

INTERVIEW WITH PM LEE HSIEN LOONG

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SYNOPSIS

Is the traditional media in Singapore under siege? For how much longer will it remain people's key source of information? How will it survive - and thrive - in the face of the challenge posed by the new media? Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong shares his thoughts on the evolving media landscape in Singapore and Asia, and what it means for the island-state's main news broadcaster - Channel NewsAsia - to present "Asian perspectives" to the world. On *The Interview* on Channel NewsAsia, Tue 930pm.

Audio

PREAMBLE

Voice Over:

Some say, the era of the traditional mass media is under threat.

In its place could be a media of a different sort – one that is more personal and participatory in nature.

Unlike the model of old, where communication is one way, and audiences are "lectured" to, users of the new media actively create content, in varying forms and scale.

Can both the traditional and new co-exist – and complement – each other?

And how will the rise of the new media change the tone of public discussion?

We speak with Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

DEBRA SOON:

Prime Minister let's start with the role of media in Singapore, the traditional media. You said a few years ago that the media is under siege. Two years on, how do you think the media has coped?

PM:

I think the situation is still evolving. The traditional media – newspapers, TV, so far they have held their own but it's a dynamic position. The young people are reading newspapers not quite as much, not quite as carefully. Watching TV - well for entertainment but picking up a lot more news on the Internet and from their friends and masses and so on. So this is something which I think that CNA and the newspapers are quite concerned about but they have done quite well so far.

DEBRA:

For how long do you think the traditional media can continue to be the primary source of information for Singaporeans?

PM:

I think there will always be a role for editors, journalists, people who're seriously following events, packaging, presenting, packaging, interpreting, whether it's on the newspapers, whether it's on TV, on the news bulletin or whether on the web, you need that service. I do not believe that if we talk about Web 2.0, anybody can be his own journalist and straightaway you will get a good comprehensive, coherent, sensible view of the world.

You will have impressions, impressionistic images, facts, data but to put it together and make sense of it and to relate different things to one another and explain that this is what's happening in the bigger trends, you need people who're professionals, who understand this, who understand the news, who understand the audience and will present it.

And I think you will have, you will be in demand for a long time. The trouble is how you pay for this because when it's a newspapers will pay for a newspaper, advertisers will pay for advertising in the newspaper.

When it's the TV channel you have TV slots and people will pay quite a lot of money for 30 seconds in the middle of a news bulletin.

On the Internet well you have Google manages your ads and you click and pay per click but it's much harder to make money. Ten times harder, maybe hundred times harder. Somehow the psychology is different and that's a big problem.

DEBRA:

Do you think there's a role for the government to play in funding public broadcasters?

PM:

Well in every country or in many countries the government does put some money into public broadcasting. The challenge is not whether the government is prepared to put some money in or not but whether we can get people to focus and to watch or not? And if you can get people to watch on TV, I think it's worthwhile having public service broadcasting.

If despite our best efforts your viewership is low, then that defeats the purpose. How that translates into the Internet and a Web presence that's something which we have to experiment to then explore.

DEBRA:

So beyond informing, educating the public what else do you think the media needs to do going ahead?

PM:

I think you also want to reflect views, you want to report the public debate, be a forum where different perspectives on what the country is doing, what's happening, where we should go, aired and debated. And the media provides a forum where all these can happen. At the same time remembering that the stage is never completely neutral. You have – there is always implicitly a frame which defines what you're debating and what the basic objectives are.

And we're talking about media in Singapore, in Asia and this is what life is about for us and this is what Singapore needs to do to survive and to do well. And within that broad framework then you provide the opportunity for discussion, for debate, for

disagreement and we hope for constructive new ideas to emerge.

DEBRA:

Let's talk about the framework of media and politics. We saw last year, in 2008, that there were significant political changes in Malaysia and the US and part of it was driven by the power of harnessing the new media. How will this affect the way you view how politicians should engage the public in the next elections?

PM:

Well I talked about it in the Rally last year that it's a sign of how societies are changing and habits are changing and the technologies are shifting all over the world and it's going to affect us too. It's never the only factor for political change. I mean in Malaysia there were many other factors apart from new media and SMS which led to the election results last year in March with the Pakatan Rakyat doing quite well and much better than expected.

In America too there was a very strong generational sense and not just among the young people but even among quite a number of older Americans. The time had come, they wanted to move on beyond the old dispensation and have a new start. And Obama tapped into this mood and this very deep desire. But he also did it using the new media, using Facebook, using Blackberry famously, keeping in touch with his network on e-mail, back and forth coordinating. Not just putting out message but operating on the Web as a means to work together, to organise things, to raise money. And I think a lot of this is going to happen to us and if our young people, for them that's a natural way to do things. I mean they organise parties, they organise their – they do their school work, they do their office work, a lot of it on the Internet. And I think that's going to happen in politics too.

