

Securing Singapore/Managing Perceptions: From Shooting the Messenger to Dodging the Question

JONATHAN WOODIER

Abstract

The citizens of Singapore have been in thrall to the governing People's Action Party (PAP) and its senior figure Lee Kuan Yew for almost 45 years. Served by a pliant media brought to heel by a combination of legislative and ownership controls, the PAP has been effective in limiting the space for debate while successfully conveying its own internal messaging aimed at securing the state and its own political longevity. It has done this by creating the image of a Singapore as a fortress Chinese-led stability and prosperity, ever under threat from more restive neighbours. But, in the face of the emerging threats to this control posed by new information technology and the exigencies of the global economy, the government has been forced to become increasingly sophisticated at managing perceptions and minimizing controversy. This paper will examine how the government has successfully met these challenges in a public relations triumph, effectively winning the battle for the hearts and minds of its internal audience, as well as shoring up the image of 'Fortress Singapore' and appeasing external allies in the 'war against terror', thus keeping Singapore critics in check and neutralizing any external political support for domestic political movements.

Key words: Singapore, Media, PR, Terror, Southeast Asia, U.S

Introduction

Public sentiment is everything. With public sentiment nothing can fail. Without it, nothing can succeed. Consequently, he who moulds public sentiment goes deeper than he who enacts statutes or pronounces decisions. He makes statutes and decisions possible or impossible to be executed. (A. Lincoln)

When the then prime minister of Singapore, Goh Chok Tong, received an unprecedented welcome during his visit to the US in April 2004, it was the outward manifestation of a successful and comprehensive campaign by his government to win hearts and minds within his own

country and to persuade important external observers that Singapore was a fortress of stability in a region of uncertainty.

A little more than a year before, as the echoes of the bombs in Bali and those that destroyed the entrance to the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta resounded around Southeast Asia, things could have been very different. The terrorist attacks that came in the wake of 9/11 were a firm reminder that, at a time when the US and its major allies see militant Muslims as one of the main threats to global security, Singapore sits on the doorstep of the largest Muslim country on earth. An adverse reaction from the global business community could have pushed the tiny island state, already in the grips of the worst recession in its 36-year history, over the brink into an abyss of financial ruin.

This small nation is well aware of its precarious position. With a devotion born of distress, nurtured through internecine strife and neighbourhood *konfrontasi* (the 1963 Indonesia policy of low-level armed raids against Malaysia), and secured in the creation of the most successful economy in Southeast Asia, the citizens of Singapore have been in thrall to the governing People's Action Party and its senior figure Lee Kuan Yew for almost 45 years. For its part, the PAP has relished its role of protector, barricading what it perceives to be a delicately imagined community against forces within and without that it believes seek to tear it apart; and the PAP has harnessed the means of communication available in the strategically positioned island state to this end (Williams, 2000, p. 2). Served by a media cognisant of its developmental responsibilities, the PAP has been effective in limiting the space for debate while successfully conveying its own internal messaging. This messaging is aimed at securing both the state and its own political longevity by creating the image of a Singapore as a fortress of stable, Chinese-led prosperity, beset on all sides by Malay neighbours whose economic and political uncertainty leads to violence and crime, often directed towards local Chinese minorities.

In the face of the emerging threats to this control posed by new information technology and the exigencies of the global economy, the government has been forced to become increasingly sophisticated at managing perceptions and minimizing controversy. This paper will examine how the government successfully met this challenge, even burnishing its public image in the face of 9/11 and the emergence of concerns over militant Islam in Southeast Asia, and rehabilitating itself with Western governments, many of which must secretly envy Lee's success both economic and political.

Long known for an unusual sensitivity over its image, as portrayed internally and externally by the mass media, the events of 9/11 and, in particular, the bombings in Southeast Asia that followed, the Singapore government began a charm offensive: a PR campaign to secure support both inside and outside Singapore. The methods used by the Singapore government in its efforts to nullify internal democratic pressures and limit sites of contestation, as well as to secure influential allies overseas, indicate a mature and sophisticated appreciation of crisis management, and an understanding of the growing difficulties of conveying its messages in a complex mass communication environment with multiple audiences. The methods are also indicative, as this paper will show, of the central role that professional consultants are assuming in continuously interpreting and monitoring public opinion, and in the image management of political parties and governments in the region.

The media, and television in particular, have begun to impact the political process even in Southeast Asia, where elites have controlled the means of mass communication since independence. Today, like many of their counterparts in the West, these elites are finding that 'the management of visibility and self-presentation through the media has become an integral and increasingly professionalized feature of government' (Thompson 2001: 180). A 'battle for the hearts and minds of Singaporeans' is now being fought beyond its shores.¹ Asia is seen in the US, in particular, as a 'risky place ... of anti-US protests and Islamic extremists with guns' (*International Herald Tribune*, 19 March 2003: B2). Given the importance of the US both to the Singapore economy and as a military ally to ensure Singapore's stable future in the region, the Singapore government has been forced into a PR charm offensive. In this it seeks to portray Singapore as a 'safe' destination for FDI and as a hub for security/intelligence exchange; indeed, as a lone fortress against the rise of militant Islam in Southeast Asia. Let us examine first the growing impact of PR on politics, before looking more closely at its Singapore manifestation.

The Rise of the Image Makers

Those who manipulate the unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power. We are governed, our minds moulded, our tastes formed, our ideas suggested largely by men we have never heard of ... dominated by the relatively small number of persons who understand the mental processes and social patterns of the masses. It is they who pull the wires that control the public mind. (Bernays 1928: 47)

With his roots in the patter of the circus barker, and his practices honed by techniques nurtured in the World Wars of 1914-18 and 1939-45, the public relations (PR) professional, while having more status than at any time in the industry's short history, remains a controversial figure, toeing a fine line drawn 'between propaganda and public relations' (Ward 1995: 47).

