissent is legitimated and as an opportunity to see how the one-party regime and its media handle dissent – renders analysis a vital enterprise.

In this section, I show that although ST journalists treat S21 as political news – covering it by using conventional hard news format and as a topic of legitimate controversy – news about S21 is personalized and de-politicized. In the final section, I argue that the human-interest feel of hard news about S21 is not to be attributed to the commercialization of the press, but to the dominance of the PAP’s personalizing frame.

*S21 news is presented with a hard news format*

The ST’s coverage of S21 follows the format of hard news. While a visual example may accomplish this task more efficiently (Figure 1), I also very briefly review Allan’s (1999: 89—93) comprehensive list of features of hard news in order to show that the ST’s coverage of S21 conforms: headlines; news leads; narrative order and sequence; (abrupt) closure; forms of address; implied reader; transitivity and modality; vocabulary; and relations of space and time.
Organizationally, all articles were timely and had clear headlines, bylines, news leads, and information organized in an inverted pyramid style (where important information precedes less important information and thus, has abrupt endings). Sources are addressed formally (with names, titles and occupations in full). The ST addresses readers as citizens, assuming that what is newsworthy is news about the well being of the nation, its economy and society. In terms of language, the ST tends to use transitive words\(^2\) that explicate the relationship between actors and processes. In terms of vocabulary, the ST’s coverage of S21 is similar to
Allan’s observation that hard news is characterized by the regular use of metaphors (e.g. global jungle, heartware, people sector, social glue, glass-ceiling) and jargons (e.g. competitive advantage, foreign talent) to convey a dispassionate quality that he described as being ‘consistent with an authoritarian appeal to objectivity’ (Allan 1990: 90). In terms of time and space, the authority of ‘being there’ and reporting ‘on scene’ is hardly an issue given that S21 is a local event held on a tiny island state.

**S21 is covered as political (controversial) news**

Journalists cover S21 as if it was an issue of genuine political controversy rather than as a partisan event organized by the PAP. To grasp the peculiarity of this journalistic practice, a comparison with analyses of American journalistic practices is useful. Hallin argues that there are three standards of reporting: the sphere of consensus, legitimate controversy and deviance. In the former and latter, issues are perceived as non-controversial and journalists do not feel compelled to present opposing views or remain disinterested. Should an issue be seen as a topic of legitimate controversy, ‘objectivity and balance reign as supreme journalistic values’ (1986: 116), and journalists would be more inclined to approach independent or bi-partisan sources and to present opposing views.

That ST journalists cover the S21 dilemmas as issues of political controversy can be seen firstly in how they showcase, following western journalistic practices, non-governmental sources. Out of the 24 news articles, eight were reports of the survey findings by an independent company while another six articles featured non-government voices (one on grassroots leaders, one on Chinese-speaking citizens, one on citizens, three on tertiary students) as their main sources.

Besides showcasing independent voices, ST journalists also attempt to cover opposing views in these 14 articles. Among the survey articles, the oppositional views that were featured were not only splits within the citizenry (which is expected in surveys) but also between citizens’ and government preferences. For instance, one article (ST 19 Aug 1998) reported that a high percentage (44.9%) believed that ‘the Government should limit the number of foreign talent’, a position to which the government is inimical.

If anti-government sentiments are legitimated by the structure of surveys and were peppered throughout the eight survey articles, they are even more strongly present in the six articles featuring independent perspectives, with ‘critical voices’ outstripping supportive opinions by a ratio of two to one (in terms of number of lines). The criticisms enunciated by individual citizens range from mild to fierce:
Singaporeans need to be constructive, rather than carping and complaining. ‘Apathy leads to a culture of dependency. It also leads to a blaming culture’, said Temasek Polytechnic student Sanjiv Vaswani, 18, a second-year student in legal studies (ST 28 Nov 1997).

The students expressed their worry about the open-door policy towards foreign talent. A student (Author’s note: unidentified source) put it this way: ‘The government is like a bird telling its babies to go find fat worms. At the same time, it invites other birds to come and eat the fat worms’ (ST 8 March 1998).

