Harish Rai
Media and Politics Final Essay

Mapping political information environments: Country Report Singapore

Introduction

The Singaporean media landscape is often distinguished by a unique combination of government regulation and digital development. The two major players that dominate the media sector: MediaCorp, a public broadcaster and Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), now a private firm, both have strong ties with the government (Chua, 2017, Lee, 2015). These organisations must follow the strict laws that are imposed by the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA), which is in charge of broadcasting and content standards, The government's approach to media control is justified in the view of prioritizing racial harmony and political stability, which frequently favours national unity over combative journalism (Chua, 2017)

Singapore has also undergone rapid digital transition in recent years, with high internet penetration allowing for more access to online news portals and social media platforms. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2024), Singapore's media industry is still heavily controlled with strict rules regulating traditional, digital and social media. Despite the government's effort to regulate the media space, the emergence of digital platforms has created a new dynamic in the production and consumption of political content. According the Freedom House (2024) the government continues to exercise control over the digital environment, such as mandating online outlets to issue rectification notices under the recently established Protection against Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA). Additionally Singapore's digital economy has risen at an anticipated annual pace of 12.9% since 2017, with technology usage among the population increasing from 74% in 2018 to 94% in 2022 (Detros and Myra 2024).

Hence, this essay seeks to map and analyze Singapore's political media landscape in six major areas: supply of political information, quality of news, media concentration and diversity, fragmentation and polarization, relativism in news and inequality in political knowledge. By using this broad lens and including my own experience as a Singaporean news consumer, the paper will provide a more nuanced picture of how Singapore's political information environment works and the issues it faces in supporting democratic engagement.

Supply of Political Information

Singapore's media landscape is heavily controlled, with both traditional and digital channel subject to a complex set of rules and government oversight. The media landscape has been altered by a combination of state control over traditional sources and increased focus on digital and social media The government hold over the media

sector has long been established, dating back to the 1930s, when the colonial authority implemented the Print Press Act to maintain control over media business. This stature, which forced the government to cancel licenses for publications that promoted dissent or disorder, has evolved into current rules that remain in effect today. The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, modified in 1974 and later replaced, mandates all print media to renew their licenses on annual basis, and only those special government - approvement management shares can exercise considerable control over media outlets (Chua, 2017)

MediaCorp, owned by the government through an intermediary company named Temasek and Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), with its extensive newspaper portfolio, dominate the media landscape. SPH published well-known titles, including The Straits Times, Singapore's most popular English language daily. Meanwhile, MediaCorp runs the country's main television and radio stations, including Channel News Asia (CNA), which is largely trusted by the population, Despite a gradual drop in print and television media consumption, these mediums are nevertheless important providers of political news, This influence over traditional media allows the government to set the narrative and maintain stability, especially on political issues (Reuters institute, 2024).

With the emergence of digital media, Singapore has seen a shift in how political information is consumed. The country has a high internet penetration rate of 92% with platforms like Facebook, WhatsApp and YouTube being frequently used for political conversation. Social media platforms, particularly Instagram and TikTok's quick rise shows the transition towards digital-native news consumption. However, even in the digital sphere, the government maintains regulatory oversight. The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), Singapore's "anti-fake news" laws, requires online platforms and social media users to provide corrections to any content considered incorrect by authorities. This law gives the government broad authority over online information, requiring individuals and media outlets to comply with government-issued rectification orders or face penalties. In recent years, these correction orders have targeted opposition leaders and independent media sites, extending the government's control over political discussions online (Reuters Institute, 2024).

It can also be argued that Singapore's media environment is based on "mediated control," with the media's primary purpose being to "inform" and "educate" in ways that foster societal cohesion rather than challenge authority. This viewpoint influences not only traditional media but also the boundaries of political debate online, fostering an atmosphere of cautious compliance among journalists and alternative media (Lee, 2010).

New digital-native channels like Mothership, as well as podcasts like The Daily Ketchup, appeal to younger viewers by combining social news and critical commentary. However, these platforms still need to confront substantial hurdles, such as suspensions, license concerns, and the possibility of defamation cases. Alternative websites, such as The Online Citizen, have even relocated their operations to other countries to continue reporting (Reuters Institute, 2024).

