



THE SCOPE OF ALTERNATIVE NEWSPAPERS IN SINGAPORE IN PROPAGATING DISSIDENT INTERESTS

Dr. Mahim Mendis
Senior Lecturer in Mass Communication
Department of Social Studies
Open University of Sri Lanka

Abstract

This study explores the role of Singaporean journalists working for the alternative press and their capacity to confer legitimacy upon dissenting political views. While the implications of Singapore's restrictive regulatory framework cannot be ignored, stringent legislation on freedom of expression produces paradoxical effects: on the one hand, a confrontational culture of political communication, and on the other, a culture of political apathy. It is often assumed that authoritarian legislation automatically silences opponents; however, evidence from comparative contexts does not unequivocally support this assumption. Two major issues are accorded analytical priority in this study: (a) the organizational apparatus and ideological commitment to alternative policy in news production, and (b) the contribution of the alternative press to developing a critical mass in Singapore, with comparative insights from Sri Lanka. In both settings, the work of journalists aligned with the opposition remains insufficiently studied, partly due to intellectual apathy among the intelligentsia toward opposition media (Jesudason, 1999; Gomez, 2006).

Key Terms: dissent, political communication, political apathy, authoritarianism, alternative press, organizational apparatus, critical mass

Introduction to the Organizational Apparatus of Dissident News Production in Singapore: The Case of *New Democrat* and *Solidarity* Newspapers.

One cannot dispute that a stable media management apparatus is a pre-requisite if the press is to function consistently with an organized mission (Jesudason, 1999; Gomez, 2006). This applies not only for the mainstream press but for any one engaged in communication activities even on a periodic basis. In Singapore

the *New Democrat* is published every two months, though the target is not always realized. The *Solidarity* is published once in three months.

The need is also fundamental irrespective of the press system as well as the macro political culture that prevails in a country (Duverger, 1962). It is also logical to assume that the work of party activists and journalists working for them would be rendered meaningless if such apparatuses are not dedicated to represent contrary views grounded in political principles (Rodan, 1996; George, 2007).

Methodology

This research is grounded in qualitative ethnography, combining semi-structured interviews, participant observation in opposition newsrooms, and critical discourse analysis of opposition newspapers (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). The methodology was designed to capture the lived realities of journalists, editors, and activists producing alternative news under conditions of repression and organizational fragility.

Ethnographic Accounts: Fieldwork was conducted in Singapore between 1998 and 2002, with additional comparative insights from Sri Lanka to situate findings within a broader Asian framework (Rodan & Jayasuriya, 2007). Prolonged engagement with opposition party cadres and newsrooms allowed the researcher to observe practices of news gathering, editing, and distribution under constrained conditions. This provided first-hand insights into how dissenting voices are articulated despite structural barriers.

Semi-Structured Interviews: A total of 23 in-depth interviews were conducted with journalists, party activists, and former editors associated with the *New Democrat* (Singapore Democratic Party) and *Solidarity* (National Solidarity Party). Interviews explored topics such as internal party democracy, censorship anxieties, ideological orientation, financial struggles, and the psychological toll of working under surveillance. Narratives from respondents reveal tensions between political ideals and practical limitations (George, 2006). Quotations included in this study are drawn directly from these interviews, anonymized where requested to ensure participant safety.

Newsroom Observations: Extended periods of observation were carried out within party headquarters and small editorial teams. Observations focused on organizational decision-making, editorial disputes, technical production, and the challenges of distribution. Notably, interactions during production deadlines revealed how fear of litigation, internal disagreements, and lack of professional resources hindered the effectiveness of opposition communication (Jesudason, 1999).

Documentary Analysis: Complementing fieldwork, opposition newspapers (*New Democrat* and *Solidarity*) were systematically reviewed alongside PAP-affiliated publications such as *Petir*. Articles were coded for themes including government criticism, policy alternatives, mobilization appeals, and self-referential commentary. Comparative attention was given to how narratives constructed dissent and counter-hegemonic discourse, or conversely, reinforced defeatist attitudes (Gomez, 2008; George, 2012).

