

issue 4: cherian george's

calibrated coercion

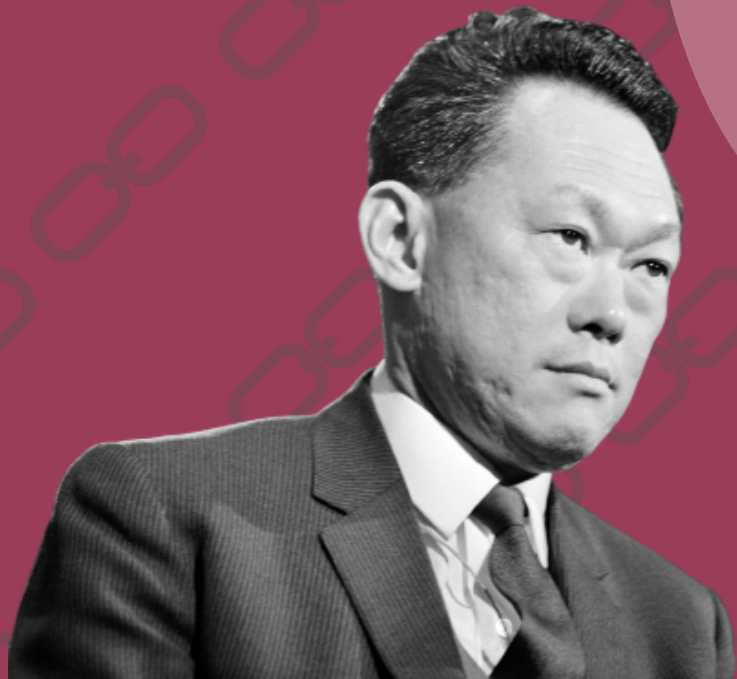


**BIG IDEAS
EXPLAINED**

Stability At What Cost?

“

Freedom of the press, freedom of the news media, must be subordinated to the overriding needs of the integrity of Singapore, and to the primacy of purpose of an elected government.



Lee Kuan Yew

at the 1971 General Assembly of
the International Press Institute

This issue is based on research from [Cherian George](#), a professor of media studies and associate dean for research at the Hong Kong Baptist University's School of Communication. He researches media freedom, censorship, and hate propaganda. Before joining academia, he was a journalist with The Straits Times in Singapore.



What is Calibrated Coercion?

According to Cherian George, calibrated coercion involves a “light-touch” approach which uses subtle press controls to maintain its dominance and build ideological hegemony.



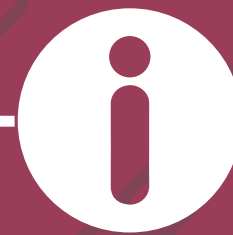
These are very different from visible methods of control (e.g. imprisoning or torturing journalists) employed by other countries.



Economic Sanctions

Regulatory Restrictions

Defamation Suits

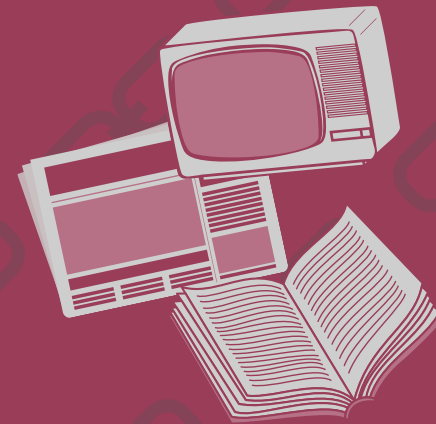


This is why Cherian George disagrees with Singapore’s extremely low rankings on press freedom indexes.

Equating calibrated coercion to visible methods of control in other countries trivialises the extreme human rights violations and ignores the different political effects of these actions.

Why is calibrated coercion successful?

Calibrated coercion's success lies in its subtlety.



for example...

Economic sanctions are hardly considered a form of repression but they can be particularly effective tools of censorship

Cherian George notes that the government has not abused its control over the press to the point that the public and journalists have boycotted the mainstream media and flown in droves to alternative websites.