DEBRA:

How are you preparing your MPs for this? Are they preparing?

PM:

First we need young MPs. We need MPs who are of that generation, who are with it and quite naturally comfortable with it. And with the population who're also operating there.

Secondly you need to build up some capabilities so that you can put out your material and in a competent sort of way, not sleek, not big budget but you know the nature of the medium and how to package little soundbites or something more than soundbites but less than a three hour speech. And people will click on it and you know what the Youtube format is and how people view Youtube or Flickr and how you share. And then we can be there too. And that's what we've been trying to do.

We're still learning. It's not easy to make this transition. It's like going from sea to land or vice versa, you're changing your medium and you need to get comfortable with it. But we're working hard at it.

DEBRA:

How would you assess the government's efforts so far at E- engagement and Facebook and so on – how would you assess the experiment and what you're doing now?

PM:

I think that we're just starting. REACH has done the most because they're constantly engaging and this is the way they now get a lot of their feedback. So they're not doing badly.

The Ministries – some like MINDEF have got more comprehensive efforts. PMO, we're trying in a small way to have a competent site so people go there, they will know what has been happening, recent events– what significant speeches have been made, who's travelling, what visitors we have had.

I don't think that we will be – how shall we put it, a very popular – social, networking website. But one where the information is there, accessible and feedback can be taken and will be attended to.

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DEBRA:

Let's turn now to the role of the media in presenting Asia and change. You have said at a conference before that each Asean country has to find its own point of balance for media and for politics. Do you think the media in Singapore has managed to find this point of balance?

PM:

I think it's a dynamic balance, it's not a fixed one because as society changes what you expect of the media, what the population expects of the media and what the system needs of the media will change.

Our media has been shifting, it's opened up, it's a lot livelier now. Many more views are expressed.

I think sometimes the – how shall I put it? You need not just have views expressed but you need people who have spent time and effort to think about the issues and to focus so that you have a deeper debate. Not just "I like this" or "I don't like this" or I have preferences. And then you reiterate that variously in different voices. But views which people have thought about, they have considered, they know what the tradeoffs are, what the implications are. And then gradually you get a sense of what is good, what is bad but also what is possible and where you have to make compromises and accept what is workable but not an ideal outcome.

But we hope over time more people will join in and we will be able to do better.

DEBRA:

How do you view the fact that there're a lot more voices out there, a lot more competing voices who express their views not only in the mainstream media but also in the new media space. And it challenges the traditional media in the sense that we might seem a little bit tame compared to what's going on out there.

PM:

Well, there is a place called the Wild Wild West and there're other places which are not so wild. And the new media some of it are Wild West and anything goes and people can say anything they want, and tomorrow take a completely contrary view and well, that's just the way the medium is.

But even in the Internet there're places which are more considered, more moderated where people put their names down and identify themselves. And there is a debate

which goes on and a give and take, which is not so rambunctious but perhaps more thoughtful. That's another range.

And then you have the print media or the TV mass media which is not narrow-casting but broadcasting and there I think the need to be more cautious on what you do because if you express their view and you influence 1 million viewers and it turns out to be the wrong view, then you have to work very hard to unexpress it.

So I think there has to be a range.

But I think the fact that you've been able to keep audiences up, readership up in Singapore shows that the mainstream media have credibility. I mean people know that it speaks facts – it may not be as exciting as in a place where tomatoes are regularly thrown at the government. They have the whole range of cable TV now – I don't know, must be hundred programmes, maybe even more. Some pay – some pay per view on demand. Others are there. But CNA - the MediaCorp channels, they have kept their viewership so I think that we're not doing too badly.

DEBRA:

What role do you think Channel NewsAsia has played in presenting Asia to the world – now that we are talking about presenting views, what do you think the role has been?

PM:

I think to the world is very ambitious because the world is a big place and there are so many alternative voices. But for Channel NewsAsia, the reason why we thought it was something worth doing is because we thought in Asia there wasn't an English language channel, news channel which is presenting what was happening in Asia from an Asian perspective, whether it's politics, whether it's economic or whether it's a development in the societies. The western channels are there. You have CNBC, BBC, you have CNN and they report a lot of things happening in Asia but it's a western perspective. I mean there're certain, very deep frames of reference when they look at the world from western eyes and we felt there was scope for perspective from Asian eyes. Not to put over an ideology or a doctrine but just present the facts less the western spectacles. And I think that's what Channel NewsAsia has tried to do and with some reasonable success.

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VO:

In the late 1990s, as Asia was confronting the throes of the Asian Financial Crisis, MediaCorp embarked on a bold plan to launch a news and information channel.

The ambition: to bring round-the-clock news and "live" news breaks, up from the previous twice nightly newscasts, and even more ambitiously, to the whole of Asia.