Public relations is most often defined as the management function that aims to 'establish and maintain mutually beneficial relationships between an organization, commercial or non-commercial, and the audiences or "publics" on which the success of these entities depends' (Bates 2002). There are those who suggest that public relations has a vital role to play in the modern democratic process, and that the 'conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organized habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society' (Bernays 1928: 47). In this way public relations, through its focus on media relations and building relationships with stakeholders, 'is an integral part of the civil society function. Civil society organisations need to reach various publics with information and create links between like-minded people' (Taylor 2000: 3). This argument purports that, where nation building is best understood as a communication process that emphasizes the creation and maintenance of relationships at various levels in society, public relations becomes central to this process and to the role of groups and organizations in mediating between the government and the public. It suggests that, 'ultimately, successful nation building is premised on the development of civil society structures that meet the needs of an assortment of publics rather than simply serving those in power' (Taylor and Kent 2002: 19).

There are others, however, who maintain that PR is not a neutral technology that is available to all, even to those who wish to achieve socially responsible ends. It is, rather, something 'hidden and sordid' (Stauber and Rampton 1995: 14), at the heart of which is the conscious manipulation of the public, and upon on which 'corporations and government feel compelled to spend billions of dollars every year' (Stauber and Rampton 1995: 206). But, whether it is an intricate part of the democratic process working to 'grapple directly with the public's scepticism, self-consciousness, and weariness of images and find new ways to frame mass appeals' (Jackall and Hirota 2000: 227), or a one-sided struggle over 'what is reality and how people will see and understand reality', public relations continues to insert itself firmly into day-to-day life.²

Perception Is All: Percipi Est Esse

The perception industries around the world have grown alongside the expansion in importance of the mass communication media. Technological developments and the current round of global economic integration have ensured that the mass communication media and its connected apparatus have become increasingly central to our daily lives. From satellite television and financial data screens to 'emoticons' and mobile text messaging, it is the nervous system providing the electrical impulses and neuro-transmitters that allows this new economic reality to function, providing a nudge to 'the intensification of world-wide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa' (Giddens 1990: 64). Information is racing around the world at 'Netspeed' (Friedman 2000: 218), and governments which once felt they had secured the means of communicating to their people, now find they compete for attention in a noisy marketplace buzzing with the clamour of everything from bloggers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to global consumer brands.

Hand-in-hand with the growth of information-hungry media companies has come the development of the publicity apparatus. Partly fuelled by media demand for content and partly by the need of commercial and political operators to communicate to stakeholders, the public relations industry worldwide has seen a massive expansion in recent years. In 2004, the PR industry saw its greatest growth rate since the tech boom, and further revenue increases are expected over the next five years. PR revenue in the US hit US\$3.41 billion in 2004, a 12 per cent growth over the US\$3.05 billion earned in 2003 (*PR Week*, 15 September 2005; Council of Public Relations Firms 2005). The PR giants are massive revenue earners. Omnicom, which includes Fleishman-Hillard, Ketchum, Porter-Novelli, Weinstock and Gavin Anderson, made almost US\$162 million in the third quarter of 2005, up 11 per cent year-on-year.³ The Interpublic Group, which includes Golin-Harris and Weber-Shandwick Worldwide, made US\$1.4 billion for the same period;⁴ and the WPP Group, which includes Burson-Marsteller, Hill & Knowlton, and Ogilvy Public Relations Worldwide reported revenue of more than 1.3 billion sterling in the third quarter of 2005, up 26 per cent year-on-year.⁵

Alongside the communications media, the PR industry is having an increasingly profound impact on the political process and political institutions. Just as the development of the communication media has

'altered the publicness or visibility of actions in a fundamental way', making elections media events, so the political process has become suffused with the trends and techniques of 'political marketing' (Thompson 2001: 179). The powerful have embraced the PR practitioner in order to get their messages across amidst the glare of public attention. From psychology and commercial advertising to opinion polls and political campaigning, the multimedia strategies employed to get elected seem to 'aim more and more overtly as forms of "subliminal persuasion"' (Zolo 2001: 415). And, just as public relations found its seat in the halls of commercial power, so it has secured a place inside the door of those who wield, or seek to wield, political power. An essential part of the political party's apparatus, PR skills became increasingly important in politics as populations grew and voters became 'more and more out of reach of the stump speaker, and mass communication was inevitably pushed to the fore' (Cutlip 1994: 29). This undisputed influence in the political process makes many uncomfortable, as 'governments have shown a growing tendency to professionally package and present information via the mass media' (Ward 1995: 165). This is a tendency that has increased over time.⁶

It is PR's growing influence on the media, with the increasing convergence of journalism and public relations techniques over the past several decades, which has underlined its impact. The dwindling resources available to the news media, yet the increased requirements for the constant flow of new ideas and information in a 24/7 industry, have seen the development of a new symbiotic relationship between PR professionals and journalists. PR practitioners have become skilful at engaging both the media and the commercial world through a pattern of services which include issues and crisis management, the provision of press releases, news tracking, video news releases, and satellite distribution. The industry has become increasingly sophisticated, 'built on a foundation of routine news practices which it attempts to direct' (Fishman 1980: 15), to such an extent that it is claimed 'the practitioners of public relations have managed to usurp authorship of the news ... a capacity put to the highest bidder' (Ward 1995: 158).

