

Press **control!**

Two books expose Singapore government's grip on the media



By P.N. BALJI / Singapore

For media watchers in Singapore, this is bonus time. In the space of just a year, two definitive books have emerged to tell the Singapore media story from two very different angles. And this in a country which hardly scrutinises its media, both from an academic and a practitioner's perspective.

The media here watch everybody, but nobody, except the government's large monitoring unit, really watches the media.

The books by former editor-in-chief of the English/Malay Newspapers Division of the Singapore Press Holdings, Cheong Yip Seng, and Nanyang Technological University's Associate Professor Cherian George, have brought a refreshing twist to that truism.

It is Cheong's book, *OB Markers: My Straits Times Story*, that goes against the grain. It is not fashionable for Singapore editors to tell all; instead, they prefer to take stories to their graves. But Cheong, who was a journalist for 43 years, 19 of them as editor-in-chief, is the exception.

Told by a journalist, who started in the profession writing racy stories as a crime reporter, his book relates in vivid detail how the government intervened in appointing editors, shaping news coverage and restructuring the media landscape to maintain the ruling party's grip on power.

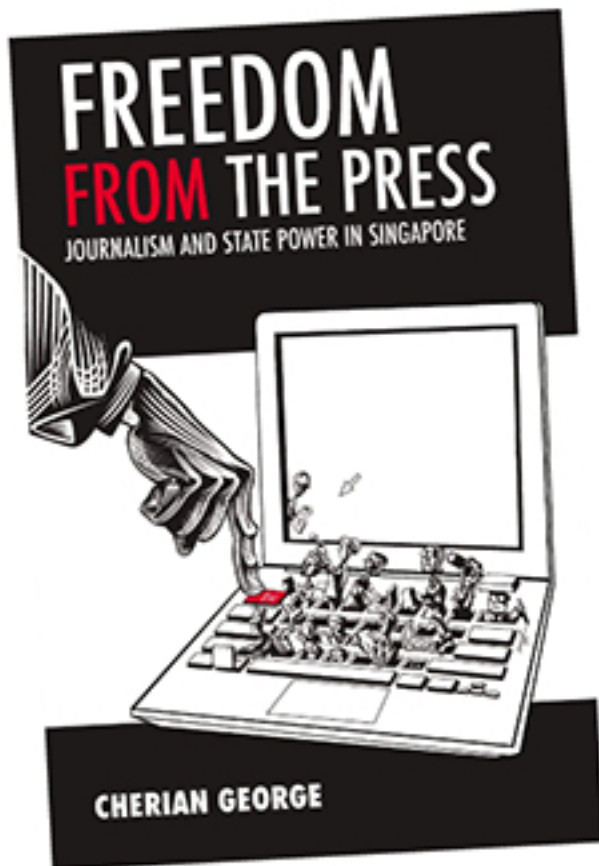
Sometimes, the orders were downright gangster-like. Cheong the editor reflects on the example of how Cheong the reporter was told by then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew that "I will break your neck if you report what I had just said".

Sometimes, they were given matter-of-factly. Like when Cheong was told during a plane journey back home after an assignment covering then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong's visit to Myanmar in 1987: "We want you to take over as editor-in-chief."

Cheong was then the editor of *The Straits Times*.

But what should make this book a favourite of media watchers are the heroic battles fought behind the scenes by the editors of ST to resist government pressure.

One such incident was Kuan Yew's attempt to get the



paper to publish the full O-level results of Opposition politician Chiam See Tong at the height of the hustings in 1984. The intention was to show that Chiam, because of his not-so-good academic performance, was not the right choice for MP.

George's book, *Freedom From The Press: Journalism and State Power in Singapore*, is grounded in sound research and a writing style that is more that of a journalist than an academic.

The beauty of this book is the rational way in which it approaches government-media dynamics.