Said project engineer Jimmy Koh, in Mandarin: ‘If I lose my job because of foreign talent, will my country take care of me? What I think about then is not whether my country needs foreigners to plug the talent shortfall, but whether I can feed my family’ (ST 17 July 1998).

This odd mixture of opinions (anti-citizen and anti-government) belie an important point – the efforts of journalists to politicize the debate and slip in criticisms that are ‘irrelevant’ or tangential to ‘the question’ as framed by the government (although it is my position later that these efforts are offset by other journalistic practices of de-politicizing and the difficulty of coalescing these criticisms into an alternative frame.)

This argument is a complex one and requires firstly the sorting out of what constitutes relevant and irrelevant criticism. Given that the S21 project sought to debate the mentalities that Singaporeans needed for the new economy, what counts as relevant discussions would be those focusing on Singaporeans’ mindset. Indeed, ‘anti-Singaporean’ comments abound and recur twice as frequently as irrelevant ‘anti-government’ comments. The presence of the latter in news discourse despite their irrelevance to S21 frames suggests that they are slipped in deliberately. Stronger evidence for this can be seen in how, although it is against the ST’s policy to allow anonymous sources, journalists conveniently forget to name their sources (e.g. see above and later excerpts) and even themselves (missing bylines in opinion essays).

The purpose of the above analysis is to demonstrate that the ST and its journalists do consider the S21 project as hard political news and attempt to cover it as such –by using a hard news format and by covering it as a topic of controversy (by incorporating independent sources and critical voices). Next, I attempt to show that, firstly, despite these efforts, S21 news come across as personalized and have a human-interest feel; and secondly, hard news coverage of S21 is not only personalized but also de-politicized.
S21 news is personalized and de-politicized

News coverage of S21 focused on debates about the mindset of Singaporeans, rather than on policies. There was only one news article that featured policies in the form of a report of the S21 committees’ policy recommendations to the government. As the last article (ST 22 Nov 1998) for the years of consultation, these policies were presented as decisions rather than as topics for public debate. This method of covering S21 news illustrates the S21 leaders’ position that ‘what we can do is try to understand, … flesh out ideas and suggestions on how the apparent conflict [dilemma] can be resolved, and submit it to Government. If those changes warrant a change in policy, that would be left entirely to Government. But we will not begin by saying let’s examine policy’ (ST 1 Nov 1997).

Given that S21 was seen as a project to bring about a ‘mindset change’ (ST 5 July 1997), it was not surprising that all of the 24 news articles were framed around what Singaporeans (rather than the government) ought to do, ranging from reigning in emotions (jealousy), becoming less dependent on the government, complaining less to managing their paranoia:

‘Singaporeans are quite worried about the influx of foreign talent. They have to compete with them and the foreigners are paid more than Singaporeans, so there is a bit of jealousy’, said Mr Wong Fook Soon from the Pasir Ris Central youth executive committee (ST 20 Oct 1997).

Mr Lee Beng Shaw, a fourth-year civil and structural engineering student, said: ‘It seems to me that if we could somehow make Singaporeans less dependent on the Government for everything, there would be no dilemmas’ (ST 8 Mar 1998).

As one student [Author’s note: unidentified source] noted during the discussions, they suffered from the ‘blacklist syndrome’ and the ‘black-hole syndrome’ in which no one would listen when they did speak up (ST 8 March 1998).

The last excerpt is a good illustration of the personalization of social issues, where the tagging of the word ‘syndrome’ crucially transforms what would otherwise be a critique of the government for terrorizing its citizens and for being unresponsive (letting feedback drop into a blackhole) into figments of citizens’ imagination.