Of course, many groups attempt to influence public opinion and the political process using the same techniques, as the 'modern publicity process has generated a more media-centric model of pressure group activity' (Blumler 1990: 105). The high cost of the skilled professionals means, however, that real influence is something that only a few can afford. Critics see this as creating an environment for the manufacture

and control of public perception by an alliance between corporations seen as increasing profits with disregard for public interest, politicians seeking political influence, PR professionals who are seen as practising deceptive methods, and journalists too accepting of PR sources and willing to bow to the companies that pay the bills. This, it is suggested, leads to an imbalance and the 'overall management of public opinion and policy by the few'.⁷

The Imagining of Nations: The Post-Colonial State and Public Relations

'PR for the nation state comprises communicative acts of a government...'
(Kunczik 1997: 13)

While the advanced Western democracies are well-known users of public relations, and names such as Dick Morris and Gould Greenberg Carville/NOP are almost as famous as the politicians they support, what is less well known is the increasing reliance of new nation-states in the developing world on the image makers as technicians of sentiment and 'discerners and purveyors of key emotional pushes to action' to shape their image (Jackall and Hirota 2000: 17). Indeed, PR has become an integral part of the day-to-day process of governing most nation-states around the world. This has played out, in part, as government efforts to persuade their citizens to accept policy, but also as part of their efforts to manage their international image and to attempt to influence the large global powers, in particular the US administration. And it is the Western PR agencies that have become central in massaging their image for Western consumption.

Since the World Trade Center bombing and the beginning of the Bush Administration's 'war on terror', effective public relations in the US has perhaps become a prerequisite for the long-term survival of a government in the Islamic world. Both Pakistan and the Philippines, two countries in the thick of George Bush's 'crusade', hired Weber Shandwick subsidiaries in 2002. Pakistan was paying Sterling International Consulting Group US\$50,000 per month to create a more favourable image for the country in the USA, and the Philippines was using Rhoads-Weber Shandwick Government Relations to facilitate its communications with the Pentagon (Corporate Watch 2003). Pakistan and the Philippines are also included on the client list of Patton Boggs, the law firm that undertakes lobbying in Washington for Oorvis, and where former US

ambassador to Singapore, Timothy Chorba, is on staff (Center for Media and Democracy: Qorvis Communications).

Other Asian nations have also hired US lobbyists in their desire to have their voice heard in Washington. Since July 1997, the Chinese and Hong Kong governments and government-controlled companies and organizations have spent at least a combined US\$19 million lobbying the US government, with WPP topping the earnings list among firms that lobbied and conducted public relations on their behalf (Guevera and Williams 2005).

Lobbying firm Cassidy & Associates has been associated with the Taiwan Political and Economic Research Institute (TPERI) (Taipei Times, 23 August 2001). Top Republican lobbyist and PR firm DCI Group has been associated with Union of Myanmar (Burma) State Peace & Development Council,⁸ and the Hong Kong Trade Development Council is listed as a client of Wexler & Walker Public Policy Associates, a Washington DC lobbying and consulting firm specializing in international affairs and trade advocacy. It is an independent unit of PR firm Hill & Knowlton (Center for Media and Democracy: Wexler & Walker), itself associated with China and Indonesia (Stauber and Rampton 1995: 150). Singapore has also been active in Washington. According to public records, Singapore spent more than US\$2 million dollars lobbying on Capitol Hill between 1998 and 2004, ranking 22nd amongst lobbyists. Interpublic was the main representative, earning more than US\$1 million over that time period. What is most interesting is that Singapore was particularly busy on The Hill in 2003, spending more than three-quarters of a million dollars in registered funds, up from less than US\$200,000 in 2002 (Center for Public Integrity 2005).

This commitment to the use of public relations is part of an understanding rooted in the development of many of the nations that came into being after the Second World War. The mass communications media has had a central role in the building of many of these post-colonial nation-states, in a Deutschian framework where society is a cybernetic order and the 'processes of communication are the basis of the coherence of societies, cultures, and even of the personalities of individuals' (Deutsch 1953: 87). The technology of communications allowed the mass distribution of the '*necessary illusions*' (Chomsky 1988) that made the imagining of nations possible. The media were able to 'extend and consolidate traditional values ... nourishing [a] sense of identity and sense of belonging for individuals' (Thompson 1995: 194). Indeed, 'the very conception of the newspaper implies the refraction of even world events into a specific world of vernacular readers' (Anderson 1983: 63).

While the embrace of the PR industry was a little slower in coming, it is now seen as a pressing concern as elites look to utilize its techniques as they find their influence over the communication media slipping and their messages competing for space in a business marketplace of ideas. Information was once the jealously protected ward of the local elites. The nascent broadcast industry, in particular, was closely controlled by the newly independent governments and given a central role in nation building. Today, the international media giants, seeking profitability through scale, have taken their place alongside local producers. They have extended their reach across Asia, eroding monolithic state ownership in an apparent profusion of choice and ownership, and creating a 'concentration of media capital through competition' (Keane 1991: 173). The global media, rather than inspiring democratic ideals, tend to be locked in their own battle of competing interests, rarely sowing the seeds of political conflict (McCargo 1999). The mass media and communications technology is still having a huge impact on politics in Southeast Asia. Here, as with much of the rest of the world, the communications media, and the perception industries so closely connected with them, are altering the very nature of politics and the ways in which political leaders relate to those they rule. Consequently, the region's elites are becoming 'increasingly sophisticated at manipulating their public images' (Thompson 2001: 173).

Political elites and associated companies, due to the unholy trinity of globalization, technological change, liberalization and reform, now find they are playing on a world stage, amidst sophisticated communicators, and they have to fight for their usual place on the front pages of even their local newspapers. This has encouraged a general change of attitude towards communications, and a general expansion of the PR industry with Asian characteristics (*PR Week*, 19 July 2004). In this context, how Singapore behaves as a model of media control in the region (Woodier 2006) is an increasingly significant area of study, to which we shall now turn.