Therefore, although digital platforms have expanded Singapore's access to political knowledge, the strict government regulations that have been formed by decades of litigation, combined with the state's ideology for social harmony prevents free flow of political news, and it is ensured that this information is managed carefully. As a Singaporean citizen,, it is essential to give balance the diversity of the emerging digital against the pre-existing dominance of state-endorsed narratives.

Quality of News

Singapore's media structure, which severely limits editorial flexibility, is reflected in the quality of news generated there, which tends to reinforce government narratives while limiting critical analysis. According to Castro-Herrero et al. (2016), political and structural factors affect news quality in ways other than ideological bias. According to Lee and Willnat (2009), Singapore's media primarily informs and educates within the constraints established by the government, typically depoliticising news in order to maintain political stability and societal togetherness.

Empirical statistics show that, while Singaporean media maintains high technical standards, its political reporting is cautious and supportive of the government. According to Lee and Willnat (2009), the media's role as a platform for political debate suffers during elections since coverage favours the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and offers opposition parties minimal prominence. The scope of critical reporting is further limited by regulatory regulations such as the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act and the use of defamation lawsuits, which encourage journalists to self-censor (Lee & Willnat, 2009).

This is also consistent with van Aelst et al.'s (2017) global observations of diminishing news quality due to commercial pressures and entertainment. Although Singapore's media market is less commercialized, there are comparable challenges between maintaining audience engagement and providing serious political coverage. Mothership and other digital-native sites present alternative perspectives, but they suffer editorial standards issues and occasional mistakes (Reuters Institute, 2024).

The Freedom House (2024) study quantifies the impact of these restraints, giving Singapore a low score of 48 out of 100 for freedom, categorizing it as "not free." The research focuses on legal and regulatory restraints that limit journalists' capacity to function independently, such as stringent licensing requirements, defamation laws, and government-imposed rectification orders under the Protection against Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA). These policies contribute to a media environment in which critical debate is curtailed and media plurality is restricted (Freedom House, 2024).

In evaluating Singapore's news quality, it is clear that high production standards coexist with significant political constraints. The media functions less as an adversarial watchdog and more as a state-aligned institution supporting governance goals—a

model of “authoritarian resilience” (Lee & Willnat, 2009). As digital platforms grow, the tension between enhancing news quality and expanding diverse political perspectives remains a critical challenge for the country’s democratic development

Media Concentration and Diversity of News

Singapore's media environment is highly concentrated, with a small number of prominent businesses controlling the majority of news production and delivery. The state has significant influence on media ownership and editorial control, resulting in a system of "mediated control," in which both public and commercial media outlets align closely with government priorities (Lee, 2010). The primary media firms, Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) and MediaCorp, dominate the local news business, with few independent publications gaining significant popularity. According to the Reuters Institute Digital News Report (2018), SPH's The Straits Times is the most popular conventional news source among Singaporeans, reaching 51%, followed by MediaCorp’s Channel NewsAsia (CNA) at 41%. Although Singaporeans access international news sources, local media consumption is heavily concentrated within these two entities, restricting the diversity of news voices and perspectives (Jr. 2018).

This concentrated ownership is consistent with global concerns raised by Van Aelst et al. (2017), who highlight how rising media consolidation, often through mergers and the dominance of mega-platforms such as Google and Facebook, can limit editorial diversity and narrow the range of political opinions available to the public. In Singapore, this concentration is exacerbated by legal frameworks that encourage a tightly managed media industry. While digital platforms have created new places for alternative perspectives, their impact is frequently limited when compared to the reach and resources of traditional media outlets. According to Van Aelst et al. (2017), such consolidation can worsen the reduction in news quality and plurality, both of which are challenges in Singapore's developing media ecosystem.

Peruško's (2024) analysis of media capture phenomena in Central and Eastern European (CEE) countries provides additional analogies. Close relationships between political elites, oligarchs, and media owners result in extremely partisan and concentrated media landscapes, with public service broadcasters frequently under political control, reducing media plurality and journalistic independence. Although Singapore's setting is different, it has characteristics of hybrid media regimes in which ownership and editorial autonomy are hampered by political monitoring. This has the effect of keeping a stable, government-aligned media environment while undermining diverse political discourse and independent journalism.

