



Settle or Fight?
Far Eastern Economic Review and Singapore
Teaching Note

Case Summary

Western ideals of the press cast journalism as the fourth estate, a watchdog of power, an institution wedded to objectivity, and a profession devoted to the truth. But those ideals are not necessarily shared around the world, and tensions can arise if they encounter opposing interests, differing political systems, or contrasting cultural norms.

This case focuses on the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (FEER), a monthly publication owned by the Dow Jones media company, and the lead-up to a libel battle with the Singapore government. In 2006, FEER published an article about a member of the political opposition. Singapore's authoritarian and litigiously inclined Lee family, which had ruled the country for more than 40 years, took exception to the piece, claiming it miscast them as incompetent and corrupt. True to precedent, the Lees demanded an apology, financial compensation, and the article's removal from the magazine's website. FEER sought a compromise, but the Lees rejected it. At the same time, and implausibly by coincidence, the Singapore government imposed new restrictions on FEER, requiring that it create an escrow account against potential legal damages and retain a local attorney.

The case traces FEER's development as a publication, together with the growth of Singapore from a British trading post to an economically powerful, multi-ethnic, polyglot city-state. The study also charts the uneasy experience of both the domestic and foreign press in Singapore under a government that claims power in the "enlightened ruler" tradition of Confucianism. Emphasizing team cooperation and interdependency over individualism, this philosophical, political and ethical system rejects press criticism as divisive, and insists that journalists should serve as a force for social and economic stability. The case study also follows the history of legal action that the country's authorities have taken over the years against the press, and the foreign media's poor record in winning libel cases against the regime.

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The threat of a lawsuit plus the government action presents FEER with a dilemma: should it capitulate to the family's demands? Or should it uphold its journalistic principles and fight the Singapore government in court, despite only a slim chance of winning, little apparent grass-roots resistance to the government within Singapore, and possible retaliation by the Lees against other Dow Jones companies?

Students step into the role of Dow Jones executives and lawyers who must decide what course of action to take. They will consider the implications and validity of non-Western political ideologies and ideals of the press, and must weigh the relative importance of a wide array of factors, including economic considerations and the possible knock-on effects that their decision could have for other foreign media outlets.

Teaching Objectives

This case was designed to illuminate differing, and sometime colliding, conceptions of the press: its standards, objectives and functions. The case can be used as a vehicle for discussing Western vs. non-Western ideals of the media, as a platform for considering the experience and responsibilities of the foreign press in a host society, and for weighing its role and duty as the eyes and ears of the wider international community.

At the heart of the discussion is a central question: what is journalism for, and what purpose does it serve? The issue, simple at first glance, is in reality shaped and influenced by a host of political, economic, social and cultural influences. Students are urged to consider the question in light of both Western, and Singaporean, ideals concerning the role of the press. What are the merits and demerits of the different conceptions of media? Is one better than the other, and if so, in what ways? Are the different norms mutually exclusive? Can they be reconciled or, at the very least, co-exist? Instructors might find it helpful to read or assign background material. In particular, it may be useful to flesh out Singapore's non-Western conceptions of the media with literature on alternative models of the press (see Suggested Readings).

Students are also encouraged to consider the related issue of the role and responsibility of the overseas press—a topic of particular significance due to the contraction of American news organizations and shuttering of US overseas bureaus in recent years. To what standards should a foreign press corps adhere? Those of the host country, their own country, or possibly a third standard, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights? In Article 19, the Declaration asserts that “(e)veryone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.”

The case study provides a basis for thinking about the competing interests and dilemmas that media companies face in seeking to be true to certain ideals while remaining economically

viable. Dow Jones owns FEER, but also the *Wall Street Journal*, *Barrons*, the Dow Jones Newswires and other properties. FEER's actions could have serious financial ramifications for other Dow Jones concerns, as well as for those of other media companies. This in turn leads to the issue of media conglomeration, and the complications that can result from media cross-ownership.

Class Plan

This case can be used in a course about international media, about the business of journalism, or on US coverage of foreign news.

Study questions. The instructor could help students prepare for discussion by assigning the following questions in advance.

- 1) How do the Western and Singaporean ideals of the press compare?
- 2) To what extent, if any, should the foreign press operating in a country with different media-related standards and ideals adapt to the ruling system?
- 3) What would you do if you were Dow Jones: fight the government, bow to its demands or seek a compromise?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to the questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can also use the students' work both to highlight talking points ahead of class, and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion. Instructors may find it beneficial to ask students in class to recapitulate their online arguments and responses—rather than simply reading the homework—in order to keep the discussion spontaneous and lively.