Singapore Embraces PR - from Singapore Girl to SARS

As a modern state, Singapore has been no stranger to public campaigns and global advertising. In 1973, a Western advertising agency developed one of the most significant Asian brand icons, SIA's Singapore Girl (Chan 2000). The interventionist government prides itself on its social engineering, using social marketing to lead 'changes ranging from massive economic restructuring to social leaps in literacy and standard of living'

(Wong and Yeoh 1996: 1). But, from 1970, when the Institute of Public Relations of Singapore (IPRS) was founded as a non-profit professional body, to the founding of the PR Academy in June 2002,⁹ the use to which the government has put public relations, and the sophistication with which it has used public information campaigns, changed dramatically. As the media environment became more challenging and new technologies enabled the development of global news and information organizations, the Singapore government was forced to rethink how it delivered its messages to internal and external audiences.

The communications media have been an important part of the Singapore government's arsenal for national development since it became an independent nation in 1965. A comprehensive campaign in the 1970s using the law courts, ownership and influence saw the taming of the media and the 'de-pluralization' of Singapore (Quah *et al.* 1985: 61). The government justifies these actions by arguing that it is the responsibility of the press 'to forge consensus and not foment confrontation, facilitate nation-building and not fray the social fabric' (*The Straits Times* [hereafter *ST*], 12 November 1995). As a result, the communications pattern of Singapore has been 'largely one-way flow from the leadership to the masses' (Kuo and Chan 1983: 102). The one-way model of communication was symbolized not only by the developmental media but also by the public education campaigns for which the island state is so famous. Whether it be the early 'Keep Singapore Clean' campaign in 1968,¹⁰ or the 'Make It Singapore' campaign at the end of 2003 – part of a S\$15 million to boost the city's share of the business travel, meetings and incentives market (*Media*, 14 November 2003: 7), the government's statutory boards (83 autonomous government agencies set up by Act of Parliament), played the major role in the government's post-independence development strategy, and their activities usually served multiple economic and political goals.

This model of communication began to change, however, when Goh Chok Tong became prime minister in 1990, and Lee Kuan Yew became senior minister. The idea of consensus and participation was introduced into politics. The local print media became a valuable pressure-valve allowing citizens to let off steam through their letters pages. There was also an increase in public consultation which the government deemed necessary to sell in its policies, from 'Meet the People' sessions for MPs, to feedback groups and public forums. The new model reflected the government's understanding that, as it embraced the global economy in the 1980s, economic and social change had created a different audience

and a different communications environment. This was underlined more than a decade later when Lee Hsien Loong was made prime minister. His father, Lee Kwan Yew, made it clear that his son had to persuade a new generation of Singaporeans who were better educated, well travelled, well informed and had 'absorbed Western ideas and they also demand that they be heard, so he has to hear them' (ST, 22 June 2004).

The government could no longer ignore the importance of informing, persuading and influencing its stakeholders, and PR was the interface through which it worked to communicate with its citizens, build consensus, and enhance understanding and support of its actions and policies. As Lee Boon Yang, minister of information, communications and the arts put it in 2004: 'the government understands that it needs to connect, consult and explain. Policies are not just disseminated downwards but increasingly a two-way communication process has to be adopted to ensure better public acceptance.'¹¹ Indeed, from the early 1990s, this was institutionalized into the fabric of government, as work was done to improve the standards of communication in government and public bodies as part of the increased efforts to communicate and educate the public, to engender understanding, support and buy-in for the ruling PAP's programmes and policies.

Until the early 1990s, there were no formal PR officers in government bodies. In 1990, the Information Division of the MCI (Ministry of Communications and Information), and the Cultural Affairs Division of MCD (Ministry of Community Development), together with other associated departments and statutory boards, united to form the Ministry of Information and the Arts. BG (NS) George Yeo was MITA's acting minister, and subsequently its first minister. At that time, MITA began training information officers. These were seconded from MITA (now MICA - Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts), and today are situated in all 14 ministries. In six, these officers also act as press secretaries to the ministers. In this way, a network was created enabling the government to be more efficient in its crisis management and to handle with panache threats to Singapore posed by the SARS epidemic, the financial crisis and the current regional security issues.

The government of Singapore has shown itself to be well-versed in 'sophisticated media management' beyond its more blunt controls (George 1993: 133). The transfer of power mid-2004 between Goh Chok Tong, only Singapore's second prime minister, and Lee Hsien Loong, was another example of this sophistication, accompanied as it was by a cacophony of positive media messages, both about how smooth the

transfer was, how well timed it was, and what a great job Goh and the PAP had done in bringing Singapore through some challenging economic times.¹² Likewise, the suitability of Lee for the role was consistently reinforced through positive stories in the media.¹³ PR professionals have become involved in the policy planning process, and media skills training has become de rigueur, particularly for top bureaucrats. In fact policy makers, as a whole, have been encouraged to become better communicators – not just their PR people. Cabinet papers had to include the possible public repercussions and how best to communicate their messages. By 2000, communication skills became an important part of the career development of senior members of the government: milestone training programmes were included as part of career planning, as information communications and media skills became part of their critical path. The comments made by outgoing PM Goh in his final National Day Message indicated these priorities as he admitted his initial concerns, when first appointed to lead the government, about his ability to communicate in front of the media, particularly television (*The Straits Times Interactive* [henceforth *STI*], 13 August 2004).

Even the local media was roped in to encourage those reluctant communicators they needed to break the habits of a lifetime and be prepared to discuss controversial subjects. Both government departments and government-linked companies (GLCs), began to feel the lash of the pens of local media reporters keen to make a name for themselves, but wary, perhaps, of direct criticism of the ruling elite, pointing accusatorial fingers at the 'fearful bureaucrats ... [who are] habitually evasive and defensive' (*ST*, 5 July 2002: 30). A key message from the new prime minister Lee Hsien Loong, was the commitment of the government to be more open and inclusive in its approach. 'Singapore today is more vibrant, open, resilient and cohesive', he said, adding, 'it is in sync with the times, and ready for tomorrow's challenges' (*STI*, 13 August 2004), and that Singaporeans 'should feel free to express diverse views, pursue unconventional ideas, or simply be different ... have the confidence to engage in robust debate, understand the problems being faced and offer fresh solutions' (*Today*, 13 August 2004: 1-2).