The above examples reflect instances when personalization appears to be performed by sources themselves rather than by journalists; if journalists played any role, it would be in their selection of those utterances (just as there are also instances when they attempt to weave in non-personalized utterances, such as in the form of ‘irrelevant’ anti-government criticisms).
However, the personalization of news coverage of S21 is more systematic and goes beyond the contingency of journalists’ sources to the way questions are framed and the ways issues are paraphrased, editorialized and contextualized by journalists themselves. The types of frames journalists choose impact news coverage. By using the S21 frame of ‘what Singaporeans need to do’ to pose questions, journalists limit the types of replies that citizens can articulate. In the following examples, journalists’ quests to answer what they regard to be the question render impossible any articulations of governmental responsibility:

The challenge: how can the individual deal with the competing needs between the young and old in his family?
What students say: Religious and family values should be stressed to instil a greater sense of responsibility in youngsters so that the older generation will be cared for by their children.

The challenge: How can we re-define our notion of success and an individual’s self-worth, yet retain the drive?
What students say: Singaporeans feel stressed-out because they want perfection in their lives. More emphasis should be placed on community service and enjoying the arts (ST 8 March 1998).

Framing and contextualizing sometimes work together. In one feature article, contextualizing can be seen in how the journalists define certain ‘realities’ as unchangeable, leaving the solution to be delimited as mindset change of Singaporeans to adjust to these ‘realities.’

The problem: Life in Singapore is too stressful, changes are happening too fast. Some people wish we could slow down a bit and not be a high-pressure society. But there are so many countries waiting to catch up and overtake us economically. And being so small, we cannot afford to stop and rest on our laurels.
The solution: Reduce stress by getting Singaporeans to see that there are many things in life which make for success. You don’t have to be rich to be happy.
The problem: Foreign talent creates jobs and brings in fresh ideas. But people are anxious that more foreigners would mean greater competition for jobs and resources.
The solution: Singaporeans must develop a big heart and welcome foreigners… (ST 18 Sep 1998)

In another feature article, a housing problem (that the wait for public apartments is too long) was presented by the journalist as a perception problem of greedy Singaporeans:
It is all too easy for Singaporeans to complain … and demand to know what the Government is going to do about it while seemingly oblivious to the land and resource constraints that prevent the Government from granting all of them that cash windfall which they will get when they sell their existing flat (ST 5 July 1997).

Finally, journalists’ role in personalizing media discourse can also be seen in the way they editorialize and paraphrase their sources. Instances of editorializing or summarizing can be seen in many of the above excerpts, where the diverse opinions of students and citizens are
simplified into uni-dimensional representations of ‘what students say,’ or ‘what Singaporeans think’. While the editorializing can politicize or de-politicize issues, the excerpts demonstrate that journalists editorialize in the direction of de-politicization.

The tendency to personalize issues is especially clear in the way they paraphrase citizens’ opinions into statements that are more personalized than in their original quoted form. In the following news article, what is problematic for Miss Boey is prejudice, which she fears may trigger perceptional side effects such as the glass ceiling. When summarized by the journalist, the side effect or the perception of ‘glass ceiling’ becomes the problem rather than the existence of prejudice. i.e., the political issue of prejudice was reduced to a perception or imaginary issue.

The students were concerned that they would come up against a glass ceiling at the workplace.

Miss Lynette Boey Lu-Yi, a third-year mass communication student at Ngee Ann Polytechnic, said in a presentation that diploma-holders were only considered for technical support positions, middle management and assistant roles.

She said: ‘Prejudice against polytechnic graduates creates a glass ceiling. There is only so far you can rise, especially in statutory boards.’ (ST 28 Nov 1997)

In a feature article by another journalist, the way the issue is framed shifts away from a politicized one (racial discrimination) to a personalized one (self-disqualification):

Observers who are ordinarily cocooned from the concerns of ethnic minorities might feel surprised at the open way sensitive topics such as racial discrimination are broached.

At one session with a self-help group, the phenomenon was cited of ‘self-disqualification’, whereby young people from an ethnic minority feel frustrated by the unrealized ambitions and perceive a glass ceiling to their socio-economic progress.