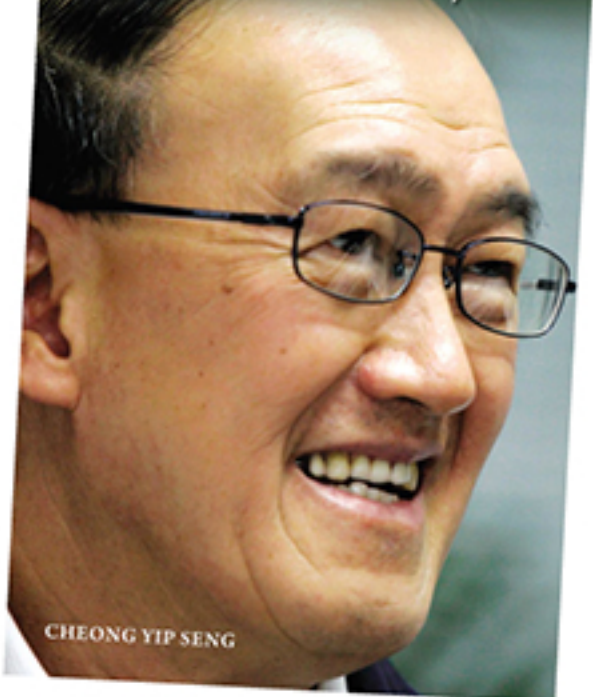
These relations have always been seen in a very black-and-white way by those who have studied Singapore's media history. But George digs into the grey areas and brings out a new perspective.

"Calibrated coercion is an important feature of Singapore's approach to managing the media. Draconian powers remain in the statute books. Yet, the government has often left these on the shelf and reached for less visible tools to prod the media this way and that.

"Over the decades, there has been a shift away from

OB MARKERS

My Straits Times Story



CHEONG YIP SENG

flamboyant punishments such as imprisoning journalists and banning publications to behind-the-scenes controls that create the conditions for self-censorship."

George devotes one whole chapter to this sophisticated management of media which sets apart this authoritarian government from many others.

"...Lee Kuan Yew recognised that he could only use newspapers effectively if he allowed them to retain some credibility, which would be crushed if his grip was too tight," he says.

I have seen this kind of management at work when I was an editor with SPH. An inordinate amount of time is spent by political leaders to convince the journalists why the government's way is the right way.

Sitting in a cosy dining room with the prime minister within touching distance can have an overpowering effect, especially on up-and-coming journalists.

Everything is said with a straight face, there are no direct orders, you are allowed to put up counter points but, in the end, there is no doubt whose views prevail.

As George hints, this kind of approach breeds self-

censorship, and as a couple of examples of recent times have shown, will only lead to the media losing its grip on a reading public who now have multiple sources for their news.

Both took place during the 2006 general election. *The Straits Times* had an aerial-view photograph of huge crowds at the Workers' Party rally but did not publish it before polling day for fear of a government reprisal. But some members of the public had similar pictures and they went viral online in no time.

At a ruling party rally, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong got so carried away in warning voters of the danger of having too many opposition politicians in Parliament that he said: "Instead of spending my time thinking what is the right policy for Singapore, I'm going to spend all my time thinking what's the right way to fix them..."

The next day's *ST* published this part in reported speech but substituted the word "fix" with "counter".

But the person who made that change never realised how times have changed with the online media on a frenzied spree critical of the PM for using the word "fix" and of *ST* for trying to protect him by editing his quote.

To make matters worse, Hsien Loong apologised the next day and put *ST* in a major fix over its self-censorship.

The media in Singapore have prospered as a business under the government's careful protection and nurturing and in the process have created a group of journalists who are likely to second guess the authorities.

The biggest loser will be the government because, as eyeballs move away from mainstream media, the leaders will find that they have no other pervasive platform to get government views across.

The big question then is whether the powers-that-be are prepared to cut the umbilical cord and pave the way for a media system that is directed by autonomous professional journalistic judgement.

George answers his own question this way: "...such a prescription seems to be too much of a mental leap for those in power".

That would be the view of most media watchers.