In-class questions. The instructors could pose any of the following questions in order to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

- a) What happened in the case? Brief synopsis of major developments on board.
- b) What should the role of the press be, according to Western and Singaporean ideals? List separately on board.
- c) What is your assessment of these different ideals? What are their relative strengths and weaknesses? In particular, what do you think of the Singaporean notion that media should

contribute to a society's stability and wealth, rather than serve as the Western-style adversarial watchdog?

d) In 1993, *The Economist*, backing down from a stand-off with the Lees, announced that it always sought "to obey the laws of countries in which we wish to publish." Should foreign media companies who operate in a particular country adhere to its rules and norms, even if they run counter to their own? What about non-Western media operating in Western countries which disagree with the prevailing norms and culture?

e) If a publication falls foul of laws and regulations of which it is well aware (even if they may be disagreeable), to what extent does it have the right to challenge them?

f) What are the risks and benefits—to the companies themselves, other foreign media, the local population and domestic audiences—of a foreign media outlet working in a country, such as Singapore, that curtails their freedom of speech? List on board.

g) Does the existence of censorship of one particular subject (for example, a ban on criticizing the government) mean that a foreign media company should refuse to cover that country at all?

h) Is there a difference between foreign bureaus toeing the government line in a host country, and the domestic press largely endorsing the position of its own government and official sources at home?

i) Singapore's government has a history of taking swift legal action against foreign media with which it is displeased. Given this precedent, was FEER brave or irresponsible in printing an article that it knew would likely anger the Lees?

j) What are the positives and negatives of FEER going to court to fight the decision of the Singapore government? List on classroom board.

k) Are there any other possible courses of action that FEER could take?

Suggested Readings

W. Lance Bennett, Regina G. Lawrence and Steven Livingston, *When the Press Fails: Political Power and the News Media From Iraq to Katrina*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

SYNOPSIS: This book examines the relationship between political power and the US news media through the prism of coverage of the Iraq war and Hurricane Katrina, and provides a useful complement to Hallin and Mancini's broader theoretical and cross-national approach to media and political systems (see below). *When the Press Fails* argues that reporters are woefully dependent on

official sources, and that this unhealthy reliance severely limits the extent to which dissenting views are covered, and opinions outside Washington are heard. The book, which suggests new practices for reporters to reduce their dependence on power, enables students to critically assess the American press system. It also presents a frame for students to think about the foreign and domestic press' relationship to the Lee government. Bennett et al refer to the US media's tendency to "defer to the best-packaged officially advanced political story," the "self-imposed limits that the journalism profession has helped place on political coverage," and the "unwritten rules of the Washington news game" which mean that "what carries a story is not necessarily its truth or importance," but whether it is driven by dominant officials within institutional decision-making arenas" (p. 29). Instructors may generate a lively discussion by posing the question: Is this really any different from how the press functions vis-à-vis the Lee government?

See also: Bartholomew H. Sparrow, *Uncertain Guardians: The News Media as a Political Institution*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999.

SYNOPSIS: This book echoes many of the key arguments that Bennett et al make, asserting that once-proud and independent journalists are today little more than shills for manipulative government officials and corporations. "Only rarely, and to a limited extent, are the news media able to act as significant checks on national government, or as advocates of a broader public interest," Sparrow writes. His claims, including the position in the "Money Making and Making News" chapter that news today is simply a profit-driven business that values dollars more than controversial, in-depth reporting, is a useful text when considering the position of Dow Jones and other large media companies operating in Singapore, which must balance profit with content.

Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini, *Comparing Media Systems*, Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

SYNOPSIS: The Anglo-American press model has long dominated Western popular thought and scholarship. But a new generation of research and comparative work is attempting to change that by recognizing different models of journalism. This book, which maps the relationship between political systems and media, provides students with an excellent conceptual framework for thinking about both the Western and Singaporean press. Based on a survey of media institutions in 18 West European and North American democracies, it compares them on four main criteria: media market development, journalistic professionalization, the nature and degree of state intervention, and political parallelism (or the links between the media and major divisions in society). Three major models of media systems are presented. The first is the "Polarized Pluralist" model, which is found in southern Europe and characterized by low levels of newspaper circulation and journalistic professionalization, and high levels of political parallelism and state intervention. The second is the "Democratic Corporatist" model found in central and northern

Europe that is characterized by high levels of newspaper circulation, parallelism, professionalization, and state intervention. The third, the “Liberal” model, is found in the North Atlantic region and is characterized by medium levels of newspaper circulation, strong professionalization, and low levels of parallelism and state intervention. The typology is useful for thinking about US media and for considering the extent to which Singapore or other Asian countries differ or accord with the models provided.

Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect*, New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001.

SYNOPSIS: Kovach and Rosenstiel make several claims about the duties and nature of journalism in this slim but classic book. Students may find the introduction and first chapter, “What is Journalism For?,” particularly helpful and are encouraged to consider Kovach and Rosenstiel’s perspective in terms of Hallin and Mancini’s “Liberal” model of the press.

“Watchdog Conference,” *The Nieman Reports*, Vol 54, No. 2. Summer 2000.

SYNOPSIS: This edition of the Harvard-based publication, based on a watchdog journalism conference held the previous year, focuses on the 2000 presidential elections. However, its rich and varied content provide many relevant articles for students to consider as they weigh the role of the press, including “Against the Commercial Impulse” (p. 65), “Journalism and Democracy are Names For the Same Thing” (p. 67), “What Are Journalists For” (p. 73), and “Media Censorship During the Troubles” (p. 86).