By combining ethnographic immersion, interview narratives, and textual analysis, this methodology not only illuminates the structural deficiencies of opposition media but also foregrounds the agency of individuals who persist in challenging authoritarian dominance.

The Organizational Apparatus of Dissident News Production in Singapore: The Case of New Democrat and Solidarity

One cannot dispute that a stable media management apparatus is indispensable if the press is to function consistently with an organized mission. This principle applies equally to the mainstream press and to those engaged in periodic communication activities within the opposition. In Singapore, the *New Democrat* is published every two months—although this target is not always realized—while *Solidarity* appears once every three months.

The demand for organizational stability remains fundamental irrespective of the prevailing press system or macro-political culture. Without durable structures, the work of party activists and journalists is rendered vulnerable, particularly when their mission is to articulate dissenting views grounded in political principles.

While opposition sympathizers as well as other discerning citizens lament over the regulatory framework of communication in Singapore, not much is known about the pathetic status of party organizations and the near absence of an apparatus to manage news production. That is with the type of respectability that an opposition deserves. Within them relevant activities are pursued on an ad hoc basis while the general environment remains uninspiring. The ground conditions represent the very opposite of what Chan (1985: 159-60) describes with regard to the PAP with its internal management structure and tight control over the cadre membership.

Explaining the ground realities confronting the organization of the press, an opposition activist working for *Solidarity* expressed his views as follows: “The absence of a well organized structure to coordinate our political communications has ripple effects. Possibly this has created a negative impression in the public and makes it difficult in attracting new members. We see that even our ardent sympathizers hesitate to offer their services regularly. They probably feel that there is no climate for such a commitment within opposition papers”.

As pointed out by another: “We cannot afford to recruit them on attractive terms. Furthermore, we cannot maintain costly infrastructure with the type of funds we have”.

These comments draw attention to problems of the Singaporean opposition parties as formal organizations. Party activists possibly feel apologetic about their plight since they wish to see the formidable structure of the dominant PAP within them. As Duverger (1962: 308) states the dominant party is identified with an epoch, that consists of its doctrines, ideas, methods and its style that coincide with those of the epoch.

Weakened Party Cadres Due to the Macro Level Culture of Distrust

Theoretically, these are constraints that could be eliminated with ease through commitment and leadership. Also as highlighted by these activists the availability of a relatively small registered membership also means that the party is denied a reasonably viable financial base to meet basic necessities. Rodan (1996) found that the Social Democratic Party (SDP) had only around 280 official members, and the Workers' Party (WP) about 2,600. Party cadres numbered in the dozens, with fewer than 100 active members across both parties. This aligns with Jesudason's (1999) argument that opposition weakness is structural rather than purely regime-imposed. Opposition activists in interviews pointed out that younger Singaporeans were socialized by the PAP into viewing dissenters as "anti-social" elements undermining national development (George, 2007).

This manufactured distrust contributes to a climate of political apathy (Gomez, 2006). But again one could question whether such a plight could be attributed solely to a hostile political regime since support for the opposition seldom dwindles in other Asian states with equally or even more oppressive politico-legal systems (Loke, 2016).

Lacklustre Membership Drive rooted in Uncertainty

Hence what is evident is the inability of the opposition political parties to draw into their fold an enthusiastic membership. According to Rodan (1996) the official membership of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and the Workers Party (WP) approximate to 280 and 2600 respectively. Party cadres number around forty-five for the SDP and sixty-five for the WP. He also points out that in both parties there aren't more than 100 active members inclusive of the cadre members.

Ironically, the activists themselves were not hopeful of any substantial increase in the formal membership thus painting a gloomy picture even for the future as potentially strong organizations. A political party cannot expect to have a vibrant structure without a formidable membership. The success of the organization depends on a diverse and talented membership. A political party cannot expect to have a vibrant structure without a formidable membership. The success of the organization depends on a diverse and talented membership. This they attributed to increasing indifference of those among the younger generation towards politically sensitive issues. In their view the government had for many years depicted 'dissidents' as 'anti-social elements' who are out to sabotage the progress made by the 'disciplined PAP' on behalf of the people since the late fifties.