When assessing Singapore's media concentration, it is obvious that while high production standards and digital innovation are benefits, they coexist with a limited spectrum of editorial opinions dominated by government-linked organizations. The absence of competitive pluralism restricts the public's exposure to other ideas, particularly critical or opposing narratives. This limited diversity risks creating an information environment that is less favourable to democratic deliberation and more likely to repeat official discourses. The reliance on a few significant media firms,

combined with the state's regulatory authority, reveals a media ecosystem that values stability and control over diversity and competition.

Fragmentation and Polarization

Singapore stands out in the study of media fragmentation and polarization. Recent empirical research reveals that Singapore's news media network, despite its thin and low-density structure, does not display considerable fragmentation. Sun et al. (2020) discovered low centralization and modularity values in Singapore's media network, indicating a coherent and non-fragmented system. This coherence is largely due to the government's rigorous media rules, which effectively limit the diversity of politically sensitive content and stifle oppositional perspectives. Unlike randomized media network models, which exhibit greater fragmentation, Singapore's controlled environment preserves narrative homogeneity, indicating deliberate state regulation of the public realm to maintain regime stability. Furthermore, Singaporeans' consumption of international news outlets, which is frequently excluded from local network analysis, complicates assessments while suggesting that the government's influence over the local media landscape is critical in averting fragmentation.

This tendency is consistent with Cho's (2025) thesis, which contends that the composition of the public sphere—particularly the proportion of pro- and anti-regime commentary—influences the regime's response to media dynamics such as fake news and fragmentation. Singapore represents a hostile public realm for dissent, with anti-regime expressions aggressively prohibited by laws such as the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act. The broad reach of this statute enables the government to identify dissenting ideas as "fake news" and inflict harsh punishments, discouraging opposition voices and maintaining a dominant pro-regime discourse. Cho compares this aggressive, repressive strategy to more permissive techniques used in nations such as the Philippines, where pro-regime disinformation thrives in a more fragmented and polarized public space. Singapore's media environment avoids fragmentation not through pluralism, but by coercively limiting political contestation.

While state-led media cohesiveness avoids the typical results of fragmentation, such as ideological echo chambers and polarized electorates seen in other democracies (Castro-Herrero et al. 2016; Van Aelst et al. 2017), it presents serious normative difficulties. Singapore's low fragmentation implies minimal political pluralism and a confined public sphere, where critical discourse is discouraged and the media primarily serves as a collaborator in regime legitimation. This trade-off between media cohesiveness and democratic openness calls into question the idea that less fragmentation is always beneficial. Peruško (2024) warns that even in managed institutions, polarization might resurface through digital media platforms, introducing new forums for dissent and ideological grouping beyond traditional official scrutiny. Singapore's traditional media networks remain intact, although social media and internet forums provide challenges to state control and hence potentially forming fragmentation in subtle ways. These digital venues have the potential for alternative perspectives, but they are being targeted by regulation and surveillance, complicating the possibility of genuine diversity. This dynamic highlights a major flaw in the state's approach: while it

can repress fragmentation at the institutional level, it struggles to entirely regulate the developing digital public sphere, which continues to provide spaces for political contestation despite constraints.

Furthermore, the Singapore case emphasizes the larger dilemma confronting authoritarian and illiberal regimes in the digital age. On the one hand, strict media regulations and sweeping anti-fake news legislation allow the regime to create a united media environment, thereby preventing fragmentation and division that could jeopardize regime stability. On the other hand, the same technologies that permit surveillance and censorship also strengthen alternative communication networks, posing unforeseen challenges to the regime's authority. Singapore's model thus shows how state authority may dramatically affect the information environment, while also emphasizing the limitations of authoritarian media control in an age of ubiquitous digital media.