Calibrated coercion in practice: Regulatory Restrictions (1 of 2)

From Visible Forces

The Internal Security Act (ISA) allows for the **detention of a person for up to two years without a warrant** if the president is satisfied that it is necessary for national security or public order. **Though the ISA gave the government the power to ban newspapers and imprison editors, the government's control over the press has evolved into the subtler methods of calibrated coercion.**

→→ To



Calibrated coercion in practice: Regulatory Restrictions (2 of 2)

1 The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (NPPA)

- Newspapers must renew their permits **annually**.
- Newspapers must issue management shares to government nominees (which allows for government intervention over editorial direction and senior editorial appointments)
- Allows the government to restrict the circulation of foreign publications (or any publication said to be working for such interests)

→ Calibrated Coercion ↕

2 The Broadcasting Act (1994) imposes a licensing requirement on radio and television, protecting the state-owned MediaCorp from unwanted competition.

- Internet regulations (1996) under the Act require internet service providers to block any content that regulators find objectionable
- Sites that deal with more sensitive topics (e.g. religion, politics) have to register with the regulatory agency, and take “full responsibility for the contents on the website(s)

The effect of calibrated coercion on the press

To avoid regulatory restrictions, press organisations have developed a culture of caution and self-censorship. This is seen through the uniquely Singaporean concept of OB markers.

What are OB markers?

Informally defined areas that the government believes responsible players should treat as off-limits

Breaching OB Markers risks harming the trust between individuals or organisations and government.



Cannot anyhow talk about

- racial/religious sensitivities
- authority of individual government officials
- government policy
- social norms
- Singapore's identity as a country
- foreign news
- hot new controversial topics

Myths about the Press



Government is the elected and legitimate voice of the people, and the press doesn't have moral authority to challenge the government on equal terms.

This overlooks freedom of expression as a requirement for free and fair elections that bolsters government legitimacy.



The media should make Singaporeans understand the government's policy choices and constraints on its society.

The media could assess the country's performance and greater freedom of expression could also develop innovation, creativity, and entrepreneurship.



Singapore is a small nation and an unchecked liberal democracy would ruin us.

News media professionals know the risks of causing offence to the country's communities. Loosening press restrictions will lead to voluntary self-restraint.



What would a free press look like?

ORDER

ANARCHY



Got middle ground what!

Cherian George suggests that the dichotomy of order vs anarchy presented in debates about the press is not true.

Presenting options as the responsibility of the majority vs the freedom of the individual unfairly pushes people to more **conservative options**.

Though government press restrictions may serve legitimate aims, they are currently overly-broad and excessively punitive.



This discourages and dampens citizens' democratic participation and government legitimacy.

What Can We Learn From This?

- ① Freedom of press is just one of the many ways in which the rights of the individual is balanced against that of the collective. In understanding the history and current state of Singapore's press, we can understand how governing ideologies of the past have shaped Singapore's media today.
- ② Despite its invisibility, both the explicit and implicit constraints enforced on the press do have costs that come alongside its benefits.
- ③ The press plays a large role in getting information to the public. Therefore, it is important that the constraints filtering the information are known.

glossary of terms

liberal
democracy

a democratic government that functions under the principles of classic liberalism

hegemony

leadership or dominance by one social group over the others

ideology

a system of ideas or ideals (in this context, related to politics)

ideological
hegemony

individuals conforming to ideologies willingly, even when the ideologies are harmful or silencing

the
Fourth Estate

refers to the press and news media's ability to advocate and to frame political issues, making it a significant social and political actor

References and Recommended Readings

- George, Cherian. *Freedom from the Press: Journalism and State Power in Singapore*. NUS Press, 2012. Apple Books.
- George, Cherian. "Consolidating authoritarian rule: calibrated coercion in Singapore." *The Pacific Review* 20, no. 2 (2007), 127-145. doi:10.1080/09512740701306782.
- George, Cherian. "The Internet and the Narrow Tailoring Dilemma for "Asian" Democracies." *The Communication Review* 6, no. 3 (2003), 247-268. doi:10.1080/10714420390226270.002.
- Tey, Tsun H. "Confining the Freedom of the Press in Singapore: A "Pragmatic" Press for "Nation-Building"?" *Human Rights Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2008), 876-905. doi:10.1353/hrq.0.0034.
- Cheong Yip Seng's Article: *The Singapore Press: How Free, How Credible?*

Much of Singaporean academia remains inaccessible to the public due to jargon or paywalls, thus impacting citizen participation in policy conversations and civic engagement. This issue is part of an infographic project by CAPE to digest and repackage theories, knowledge, and research by our homegrown academics for the Singaporean public.



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