Viability of Politically competitive Parallel Structures

Hence what is at stake is the viability of politically competitive parallel structures since they are not considered as beneficial to the citizenry. As stated by an activist, "Even within my immediate family this idea is there, and there is unhappiness on the part of many including my relatives and friends on my political interests. Actually these people are thoroughly brain washed by the regime. I don't see any hope for them. They do not think for themselves as mature adults any longer. They only know what they have been shown by the PAP. They cannot visualize any thing better".

Disintegrated Culture of Intra-Party Communication

While these remain major psychological barriers for motivated action, party cadres were asked as to what other factors, if at all, went against them within the prevailing context to commit oneself with vibrancy. It was their position that while the need for a strong opposition inspired them to continue with party activities they felt burdened at times by the culture of communication within the party itself. They thought that it would be in the best interest of their future struggles if the party hierarchy relates themselves to cadres more closely. Committed action, it was held, cannot be divorced from inspiring political relationships especially when the opposition is confronting a formidable State apparatus fine tuned by the experienced PAP. As stated by an SDP member, “I have heard that attitudes of many party leaders in government and in opposition throughout Asia have been patronistic towards the members. The locus of decision making has often been centralized. This kills the spirit of activism when the party is struggling with basic issues like increasing its membership”.

Unstable Party Structure Weakens Future Directions

It was his position that the work relating to the publication remained contentious with each passing issue since leaders within the Central Committee found it difficult to agree on the nature of content before them. This is due to their different individual orientations. It was mentioned that their leader Dr. Chee Soon Juan was pinned down by the government in 1996 for erroneous presentation of Health Care statistics in his publication titled, ‘Dare to Change: An Alternative Vision for Singapore’. Later adopted as the Party’s Political Manifesto.

Ever since he was found guilty by the Parliamentary Committee on Privileges more and more party members have become extra-cautious. Adding to this burden there is a fear psychosis arising from licensing requirements to disclose the nature of contents in advance to the Ministry.

Furthermore, the Central Committee members are held collectively responsible for what is published. In the case of both newspapers the inner constraints resulting from such disputes became aggravated since the printer needed to be satisfied that the contents would not be held libelous by the government. It was said that delays could be caused due to fears entertained even by a single member of the party central committee, which was according to this respondent a regular occurrence.

The end result was the creation of a ‘defeatist mentality’ even before the paper is printed. As explained by a member, “I can remember that in one issue of the *New Democrat* in 1999, it was mentioned in a letter to Lee Hsien Loong that before he tells Singaporeans not to think so much in dollars and cents he and his fellow ministers should declare their incomes and assets. Actually many of us were jittery about this comment. It meant that Lee Hsien Loong had been dishonest by the people. I believe that he could have filed a libel action on this, but for our good fortune nothing happened. So I am telling you that a comment that looks insignificant could become a stressful factor within this system. All this creates delays by days since the members are forced to deliberate on irrelevant issues”.

The Need for Intra-Party Democracy within the Opposition

Being centralized also due to small numbers, members in both parties expressed that they wish to see more inner party democracy since autocracy is a quality of their adversary, the PAP. Jesudason, J. (1999: 171) explains the complexity of effective decision making for Singaporean Opposition Parties when they are dependent on personalities. Over dependence on a single leader as the ‘Chief Spokesman’ of the party has had a negative bearing on the organizational culture and on decisions relating to the party publication.

Evidence of Self Righteous Orientation by Opposition Leaders

They said that seniors often displayed a ‘know all’ attitude and the newspaper became the mouthpiece of those who appeased the wishes of the leaders. Consequently, there is a tendency to marginalize competing ideas and suggestions on major issues due to idiosyncratic preferences as found in the case of those in supervisory positions at Straits Times. As revealed by him the sympathizers who bought the paper often sent feed-back that the messages lacked coherence, and furthermore, a sense of petty mindedness had been displayed. Elaborating with an example he said, “In a particular issue of the *New Democrat* last year, an influential member wrote that a 77 years old man who was too poor to afford a bus ride was killed by a car while crossing the road.