In a self-fulfilling prophecy, they then lower their sights and rule themselves out of scholarships and good jobs (ST 7 Mar 1998).

By focusing on instances of personalization, I do not mean to suggest that instances of politicization do not exist, but that there are systematic obstacles that prevent their entry into news discourse and that, even when they are slipped in by journalists under conditions of anonymity, these instances do not coalesce to constitute a centre or frame around which discussions are based. What I want to illustrate firstly is that if S21 news is personalized, it is not the product of aberrant contingencies such as the sources that journalists happened to approach, but the consequence of routine journalists’ practices of framing, editorializing and paraphrasing.

The routine personalization of social issues impacts news genres in two ways. Firstly, what would otherwise be hard political news (of national events centred around political
leaders in a serious national daily) acquires a human-interest feel and blurs the distinction between hard and soft news (even within a serious daily), despite journalists’ effort to cover S21 as hard, controversial political news.

Secondly, while certain styles of personalization (e.g. testimony, Cf. MacDonald, 2000) can politicize issues, the ST’s coverage is one where the combination of the political and the personal does not contribute to the politicization of issues. ST’s coverage comes closer to Peck’s description of the personalization and de-politicization of issues on Oprah, where fans are encouraged to find personal solutions to social problems. Specifically, even if issues were initially linked to policy and macro contexts, insofar as solutions are pitched at the level of mindset change or personal revolutions, the politicizing potential of human-interest news is lost. It is thus not a contradiction to say that in Singapore, political news is de-politicized. By some criteria, S21 news is political news because it is focused on top leaders, major issues, significant disruptions and connected to macro contexts (Patterson 2000: 4). By other criteria, S21 news is de-politicized news because ‘the political’ is drawn on only to set the context and does not constitute the explanatory framework or more specifically, the terrain for action and change.

Finally, the routine personalization of social issues in media discourse also contributes to a significant political effect. By accepting the PAP’s perspective of what the question is (what Singaporeans need to do, rather what the government needs to do), journalists’ complicit use of personalizing frames sufficiently filters out anti-government articulations, without the PAP having to intervene coercively. It is because discursive boundaries have been successfully (or at least unchallenged) pre-limited to personal controversy (rather than political controversy) that the PAP can afford to throw open the gates of the public sphere and even encourage controversy, allowing the S21 process and findings to acquire a degree of popular legitimacy.

**FURTHER ANALYSIS, EXPLANATION AND CONCLUSION**

In pondering the absence of alternative frames in the news, it is perhaps unfair to put the responsibility of supplying them on the shoulders of journalists, whose professional values require them to refrain from inserting their views. In this section, I offer a more balanced evaluation of journalists’ role in abetting or retarding the emergence of alternative frames by examining a site where they have greater autonomy – non-news articles, and also by examining a vital factor over which they have little control – independent sources.
The long shadow of the PAP’s ideological dominance looms even in non-news – a site where journalists are supposedly freer to adopt alternative, especially populist, frames. This can be seen firstly in the dominance of non-news articles that reproduce the official frame of what Singaporeans ought to do (nine out of 13 articles, comprising of one reader’s letter, two interviews and four opinion pieces; for other four articles, see next paragraph). Secondly, strategies of personalizing issues seem much more pervasive in non-news genres.

While the above observations suggest the hegemony of PAP’s frame, there is also evidence that it is not only consent but also caution that motivates journalists’ reproduction of official frames. Firstly, no matter how few in number, the existence of the four articles that draw upon an alternative frame of what the government ought to do suggests that these ideas are vitally present in popular discourse and in journalists’ consciousness. Secondly, the genre of these articles (three readers’ letters, one anonymous opinion piece) suggests that journalists are aware and agreeable to publishing these perspectives, as long as it is not in their name. Thirdly, the intensity of criticism in these articles is quite surprising – readers and (anonymous) journalists do mount fierce criticisms of the government:

… a core of talented and motivated people is essential if a city-state is to prevail in a global jungle, which is a democracy only to the extent that it gives everyone the right to eat or be eaten. But nations are different (ST 9 June 1997).