Overall, Singapore's strictly regulated media environment indicates that fragmentation and polarization are not natural outcomes of various media markets, but can be substantially influenced by political and regulatory circumstances. Singapore achieves minimal fragmentation and restricted polarization by suppressing dissident voices and manipulating the public sphere to favour pro-regime narratives, but at the expense of democratic liberties and pluralistic discourse. This contradicts findings from other contexts, where fragmentation is associated with political instability and diminished public spheres (Castro-Herrero et al. 2016; Van Aelst et al. 2017). Singapore's approach emphasizes the intricate relationship between media structure, political control, and democratic involvement, implying that fragmentation must be understood not only empirically, but also in terms of broader consequences for political participation and media freedom. The regime's capacity to efficiently "engineer" a unified media environment shows how state authority can significantly alter the information landscape, but potentially at the expense of public empowerment and critical participation, which are essential for democratic life.

Fake News

Relativism in news, as well as the phenomena of false news and misinformation, represent important challenges to current public discourse, particularly in cultures such as Singapore, where media consumption patterns, trust, and government actions intersect in unusual ways. According to Van Aelst et al. (2017), the proliferation of misinformation, conspiracy theories, and the degradation of traditional journalistic authority have all contributed to the ubiquitous idea of relativism—the belief that all points of view are equally valid. Their research demonstrates how algorithmic echo chambers and false news weaken the shared factual basis required for democratic knowledge, resulting in fragmented public spheres where truth is contested and trust in the media falls. This fragmentation of reality endangers democratic discussion by encouraging distrust of institutional sources and cultivating polarized, misled publics.

Singapore exemplifies how such dynamics interact with a specific socio-political setting. According to the Ipsos (2018) analysis on fake news perceptions in Singapore, while the majority of Singaporeans (79%) believe they can recognize fake news, a staggering

90% mistake one or more false news headlines for real. This discrepancy between optimism and actual skill demonstrates the complexities of detecting fake news in digital media ecosystems. Despite having high self-reported trust in traditional news sources such as print newspapers and government communication platforms, Singaporeans increasingly rely on social media and instant messaging applications as their primary news sources. According to the study, these networks are also the primary conduits for the distribution of fake news, with instant messaging apps such as WhatsApp being particularly implicated in the propagation of misinformation. Crucially, many respondents admitted to sharing fake news inadvertently, highlighting the difficulties disinformation poses even among a generally media-literate populace.

In addition to these findings, Lim and Perrault's (2020) study on perceptions of news sharing in Singapore discovered that, while social media is widely used, it is met with low trust, whereas government communication platforms enjoy the highest trust levels. This trust in government-run channels mirrors Singapore's overall political culture and media ecology, which is marked by a strong state presence and regulation. The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA), enacted in 2019, exemplifies the government's proactive approach to combating disinformation, which Francis L. F. Lee (2024) claims has had good effects on boosting public trust and minimizing the societal harms caused by fake news. Lee's empirical research in Hong Kong and other contexts shows that perceptions of fake news severity and influence have a negative impact on general media trust, but this effect is moderated by political trust: people with higher political trust are more likely to support stringent anti-disinformation laws and view government intervention positively. Thus, in Singapore, high political trust promotes support of state-led false news regulation, which the government views as critical to maintaining social harmony and public order.

However, the precautions against fake news, while helpful in minimizing misinformation, come at a high cost. Özdan (2021)'s work on fake news safeguards criticizes how such legal frameworks might limit free expression, repress opposition, and solidify governmental dominance over the media environment. The tension between combatting misinformation and sustaining democratic standards is particularly evident in hybrid regimes like Singapore's, where law and order frequently take precedence over civil freedoms in the political value hierarchy. Peruško's (2024) examination of media systems highlights a trade-off between delegitimizing legacy media and the growth of "alternative facts" due to poor institutional safeguards and limited professional autonomy. In Singapore, stringent regulatory constraints and government communication platforms supersede traditional journalistic functions, resulting in a media climate in which certain perspectives are prioritized and others are excluded, undermining pluralism and open debate over truth.