The embrace of public relations since the early 1990s was, if not enthusiastic, at least rigorous. The government is trying to cope with the challenging communications environment, and be responsive to changing expectations and the public demand for more and ever faster information. Many statutory bodies have PR consultants on retainer, and public campaigns have employed PR consultants, favouring the

large multinationals. Weber Shandwick, the largest PR company in the world and part of the Interpublic Group, has been used by Singapore in various campaigns including Singapore Tourism Board's 'Clean Toilets' initiative and to provide media training to Contact Singapore. Another early example was the use of Ogilvy & Mather Public Relations for Singapore's environmental 'Clean and Green' campaign (*Asian Advertising & Marketing*, September 1991).

However, it is the Singapore government's relationship with Burson Marsteller (BM), one of the world's leading PR consultancies, which has shown such remarkable success of late. Burson Marsteller was given the high-profile job of cleaning up the image of the Singapore Prison Service, which included not only an outstanding advertising campaign to promote the lot of ex-cons, but also putting together a non-profit company with S\$1 million to encourage small businesses and co-operatives to hire people with criminal records. This relationship recently culminated in the award-winning SARS (Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome) crisis management and recovery programme. BM, which also worked on the Hong Kong government's SARS campaign (O'Dwyers 2003), was awarded the IPRS's 2004 Prism Excellence Award for Crisis Management for its work in 2003.

The SARS crisis came as a shock for Singapore, which had escaped the worst of the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s, but was slipping into what was the nastiest economic recession it had faced since early independence. Singapore's economy was hit hard in 2001, as economic slowdown in the United States, Japan, and other key trading partners reduced demand for the city-state's electronics exports. The economy contracted by an estimated 2.2 per cent in 2001 after growing by 9.9 per cent in 2000, and as many as 25,000 Singaporeans lost their jobs during the year (Freedom House 2002).

BM's campaign, which was successful in minimizing the impact of the crisis, employed many of the classic elements of an integrated public relations campaign, which can also be seen in the government's ongoing crisis management of the regional security issues. First of all, it was important to get the fundamentals right and control the spread of the disease, at least in the perception of all target audiences. This was achieved amongst both the internal and external audiences by instituting various controls which clearly showed both the political will and technical ability to limit the risks of contamination. These included temperature checks at the workplace and at immigration, the setting up of a special treatment centre to isolate patients, and the use of legisla-

tive powers to limit the spread and to ease public concerns. This was all carried out with unusual transparency, a fact government officials continued to reinforce, led by PM Goh, who underlined the fact while in Japan as the SARS epidemic began to take hold in East Asia in March 2003 (*STI*, 27 March 2003).

Subsequently, the image of a city beset by 'plague' needed to be changed, and people had to be persuaded back onto the streets and into public places. The government's 'Step Out Singapore' campaign, which included street concerts and outdoor events, helped to provide a more favourable backdrop for television pictures of Singapore than that of empty streets peopled only by a few scurrying figures in surgical masks. It was also important to involve key opinion leaders, particularly for international positioning: the international media (here, growing ties between global media organizations with their Asian headquarters in Singapore really paid off), international health organizations and international business leaders. The chairman of British bank Standard Chartered, Sir Patrick Gillam, was quoted as having no qualms about flying into town as planned. Likewise, the fact that German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder did not alter plans to visit Singapore and other countries in Southeast Asia, was covered in the media (*STI*, 25 April 2003).

Also significant was the WHO's approval: Singapore avoided being put on a 'travel warning' list alongside Toronto, Hong Kong, Guangzhou and Beijing. Mr Ali S. Khan of the WHO praised the Republic's efforts in fighting the spread of the disease:

'I think the Singapore Government has done an excellent job and I really would not characterise it as draconian ... I would say they have put in state-of-the-art public health measures, with complete transparency' (*STI*, 27 April 2003).

Singapore's appreciation for this confidence was demonstrated in its sponsorship of a WHO conference on crisis management and disease in Singapore in September 2004, which gave the government an opportunity to burnish its image a little further. Statutory boards and government organizations all pitched in. The Economic Development Board (EDB) and International Enterprise Singapore gave daily updates to all their clients. EDB chairman, Teo Ming Kian, even wrote to CEOs of major companies around the world to reassure them of Singapore's determination to stamp out the virus (*STI*, 25 April, 2003). The American Chamber of Commerce was one international organization in Singapore that praised the government's handling of the crisis. The Chamber's chairman, Kristin Paulson, said: 'Singapore has taken a leadership role,

globally, in the fight against SARS and its approach is a model to be adopted by other countries' (*STI*, 25 April 2003).

Singapore's decision to focus on the public health aspect of the problem and resist having a huge economic stimulus package also received a nod from *The Asian Wall Street Journal* (26 March 2003: A7) in an editorial headlined 'SARS bail-outs are a bad idea'. The Journal admitted that it had sometimes been critical of Singapore's degree of protection of civil liberties but lauded Singapore for being transparent and proactive in fighting the spread of SARS. Yes, the Journal is a well-known advocate of fiscal restraint, but clearly efforts to ensure regular and positive coverage on the international stage proved fruitful. Another global media name, the BBC, also signed up alongside Singapore's admirers. Again, it was not the electronic tagging of quarantine breakers which was highlighted by this bastion of the liberal media, but rather a celebration of temperature checks at immigration and Singapore's other efforts to contain the virus. The British broadcaster's flagship 10 pm news bulletin devoted the entire first part of one programme to what the Republic was doing to combat the SARS virus (*STI*, 27 April 2003). These articles were included on the SARS website put up by the government to keep investors, visitors and Singaporeans up to date with its efforts to combat the virus.¹⁴

The success of the campaign was such that a global award accompanied the local recognition. In July 2004, Tan Tock Seng Hospital received a Golden World Award for excellence in public relations from the UK-based International Public Relations Association (IPRA) for its campaign to restore confidence in the health system of Singapore during and after the SARS crisis.¹⁵ Most important of all, the Singapore government has proved a good learner. The PR techniques honed from integrated communication campaigns like that against SARS, have been brought to bear on what is probably Singapore's greatest challenge since independence, the 'war against terror'.