Trivializing and Compromising of Politically Pertinent News

Yet in another situation it was reported that a man and a woman who were evicted from their HDB flat for not paying rent had to live in a public toilet in Prime Minister’s own constituency. All these writings originated from the same source simply because of the influence he had with the leaders. What comes to be ignored is active and more meaningful criticism of the government. For this, there is no proper political will to make up their minds”.

They also said that the newspaper tends to be repetitive on selection of themes and the views expressed. They explained that it was difficult to control this due to a severe dearth of material that can be published. The implication is that readers could get an exhaustive feeling about what the opposition talks about. Jesudason (1999: 171) argues that the limited ideological spaces available to the opposition have led them to attack particular state policies and practices or to reject the whole political and moral order. In doing so they have not been able to convince the electorate on the alternative policies that could make a qualitative difference to what the public enjoys. Taking a rational and self-critical standpoint a member referred to a reader’s sentiment published in the new MediaCorp paper, ‘Today’, in its issue of 12th March, 2001 that opposition leaders like J.B Jeyaretnam have been repeating the same issues over and over again in spite of been replied adequately by the Ministers.

Disorganization with Weakened Ground Realities

It is evident that due to poor organizational infrastructure both the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) and the National Solidarity Party (NSP) see that their cadres are over-taxed with regard to political activities. Further

complicating this matter the involvement of the same members in all the stages of news production is considered self-defeating from a communication perspective. As it is, the same members had to coordinate each stage of the production process from the stage of getting the people to contribute articles to the stage of selling.

Also much needed to be written internally at present. Members also thought that the type-setting that they do internally is not professional at all and they themselves were dissatisfied. Explaining the related constraints an activist said: “The overall system creates burdens that should not have been there. It is terrible that the paper that is printed with enormous difficulties has no place to be displayed and legitimately sold. We do not have newsagents who are prepared to consider it as a part of their business.

Political Uncertainties through Autocratic Legislation

The Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act (Cap. 184) provides that any assembly or procession in a public place be prohibited/restricted if the authorities are satisfied that it might result in public disorder. Also Penal Code (Cap.224) makes unauthorized public demonstration an offence. It is as if to do business with us is to be out of business altogether for them in Singapore. This situation is created by the PAP since their policy is to show contempt to anyone sympathizing with the opposition cause (Jeyaretnam, J. B, 2003). So we have to be the vendors ourselves and be enterprising enough in selling. Much persuasion is needed and we end up shouting slogans in street corners near MRT stations to get the attention of the public. On many occasions the police and officers of the Ministry of Environment have warned us. They tell us that we are a public nuisance, committing a criminal offence. But most often they have stopped short of prosecution (Loke,2016). Our members however suffer from stress and anxiety when selling the paper. So the government has succeeded in showing us and the people how stressful it is to be identified with the opposition”.

The Ground Level Reality of Inadequate Representation

Looking at this objectively, a SDP activist said that this tendency would be inevitable in a context where the opposition is inadequately represented, with the three opposition members having their own preferences over specific issues which are their favorite subjects. The opposition newspapers confront this dilemma since the bulk of the work is done by the same men over and over again. These men feel strongly about certain themes, and they are often reflected in the paper.

Responding to the question whether they feel that the paper equals the arguments presented by the PAP organ Petir’, a member pointed out as follows: “It is not a pleasant task to be very objective on a question like that and to admit ones weaknesses to the detriment of party welfare. What I can say is that people expect a formidable message from the opposition, and this may not be happening according to their expectations. After all what is the justification for an opposition newspaper? Obviously to present a meaningful alternative to what the people already have. Not to lament and tell sobbing tales about how unfair the government is concerning the opposition. I agree that we need to tighten the screws policy wise”.