Van Aelst et al. (2017) believe that the relativism that characterizes misinformation environments is caused not only by fake news, but also by a reduction in traditional journalistic authority. As audiences increasingly get news through individualized digital channels where algorithms value interaction above authenticity, they are presented with tailored material that validates pre-existing ideas and reinforces conspiracy theories. This approach weakens the shared factual baseline essential for productive public

discourse while increasing susceptibility to "alternative facts." The Ipsos study highlights this phenomena in Singapore, where younger groups are more likely to obtain news via social media while also being more sensitive to disinformation, emphasizing the urgent need for improved digital literacy and critical media education.

Furthermore, Lee's (2024) research emphasizes how political ideals influence responses to misinformation. Individuals who value law and order are more inclined to support aggressive governmental actions to combat fake news, even if they restrict civil freedoms. Those who value civil rights, on the other hand, are more likely to support autonomous media and civil society activities to combat misinformation. This paradox is crucial in Singapore's setting, where the dominant political culture and institutional arrangements promote order and regulation, allowing for a top-down response to misinformation at the expense of media freedom and plurality.

Despite these limitations, the Singapore experience has revealed opportunities. The high level of trust in government communication channels suggests that civic technology and government-led efforts can encourage accurate information and public engagement. Lim and Perrault (2020) argue that such trust can be used to create interventions that combat disinformation, particularly in closed communication networks like instant messaging apps. However, the success of such efforts is based on striking a balance between official involvement and respect for free expression, as well as building public trust in independent media and fact-checking institutions.

When these intricacies are examined, it becomes evident that combating relativism and fake news necessitates numerous methods that go beyond legislation. While Singapore's regulatory strategy has limited the dissemination and impact of misinformation, it raises fundamental concerns about democratic governance, media plurality, and citizen empowerment. The risk remains that excessive control over information flows may entrench state narratives and repress legitimate opposition, thus encouraging scepticism and disengagement. Thus, future initiatives should address how to strengthen institutional safeguards, encourage media professionalism, and improve public media literacy all while protecting democratic liberties.

Degree of inequality in political knowledge

In Singapore, the relationship between media consumption and political knowledge is complex, involving media control, digital platform affordances, and civic culture. Despite the country's heavily regulated mainstream media landscape, in which major publications are tightly tied to the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) and politically related corporations, digital news platforms have provided new pathways for political knowledge and engagement. Kim et al. (2022) show that Singaporeans who consume news through online news websites, news apps, Facebook, and YouTube have higher levels of political information seeking and expressive participation—two essential paths to civic and political engagement. Notably, YouTube appeared as the platform with the greatest impact on political participation, presumably due to its immersive video content and algorithmically tailored news streams that encourage long-term interaction. Facebook promotes political knowledge and activism by allowing for social sharing and

discussion. In contrast, messaging applications like WhatsApp, despite their extensive use for news sharing, had no substantial impact on political awareness or involvement, most likely due to their private and limited social networks, which limit broader political conversation (Kim et al. 2022).

The affordances of these platforms influence how Singaporeans learn about politics: public and interactive platforms with rich information and chances for social expression tend to improve political knowledge and involvement, whereas more private and content-limited platforms do not. However, the overall image is hampered by Singapore's political economy of media control. According to assessments of Singapore's media system, mainstream media serve not just as information producers, but also as tools for establishing political consensus among elites and marginalizing opposition (Lee 2010). The strong relationship between the state, powerful media corporations, and politically affiliated enterprises ensures that news framing and agenda-setting tend to promote the ruling party's dominance, limiting the diversity of political opinions available to the public. This state influence extends to the digital sphere, where collaboration between mainstream and independent online media blurs boundaries and influences political discourse, potentially limiting critical engagement and deepening knowledge inequality (Mateusz Brodowicz 2024).

Recognizing the issues associated with unequal digital access, the Singapore government has actively promoted policies to bridge the digital divide, with the goal of ensuring more equitable access to digital platforms and, as a result, facilitating wider political information consumption. Programs that provide cheap internet, improve digital literacy, and promote community digital involvement aim to increase citizens' access to political news and conversation online (Centre for Public Impact, 2023). While these initiatives address structural impediments to access, the conversion of access to political knowledge is influenced by human motivation, media literacy, and the sort of content encountered. Thus, digital inclusion measures are vital but insufficient to entirely address political knowledge gaps.