Winning Singapore's War against Terror

The US 'war against terror', like the SARS crisis, did not come at a good time for Singapore. The Bali blasts in October 2002, which killed 202 people, and the August 2003 suicide bombing at the J.W. Marriott Hotel in Jakarta that left 12 people dead, were even more threatening to the Singapore's economic well-being and political stability. The economy was struggling with deep structural problems and was ill-prepared for either the slowdown that came with the end of the tech stock bubble,

or for the regional impact of SARS. Where a decade ago Singapore was close behind China in attracting foreign investments to Asia, by the end of 2003 China had received nearly seven times as much, and India was also an emerging competitive threat as Singapore's share of global trade became either 'stagnant or shrinking' (*Financial Times*, 12 August 2004: 2). At the same time, the importance of the US to the Singapore economy and to the healthy functioning of its neighbours was undiminished. The US was the biggest foreign investor in Southeast Asia with direct investments of nearly US\$90 billion, and its third largest export market valued at US\$50 billion. Moreover, international concern about the security situation in Southeast Asia was very real.

In the middle of 2004, the president of the US-ASEAN Business Council, Ernest Bower, organized a trade mission to the US led by the region's US ambassadors. The mission heard concerns raised at meetings in Washington and elsewhere in the US about terrorism in the region (*Today*, 23 August 2004: 10). At the same time, a new report by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, *Combating Terrorism in the Transport Sector – Economic Costs and Benefits*, indicated that investors were already very wary, and the impact of a pull-back would be severe (*The Business Times*, 22 June 2004: 1).

Singapore's crisis management teams swung into action. With security traditionally the government's number one concern, it sought advice from global consultants such as PR firm Ruder Finn, which was working closely with the Homeland Security Department in the US. Singapore, from the outset, showed that it was prepared to act swiftly and decisively when dealing with terror threats. In the wake of 9/11, the government cracked down on individuals alleged to be linked to 'terrorist' organizations, detaining 34 men without charge or trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA), with little or no complaint from formerly critical liberal Western governments and media. Most of these alleged members of Jemaah Islamiyah (blamed for the blasts in Bali and at the Jakarta Marriott, and said to have been plotting to attack US facilities in Singapore post 9/11), disappeared into the air-conditioned ISD interrogation centre off Whitely Road. No legal niceties or complicated proceedings were needed to put suspects behind bars – unlike in Indonesia, where Muslim cleric Abu Bakar Bashir defied prosecutors keen to link him to a series of attacks, including the Bali bombing (*FEER*, 27 May 2004: 20).

Dr Tony Tan, the coordinating minister for security and defence, outlined a new national anti-terrorism strategy in July 2004,¹⁶ and a plan to get the new National Security Coordination Secretariat and its two

agencies up and running quickly (*STI*, 18 August 2004). Singapore indicated that it was prepared to go above and beyond the call of duty, for example in the requirements of the international maritime security code to safeguard ships against terrorism and start tracking the movements of virtually every vessel in its waters (*STI*, 5 August 2004). It was a similar story for airport security: speaking at the SATS Security Services conference in April 2004, second minister for transport, Dr Balaji Sadasivan, said Singapore was working for an audit from the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO), and would 'work to have a standard even higher than what the audit requires' (*Today*, 15 April 2004: 1).

The government left the US in no doubt where it stood in the 'war against terror', with statements of unequivocal support for, and close co-operation with the US administration. Dr Tan, by now a familiar face at the Pentagon in Washington where he regularly met US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, emphasized the need for close international co-ordination to break up global terrorist networks. Rumsfeld, in return, emphasized the value the US administration placed on this co-operation: 'It is a very close relationship, not just military to military, but a political and economic relationship, which we value greatly,' he said (*STI*, 22 April 2004). These close ties included allowing American warships to call in to Singapore for repairs and stop-overs, and the same went for US military aircraft. The March 2001 completion of the deep-draft pier at Changi Naval Base, constructed entirely at Singapore's expense, provided support for a continued US presence in the region for many years to come (See GlobalSecurity.org). There was also a US communications and logistics unit based in Singapore to co-ordinate the stop-overs. Singapore also sent police trainers, transport aircraft and other support equipment to Iraq to add its name to the list of allies occupying the country after the ouster of Saddam Hussein (*STI*, 22 April 2004).

And when others – even close neighbours and fellow members of ASEAN – faltered, Singapore stood firm alongside its key ally. A statement from the Foreign Ministry emphasized its support for Washington's position that Coalition forces in Iraq should not make any concessions to hostage-takers: 'Succumbing to such threats will only increase the dangers, weaken the Iraqi government, and delay Iraq's reintegration into the world economy' (*STI*, 5 August 2004). The comments came soon after a decision by the Philippines to accelerate the planned departure of its troops from Iraq to secure the release of a hostage.