These views indicate that much should be done to bring the opposition papers to the expected level at a time when the people display increasing apathy concerning political causes. Respondents indicated that increasing indifference by the public together with opposition's own inability to awaken them, paves the way for people to justify the status quo even more vigorously. The implication is that a conservative minded electorate would willingly settle down to the status quo than opting for an inadequately publicized alternative.

Lethargic and Counter-Productive Behaviour

It was also highlighted that given the type of constraints that they have with a weak organizational structure, the opposition parties couldn't do much to discipline its own rank, when lethargic and counter productive behavior is seen on the part of its cadres. For instance, it was stated that the Sunday Walk-about that are planned in advance often start off with delays caused by irresponsible members. They lamented that members do not seek to engage in soul searching being so disgruntled with the government as well as with the people who have been indifferent towards them for decades. The resentments often come to be demonstrated through the newspaper itself. As elaborated by this activist, "A major theme of discussion in the New Democrat last year was the CPF savings. A controversial issue for a long time. The thrust of the message was that the PAP has no moral right to retain the hard earned money of the people, and to tell the people that they would squander away everything if the whole thing was given to them. But the answer that our paper proposed was not to my liking. The article in question was titled, "What can I do to get my CPF savings back?" which appeared as a short notice. It criticized the people for not listening to the SDP in the past. The writer made three major suggestions, namely, to pass this copy of the newspaper to many relatives and friends as possible since the information in the newspaper would go a long way in helping to protect their savings. It also said that the people should help the party and the newspaper, and give financial assistance to the newspaper to agitate on their behalf. While there was no inter-relationship between the CPF savings and the Party newspaper, the whole thing I believe was in poor taste".

Concluding Observations

The opposition has failed to establish a viable organizational structure capable of projecting dissenting views credibly. Rooted in structural deficiencies, opposition press outlets lack talented personnel, adequate infrastructure, and vibrant internal culture (Rodan, 1996; Jesudason, 1999). Leadership often mirrors the authoritarian tendencies of the PAP itself, centralizing decision-making and stifling initiative (Duverger, 1962).

These findings align with George's (2012) analysis that authoritarian regimes succeed not only through repression but also through the opposition's inability to project itself as a credible force.

The Scope of Alternative Newspapers in Eliminating Political Apathy

Opposition newspapers remain preoccupied with lamenting barriers rather than articulating ideological alternatives (George, 2007; Gomez, 2008). Criticism is often operational rather than policy-based. By contrast,

successful opposition movements elsewhere in Asia—such as Malaysia’s Reformasi movement—demonstrated the power of counter-hegemonic media when combined with organizational resilience (Rodan, 2004).

In Singapore, the failure of alternative newspapers to challenge the PAP on ideological and policy grounds perpetuates political apathy. As Tan (2025) demonstrates, new digital platforms like podcasts and online forums may offer greater potential for bypassing traditional censorship and engaging younger citizens (Goh, 2015).

The first analytical theme relating to the organization of the press in Singapore reveals that in the context of its political order the opposition has failed to prove its competence in establishing a viable organizational structure that could provide momentum to dissenting views. What prevails does not inspire even those who are sympathetic to the opposition cause. Rooted in structural deficiencies the press is burdened with an acute shortage of talented personnel to steer political communications. Furthermore the activists working for the papers are often over taxed making them weary of vibrant initiatives. Members also believe that the culture of their organizations is too ‘patronistic’ and ‘top-down’, creating constraints to inspiring communications. They assume that leaders tend to imitate the qualities of their formidable adversary, the PAP, where the will of the leaders remain uncontested.

At the ‘Operational level’ there is often an absence of consensus on the nature of articles to be published since the subjective interests of the top leaders become over-whelming. At the ‘Allocative level’ the party newspapers are burdened with inadequate physical infrastructure to sustain its political mission independently. They continue to be dependent on outside printers who are compelled to be careful on what is printed due to governmental control over the press.