At the time, some believed such a plan wouldn't work – and that MediaCorp was biting off more than it could chew.

Others thought it a good challenge for the broadcaster to rise to.

PM:

On the merits of it will be very good if we could make it work. The question is can you make it work? Can you build up the viewership and even more challenging, can you

build up the team to report the news and interpret the news, because it's not just finding out what's happening and saying that something has happened. But you must understand the country, you must understand the society, the developments and put things in context and understand therefore what are the important things which make, which will be significant to viewers in Asia, which people need to know about. And then you can report them in perspective. And I think that we have built up not badly. I mean we still need to strengthen the capabilities. It's never easy to have enough depth in the team.

And you also need a balance between looking at it from Singapore, in the region and looking at it as say from each different country – an Indian in India or Malaysian in Malaysia or Indonesian in Indonesia or Chinese in China. Their perspectives are not quite the same so you have to have a careful balance there.

DEBRA:

When we first started over ten years ago, there were a lot of doubters and nay-sayers – and some felt that it might be oxymoronic to have a news channel headquartered out in Singapore presenting neutral, credible views. Did you get the sense of the scepticism at the time and how do you think the channel has done?

PM:

Well that's an example of a standard western perspective. That's why we felt that there's a need for a channel which is not wearing the western spectacles. The challenge is not being unable to present news candidly out of Singapore, because we're sensitive in Singapore. The challenge is to present news neutrally out Singapore and not be seen to be Singapore, being unfriendly to our neighbours. You have to report what's happening at the same time we don't want a misunderstanding that we have some agenda to cause changes in our neighbouring countries or to get involved in their politics. And that's a very difficult balance which a news channel has to maintain.

DEBRA:

How successfully do you think we manage to do that over the years?

PM:

Well I watch Channel NewsAsia regularly. I watch your news bulletin, I watch the business reporting. Sometimes in the morning when I'm exercising, I watch your morning shows to see what's happening in the markets. I think that the coverage is very competent and you get more feel than from the other news channels that are available.

I would say that the challenge is to boil it down so that you get in a crystallized form the essence of what's going on. The colour, the touch, the background, the details are all very good. But to be able to crystallize that and maybe three or five minutes worth of a summary, say this is what was important last week, that's a big challenge which we need to work on.

DEBRA:

Can you describe a particularly poignant or memorable moment which you remember watching on Channel NewsAsia?

PM:

Well during the Tsunami back in 2004 we watched a lot of your footage – you had almost a continuous coverage and you were on the ground. Your journalists in Aceh and elsewhere in Asia and we watched a lot of it then. And you have a lot of other events going on for example, during – when there are elections around the region whether in Taiwan or in Malaysia, we watched that. Or if there are Olympic Games, it's not going to change the world but it's quite fascinating and you had good coverage.

DEBRA:

What are your personal media consumption habits, I mean when you start your day, how do you start your day?

PM:

I watch the news on TV most evenings, usually the eleven o'clock news. In the morning what I do, I watch – I get the news on the Internet. My browser is open and I always have 3 or 4 news sites, CNA is one of them and the Singapore newspapers and BBC and couple of others. And that's the first thing I look at every morning when I get up. I read the print newspapers after that. But now with the big screen and with better software, you can get a very good impression of the print newspaper on the screen. I think my habits may migrate even further onto the screen.

CNA is always there and if I'm overseas, that's one of the ways I keep in touch with what's happening at home and pick up the significant items of the news. We get updates during the day if something important is happening. But with the browser, the government channel is not a lot faster than the public channel. The public has very good information.

DEBRA:

How about your children, do you talk to them about their media consumption habits and where they get the news and information?

PM:

Well I watch them. They watch – they read the newspapers but differently. Some read the *Life* section. Some browse the world news and the main items. I think that they will spend more time on the Net. I don't know, I don't get the impression that they're systematically reading news sites the way you would systematically have read a newspaper in the old days. You know you sit down, you have 45 minutes to go through and you flip every page and you don't do that on the Internet. But I think that's the way the new generation is going.

DEBRA:

How do you think this – what sort of challenges do you think this poses to people who need to get the message out, like the government, I mean to young people.

PM:

I think it's a big challenge. It's a very big challenge. In the old days if you had the message, you could make sure that people will get it because the newspapers will

print it, the TV people will watch it. You have that number of channels, that's it.

Nowadays you cannot force people to watch you. I mean if you're boring they will just surf, they close, click, gone! And you can put anything you like on your website. Unless you can make people interested in it, they won't read your website, they don't have to read your website.

So how to get the message across and get people to focus, to think about these subjects and to understand what's important, I think that's a big challenge.

DEBRA: Thank you very much, Prime Minister.

PM: Thank you.