Singapore's government even went so far as to suggest, in April 2004, that US-led forces might be needed to help police the Malacca Straits,

seen as a key target for terrorists given its strategic importance. While Dr Tan was at the Pentagon, his colleague defence minister Teo Chee Hean told a meeting of marine and military experts that there was not enough security in the 900km sea-lane to stop a terrorist attack there. Saying that the measures taken by Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia were not enough, he then painted the nightmare scenario of what would happen if such an attack were to take place, given that one-third of the world's shipping and half of its oil pass through the straits off Southeast Asia. The rear admiral (NS) said:

The littoral states are obviously not the only stakeholders in the Malacca Straits. Other users have a strong economic, if not also strategic interest in ensuring that the Malacca Straits is kept open and safe ... they could contribute resources needed for the fight. (*Today*, 21 May 2004: 6)

The idea was quickly quashed by Malaysia, but, as US President George W. Bush announced a reshuffling of troops in Asia, Singapore announced new unilateral moves to deepen its defence ties with Washington. Dr Tony Tan, speaking at a press conference at the Istana Palace in August 2004, said that Singapore was negotiating a 'strategic security framework' with the United States and that Singapore supports the presence of the US military in the region because it adds an element of stability in Southeast Asia (*STI*, 18 August 2004).

Singapore also worked hard to have its voice heard on the international stage. It was represented as the only Asian member of the UN anti-terror team, appointed in April 2004 (*Today*, 12 April 2004: 6). Singapore also secured its place as the chosen venue for the annual security conference of the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). The Shangri-La Dialogue, named after the hotel in which it was held, was the only inter-governmental forum in Asia focusing on defence and security-related topics (*STI*, 23 August 2004). Key opinion leaders have also been primed to take Singapore's part. Terrorist expert, academic Rohan Gunaratne, from his position in Singapore as associate professor at IDSS (Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies at Nanyang Technological University) and head of the International Centre for Political Violence and Research in Singapore, delivered a speech in April 2004 at an international security conference, when he said that there were 'no terrorist groups in Singapore' that they had been 'neutralized' by the Singapore government when it 'swooped on existing cells in December 2001'. He reassured the watching world that these groups would not resurface as the Singapore government had been 'very efficient in reducing the terrorist threat ... in stark contrast' to the hundred-fold increase in worldwide terrorist threats since

Saddam had been overthrown. The Jemaah Islamiyah in Indonesia, he suggested, posed a 'significant threat' (*Today*, 15 April 2004: 1).

Despite its earlier record in the mid-1990s as a proponent of Asian values, all such arguments were dropped in the post 9/11 environment. Singapore was determined to be seen as secular if not Western. The government made a show of embracing a liberal reform process by accepting the advice of parliamentary committees such as that considering 'Remaking Singapore'. A country that employs gays in the government and sanctions dancing on bar tops surely is a friend of the liberal West, if not almost liberal itself (*Guardian*, 18 April 2004). Singapore even began a campaign to become the regional centre for NGOs. While, strictly speaking, NGOs are not new to Singapore, independent organizations had not been welcomed, and were depicted by the senior Lee, as the 'fads of contemporary activists who copy Western ideas, with little impact or relevance on the business of Singapore and its development' (*ST*, 16 October 2001: H3). But, as security concerns forced organizations like Helen Keller International to leave their regional home in Indonesia, Singapore offered itself as a new regional base (*STI*, 7 June 2004). And should the international media not stay on message, there were Singapore's familiar defamation laws to remind them just who was boss, as *The Economist* found in September 2004 (*STI*, 3 September 2004).

The right messages were also placed in the local media, where their international brethren might pick them up, not only keeping account of Singapore's security campaign, but of the continued economic advantages of investing in the island state.¹⁷ Should Singaporeans feel that the government had been too successful in dealing with terrorism, the work continued through the local media to maintain Fortress Singapore. This was achieved by (i) playing on the fear and perceived vulnerability of the predominantly Chinese population of this small island state surrounded by Malay peoples and, often, by opposing religious and political ideologies; (ii) justifying the position of the ruling PAP and (iii) ensuring the political legitimacy and longevity of its authoritarian rule. From Tony Tan's warning of the threat to small densely populated countries such as Singapore from rogue scientists who use their knowledge to create deadly biological agents (*STI*, 7 April 2004), to seeking Interpol's help to deal with cyber terrorists (*STI*, 14 November 2004), or to the familiar warning of JI plots (*STI*, 5 August 2004), the justification for maintaining tight controls at home remained firm. Where the legal requirements did not exist to ensure that the perimeter and firewalls were well buttressed, they were quickly introduced. The changes to the Amendments to the

Computer Misuse Act, seen by critics as the cyberspace equivalent of the Internal Security Act, showed that the government was swift to arm itself with the necessary weapons to maintain national security and essential services, 'further tightening of the city state's control over the Internet' (*FT*, 12 November 2003: 2).

This has all been to good effect. There is no doubt that the warmth and good will with which Singapore has been received by the US is indicative of the success of this huge PR campaign security (*STI*, 6 May 2004). The final US seal of approval on Singapore's tough stance on terrorism was the decision by the secretary of homeland security, Tom Ridge, to attend Singapore's annual National Day reception in Washington, a first for a cabinet-level US official (*FEER*, 19 August 2004).

Conclusion

The public relations industry has stolen our dreams and returned them to us as privileged illusions. (Stauber and Rampton 1995: 206)

As the mass communication media move to the centre of daily life, globalization is creating a more complex communications environment. The technology that makes this possible also allows for the creation of electronic networks that offer alternative methods of mobilization and accurate targeting. Politicians around the world are therefore left to compete with everything from soap powders to banks to get their messages across to the consumer. It is a challenge they are increasingly meeting with the help of PR professionals – image makers who help market ideas in a mediated world where the celebrification of politics threatens to exchange discussion of policy and political choice for designer labels and branded slogans.