These responses prove that dissident voices are gravely burdened not entirely due to an oppressive political regime at the macro social level. The opposition parties themselves need to be more strategical in their communications. This would be feasible if they organized themselves on a more vibrant footing and strengthened the infrastructure to project themselves as a credible force. After all the product that reaches the people becomes symbolic of the image that it carries as an alternative to the powerful PAP. It is often held that the middle class which is increasing in numbers desire greater political opposition but are reluctant to take decisive steps in bringing the result about (Loke, H. Y. (2016). It further reflects poorly on the organizational as well as persuasive powers of the opposition, thus failing to be a catalyst in this endeavor.

Weakened Party Cadres and Distrust

Theoretically, these constraints could be eliminated through leadership and commitment. Yet the opposition lacks the organizational resources needed to draw membership. Rodan (1996) found that the Social Democratic Party (SDP) had only around 280 official members, and the Workers’ Party (WP) about 2,600. Party cadres numbered in the dozens, with fewer than 100 active members across both parties. This aligns with Jesudason’s (1999) argument that opposition weakness is structural rather than purely regime-imposed.

Opposition activists in interviews pointed out that younger Singaporeans were socialized by the PAP into viewing dissenters as “anti-social” elements undermining national development (George, 2007). This manufactured distrust contributes to a climate of political apathy (Gomez, 2006).

Disintegrated Culture of Intra-Party Communication

Internal culture also weakens organizational vitality. Several activists described the top-down, “patronistic” leadership style of opposition parties, which discourages vibrant activism. This reflects Jesudason’s (1999) critique of opposition dependence on individual personalities rather than collective leadership structures.

An SDP member remarked: “I have heard that attitudes of many party leaders in government and in opposition throughout Asia have been patronistic towards the members. The locus of decision-making has often been centralized. This kills the spirit of activism when the party is struggling with basic issues like increasing its membership.”

Comparative evidence from Malaysia demonstrates that such over-centralization can also be fatal to opposition media credibility (Rodan, 2004).

Unstable Party Structures and Fear of Litigation

Publishing processes are further hindered by fear of libel actions and internal disagreements. The case of Dr. Chee Soon Juan’s disciplinary action in 1996 for statistical errors in *Dare to Change* exemplifies how legal instruments restrict dissent (George, 2012). Moreover, the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act and Penal Code provisions are systematically used to criminalize opposition mobilization (Rodan, 2006).

Evidence of Self-Righteous Orientation and Content Trivialization

Several activists lamented that opposition newspapers trivialized issues or repeated themes excessively. Jesudason (1999) argues that this stems from the limited ideological spaces available to the opposition, which leads them to recycle grievances rather than articulate policy alternatives.

For example, in *New Democrat* (1999), an article criticized Minister Lee Hsien Loong for hypocrisy about “dollars and cents.” While such critiques resonate with sympathizers, activists feared libel repercussions. This produced what respondents called a “defeatist mentality” within editorial boards.

Political Uncertainties through Autocratic Legislation

The PAP regime’s licensing and defamation laws also deter newspaper distribution. Respondents described how even vendors feared association with opposition publications. As George (2006, 2007) observes, this is an example of “calibrated coercion,” where fear rather than direct repression enforces compliance.

Despite such challenges, members themselves recognized that the opposition had not successfully projected viable alternatives to PAP governance. As one activist admitted, “After all what is the justification for an opposition newspaper? Obviously to present a meaningful alternative to what the people already have—not to lament endlessly.”

Of the major constraints identified through this study, it could be seen that the alternative press has failed to confront the PAP regime ideologically in socio-political, economic and political spheres. Criticism leveled against the government is more on operational deficiencies than on policy. Furthermore the opposition has not convinced the readership that political controls on fundamental freedoms are detrimental to national development, while the government propagates the significance of controls. The Singaporean opposition newspapers have also engaged in self-destructive communications highlighting their own weaknesses. Members lament that they have provided enough ammunition to the government to be used against them selves.

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