The first dilemma is retaining Singapore’s competitive edge and developing it into a world-class city without Singaporeans becoming mere ‘economic animals’. One wonders if there is a need to live in constant paranoia, fearing that we would be extinguished from the face of the earth if we slow down a little and lose out to our neighbours (ST 14 July 1997).

In being overly cautious about the release of vital information concerning how our country is being managed, the Government could inadvertently be feeding rumours and speculations among the people, much of which are often not in the Government’s favour. However, such rumours and speculations are merely attempts by the people to fill in the information gap… Only with enough information can there be quality feedback; and only with quality feedback can there be dispassionate, informed and more focused discussion (ST 21 Sep 1998).

If journalistic practices appear to be constrained ideologically and coercively and unable to promote alternative frames except at the further margins of media discourse, perhaps we should turn to the responsibility of other (independent) institutions. However, a quick glance at the types of sources that make it into news discourse suggests that independent institutions have only a very limited opportunity to make the news and that critical institutional voices have no place at all in the media.
As noted previously, opposition parties were explicitly excluded from the S21 process while institutions that are usually considered ‘relatively autonomous’ such as trade unions and religious organizations have either been absorbed into para-governmental organizations or prevented from straying into the political realm. Among the 37 articles, there were only six civic leaders that were represented in three articles (one news, one letter to the editor and one opinion piece) – three grassroots leaders, a leader of a women’s organization and Presidents of two universities. While these institutions may appear independent (especially with the help of journalists’ contextualizing, see later), a quick analysis reveals that they are not.

While in other societies, grassroots organizations may signify independence, in Singapore, they are an integral part of the PAP’s project to ‘accentuate the populace’s dependence on a whole range of government agencies for services and facilities’ so as to develop in citizens ‘a strong stake in the continuing stability of the system since any major disruption of the status quo would … affect… the supply of those services essential for daily living’ (Seow 1985: 186). The independence of women’s organizations in Singapore is a constant and often unsuccessful struggle; furthermore, the demands articulated were presented in the form of a letter to the editor with the mild request that the S21 committees consist of equal numbers of men and women. The independence of universities have been severely impeded by the PAP’s de-sinicization projects to break their close connections with communist China during the 1950s and 1960s (Wong 2002: 187, 231). While there is no doubt that the days of independent universities are over, it is surprising how a journalist chose to contextualize the views of a current university president as the voice of ‘a former student radical’ (ST 3 Oct 1998) without clarifying how neither he (the current head of Singapore Management University and Singapore Power, a state utilities company) nor the university he represents is radical anymore and that he had, in fact, protested as a student against the state’s erosion of his university’s independence.

Having reviewed the sites and institutions where alternative frames may emerge, we are in a better position to explain the peculiar shape of news in Singapore. The analysis of the ST’s coverage of S21 news provides insights into how coercion and ideology influence journalistic practices and the impact that an unrivalled official ideology has on news genre. Even though ST journalists cover S21 as hard news and as issues of legitimate controversy, their imitation of Western journalistic practices achieves the divergent result of personalized and de-politicized news. This is due to the absence of two vital assumptions underlying Western journalistic values: controversy is tied to oppositional groups (which are excluded in Singapore); and it has policy implications (which are excluded by the dominance of PAP’s
personalizing frame). Because these premises are not present in Singapore, the simple transplanting of Western practices contributes to an illusion of controversy without a genuine politicization of media discourse.

1 My thanks to Daniel Hallin and Colin Sparks for their invaluable comments on the many drafts of this essay.
2 An analysis of four news articles with mixed sources showed that only 6 out of 114 clauses were intransitive.
3 It should be noted that although this criticism appears to be a criticism of the perception of authoritarianism rather than of authoritarianism itself, the non-identification of the speaker of this statement suggests that the journalist is aware that it comes very close to a criticism of the government.
REFERENCES