Empirical study indicates that political knowledge disparity in Singapore is driven by both structural media constraints and the fragmented and platform-specific character of news consumption. Van Aelst et al. (2017) argue in broader comparative research that media fragmentation and polarization exacerbate inequalities by creating divergent information environments—some people engage with rich, high-quality political content, while others consume partisan or entertainment media, resulting in uneven political learning. This impact is paralleled in Singapore, where disparities in platform usage and content affordances generate divergent political knowledge outcomes. Peruško (2024) argues that media capture, political meddling, and educational inequality contribute to knowledge gaps, restricting equal possibilities for political learning in hybrid media systems.

Beyond acquiring political information, expressive participation—the act of voicing thoughts and engaging in public debate—has emerged as a greater predictor of civic and political engagement in Singapore (Kim et al. 2022). This demonstrates that political knowledge alone is insufficient; active engagement through expression and discourse

strengthens the impact of information on democratic participation. However, Singapore's subdued civic culture, which is characterized by cautious political participation and a regulated media environment, may limit the amount to which expressive participation may thrive, sustaining political knowledge gaps.

Finally, as the digital media landscape evolves, new processes emerge that may influence the diffusion of political knowledge. YouTube's unique features, which mix immersive content with algorithmic incentives for continuing consumption, stand in stark contrast to WhatsApp's restricted sociality. These affordances, combined with ongoing shifts in media management and the political economy of information, necessitate ongoing scholarly attention to understand how political elite influence and technological changes interact to shape political learning and participation in Singapore (Lee 2014; Kim et al. 2022; Mateusz Brodowicz 2024).

Conclusion

Singapore's political media landscape is a complex interaction of government regulation, media concentration, digital innovation, and shifting patterns of political engagement. The state's long-standing influence over traditional media channels guarantees that political narratives overwhelmingly support regime stability and social cohesiveness, restricting the space for critical or opposing viewpoints in the mainstream. This has created a highly concentrated media ecosystem in which a few powerful entities dominate the information available to the public, resulting in limited diversity of news voices and opinions.

Simultaneously, fast digital development and high internet penetration have created new platforms and channels for Singaporeans to consume political news and participate in public conversation. Social media and digital-native outlets offer alternate sources of information, which appeals to younger and more digitally savvy consumers. However, even in this developing digital arena, government laws and legislation place restrictions on the free flow of information and speech, reflecting the state's emphasis on ensuring social peace and political stability.

The regulated character of the media environment has an impact not only on the supply and quality of political information, but also on public sphere fragmentation and polarization. Unlike many democracies, where various media ecosystems can result in fragmented and polarized audiences, Singapore's media landscape is reasonably cohesive, but this coherence comes at the expense of limited political plurality and constricted public discourse. This method, while effective in preventing overt polarization, stifles the growth of a robust and pluralistic democratic society.

Furthermore, the ubiquity of misinformation and fake news in the digital age creates additional obstacles. While the government's proactive position against false information attempts to maintain social order and public trust, such actions can also restrict media

freedom and repress dissenting voices, straining the balance between regulation and democratic openness.

These linked factors influence the level of political knowledge inequality in Singapore. Individual capacities such as digital literacy and motivation influence access to political information, as do media platform characteristics and governmental control. Platforms that provide rich material and social interaction tend to promote increased political learning and involvement; nevertheless, unequal access and a cautious political culture imply that differences in political knowledge exist across the population.

Importantly, political knowledge does not ensure active involvement. The ability and willingness to voice political thoughts and engage in discourse are crucial for transforming information into democratic participation. However, Singapore's subdued civic climate and closely regulated media restrict such outspoken participation, exacerbating political knowledge disparities.

To summarize, Singapore's media and political scene is distinguished by a careful balance of control and innovation, stability and limited pluralism, access and regulation. While digital platforms have increased chances for political learning and engagement, long-term institutional, legal, and cultural issues continue to influence who learns about politics and how individuals participate. Addressing these difficulties needs not only improving digital access and literacy, but also developing a more open, varied, and critical media environment that enables vigorous democratic engagement in the coming years.

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