To suggest that communications campaigns in Southeast Asia can 'educate and empower, level the playing field, and bring the nation to a state of equilibrium whereby all people have the opportunity to develop the fullest potential' (Taylor and Kent 2002: 22) is something that needs more careful situational analysis. Instead of truly creating something new, differentiated and exciting, we risk slipping into a postmodern, illusory world where everything becomes advocacy in a managed reality: such an 'epistemological Hobbesianism makes doublethink and doublespeak respectable' (Jackall and Hirota 2000: 27).

The various elements of the perception industries have become a powerful source of influence and information. People employ them to make sense of their lives, thereby rendering them a useful tool for the

powerful as they attempt to influence their constituents. And, while the increasingly cynical modern audience does play an important role as 'situated interpreters' (Keane 1991: 38), it is equally important to understand that the persuaders are becoming increasingly sophisticated (*The Economist*, 22 May 2002).

The Singapore government, with its long experience of public campaigns, is leading the way in the region, not only with its media policies, but in its sophisticated use of PR. As the number and frequency of its campaigns dropped and the government of Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong shifted its policy from its previous top-down approach to a more participatory style, persuasion has taken a slightly different and more subtle form, as is evident from the way the government has dealt with recent challenges to Singapore's stability and prosperity.

Integrated public relations campaigns have proved more valuable in defending Singapore's image in the face of threats like disease and security, than the usual practice of berating Western governments for decadence and decay. To be voted the safest city in the world (*Conde Naste Traveller*, 21 September 2004), as another bomb exploded at the Australian embassy in Jakarta, can only reinforce the efficacy of its strategy. The rewards of this strategy are obvious, from the Congressional salutes and US Administration photo opportunities, to the bilateral Free Trade Agreement awarded as a concrete sign of Singapore's successful rehabilitation.

Indeed, in the post 9/11 world, the government has found some unlikely Western supporters in its clampdown on dissent. 'Asian values' were once the talisman used by the Singapore government to ward off what it saw as the worst effects of globalization, namely the move towards liberal democracy and the undermining of its authority. The attacks on the US and the global financial fallout from both the telecommunications stock price meltdown and the Enron-inspired corporate scandals have tested the commitment of even the strongest proponents of globalization. With many in the West now wary of its ramifications, the Singapore authorities have found themselves back in the fold amongst their Cold War allies, in their efforts to control change and counter opposition, and with the noise from liberal governments greatly reduced. Thus the 'war against terror' serves merely to reinforce the garrison-state mentality, providing a fillip to authoritarianism, and standing in opposition to the global, open media policies of the 1990s.

Singapore's charm offensive is symbolic of the ascendant role PR is playing in politics in Asia. Moreover, while 9/11 has helped to silence critics internally and externally, Singapore's government has displayed

sophisticated communication skills and an ability to manage perceptions in the face of challenges from SARS to the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. In this it has effectively neutralized critics as well as dissuading external agencies or political forces from supporting local political/civil society movements. With a keen understanding of the mass communication media as both a commercial animal and a political tool, the Singapore government has maintained its role as a stern and effective gatekeeper, barring much that might obviously threaten its surveillance state. It has become less brutal stylistically. Indeed, many would suggest it has shown remarkable flexibility. The PAP has changed its image to accommodate media fashion without relinquishing any control. It assumes a media-friendly style, but the politically illiberal message remains the same.

Thus, the government has been successful in not only shoring up Fortress Singapore in the eyes of its internal audience, but also in effectively assuaging the concerns of its external allies in the 'war against terror', despite efforts by the international media to paint an increasingly gloomy picture of the security situation in Southeast Asia. It has achieved this via an integrated public relations campaign that has helped Singapore to reclaim its position as Guardian of the East.

Jonathan Woodier is the Deputy Director of Corporate Affairs for Citigroup Europe, Middle East and Africa

NOTES

- ¹ Singapore's trade minister, Brig. Gen. George Yeo speaking at News World Asia, Think Centre Report on News World Asia 2001. Accessed 9 January 2006: <http://www.thinkcentre.org/article.cfm?ArticleID=792>
- ² Ibid.
- ³ Omnicom Reports Third Quarter 2005 results.
- ⁴ 'Interpublic Announces Third Quarter and Year to Date Results'. 9 November 2005. Accessed at: <http://investors.interpublic.com/phoenix.zhtml?c=87867&p=irol-newsArticle&ID=780754&highlight>
- ⁵ WPP Quarterly Trading Update, 28 October 2005.
- ⁶ Also see *PR Week*, 19 September 2005. Accessed at: <http://www.prweek.com/us/search/article/517416/the-beltways-power-alliances>
- ⁷ Stauber, Media Channel, 31 July 2000. Accessed August 2000: <http://www.media-channel.org/atissue/prunspun/>
- ⁸ Disinfopedia, accessed 25 August 2004: http://www.disinfopedia.org/wiki.phtml?title=DCI_Group
- ⁹ See www.pracad.com.
- ¹⁰ Other examples include the Courtesy Campaign; Speak Mandarin Campaign and Romancing Singapore Campaign.

- ¹¹ Dr Lee Boon Yang, minister of information, communications and the arts, IPRS Prism Awards 2004.
- ¹² For example, see *Straits Times Online*, 10 August 2004; *Today*, 12 August 2004.
- ¹³ See *Today*, 13 August 2004; *Today*, 31 August 2004; *The Straits Times Online*, 11 August 2004. Also, Lee Hsien Loong News at <http://lee-hsien-loong-news.newslib.com/2004081200/>
- ¹⁴ See www.sars.gov.sg.
- ¹⁵ 2004 IPRA Golden World Awards Winners List.
- ¹⁶ *The Fight Against Terror: Singapore's National Security Strategy*, National Security Coordination Centre 2004.
- ¹⁷ For example, *BT*, 31 May 2004: 1 and *Straits Times Online*, 5 May 2005.

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