

# Singapore Radio:

*Then and Now*



# Singapore Radio:

## *Then and Now*

By

Bradley C. Freeman  
and Yoganathan Ramakrishnan

Foreword by Drew McDaniel,  
Ohio University

Afterword by Arun Mahizhnan,  
National University of Singapore

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



Singapore Radio: Then and Now

By Bradley C. Freeman and Yoganathan Ramakrishnan

This book first published 2016

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Copyright © 2016 by Bradley C. Freeman and Yoganathan Ramakrishnan

All rights for this book reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the copyright owner.

ISBN (10): 1-4438-9019-7

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-9019-9

Dedication from Bradley C. Freeman:  
*For my father, Professor Emeritus, Richard J. Freeman.*

Dedication from Yoganathan Ramakrishnan:  
*Dedicated to my family.*



# CONTENTS

Acknowledgements .....	ix
Foreword .....	xi
Drew McDaniel, Ohio University	
Chapter One.....	1
Introduction	
Chapter Two .....	9
Singapore and the Role of Radio	
Chapter Three .....	17
Radio in Pre-independent Singapore (1936-1965)	
Chapter Four .....	35
Radio in Independent Singapore (1965-1994)	
Chapter Five .....	43
The Modern Radio Landscape (1994-2016)	
Chapter Six .....	63
Ratings, Risks, and Reprimands	
Chapter Seven.....	83
Education and Campus Radio	
Chapter Eight.....	95
Economic Issues	
Chapter Nine.....	105
Political Underpinnings: Cultural and Social Aspects	
Chapter Ten .....	119
Radio Personalities and Styles	

Chapter Eleven .....	133
Social Media and Radio	
Chapter Twelve .....	147
Technological Advancements	
Chapter Thirteen .....	153
Conclusion	
Afterword .....	157
Arun Mahizhnan, National University of Singapore	
About the Authors .....	159



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A few years ago when we were asked to write a chapter on Singapore radio for an international radio broadcasting book, we enthusiastically gathered information and put pens to paper. As the deadline approached for our submission and we began to combine our writings, the realization set in that we had written much more than would fit into the 25 or so odd pages that we were allotted for the chapter. And so the task of editing and cutting text along with various tables, figures and photos began in earnest. Upon finishing that task and submitting the chapter, it occurred to us that instead of chopping, perhaps we should be keeping the information and adding to it. And the idea for a full-fledged book on Singapore radio was born.

No one book could be said to be the definitive tome on the subject, and we certainly will not lay claim to such a lofty ideal. Over so many years, the nature of the radio broadcast (and the industry surrounding it, and the people involved) has grown and developed so much, that we can only hope to scratch the surface and provide a few insights into some of the areas. This is what we have tried to do – create a book that compiles some information and sheds light on a subject matter that is near and dear to our hearts – Singapore radio. You may notice both American and British spellings in the book – this is somewhat indicative of the debate that goes on in Singapore society – to use British or American English? We apologize for any deficiencies in advance and welcome feedback on any of the areas covered in the book. We do not rule out a second edition.

It would be difficult to thank all of the many individuals who have helped both directly and indirectly with this project. There were many personal communications; we thank you for your valuable input. We wish to thank all of our friends and colleagues at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication & Information at Nanyang Technological University, The American University in Dubai; and also in the School of Film & Media Studies at Ngee Ann Polytechnic. Finally, we also would like to thank the numerous individuals who have worked in the radio broadcasting industry in Singapore... *then & now*.



## FOREWORD

As of this writing, 50 years have passed since independence came to Singapore, and so it is convenient to look backward across that half century and beyond to reconsider this interesting and vital nation. Its economic and political influence has spread across South and Southeast Asia, making it in many ways a giant country in spite of its diminutive geographic size. How did this small island become home to one of the world's most technologically advanced societies? Using radio both as an example and a metaphor, this book offers some clues to this puzzle.

We can begin this story at a time when colonial powers were dividing up the eastern world. It was Stamford Raffles who negotiated an arrangement with a local chief in 1821 for a British presence on the patch of an island called *Singapura*. It was a territory that lay beyond the powerful Sultanate of Johore to the North and somewhat beyond the reach of the Dutch. Holland had been the main European power in the region, due to its energetic development of the spice trade in the archipelago, and it was testy about challenges to its territorial dominance. However, Britain somewhat belatedly had begun exploration and settlement in Southeast Asia too, through its mercantile enterprise the East India Company. It had established a post and assumed control of the island of Penang some 400 miles further north up the Malayan coast in 1786, and the company was tentatively seeking additional opportunities for trade and goods elsewhere in the region.

Under British rule the Singapore settlement founded on the island became its principal entry point to Malaya as it expanded its holdings over the next century. In time, that included the Straits Settlements, which included Singapore, as well as the Federated and Unfederated Malayan States. In fact, due to its favorable geographic position at the intersection of major maritime routes, Singapore grew with truly remarkable speed and by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century it had become a metropolitan area with a population of about 220,000. By the time of Japanese occupation in 1942, that population had more than tripled to about 750,000.

Much of the growth in population was a result of the British policies on immigration to Malaya. In particular, the global appetite for canned foods that arose in the late 1800s fostered establishment of tin mines across the whole of the peninsula. A labor force to carry out the dirty and

dangerous work in the mines had to be recruited from abroad, and China provided an abundance of workers. Tens of thousands of Chinese laborers came to Malaya for that purpose. However, over time many drifted away to become settled and to carry out other kinds of work. As the largest population center, Singapore was a magnet for this unattached human tide, and very quickly the majority of residents of the city were Chinese. There had been Chinese living in Malaya for centuries prior to this, but the new immigrants changed the complexion of Singapore forever. Today, three-quarters of Singapore's residents are of Chinese origin; and most are descendants of immigrants who came to Southeast Asia a few generations earlier.

A half century after independence, Singapore is still linked in numerous ways to its British roots. It is a member of the British Commonwealth and much of its government and legal system mirrors that of the UK. Many of its citizens study in British universities, and the UK remains a popular tourist destination. Even so, the UK does not appear among the top fifteen trading partners. Importantly, eleven of the top fifteen trading partners are Asian nations while the US ranks fifth. The reason this matters is that Singapore has become the world's most successful trading entrepôt-nation. Global commerce is at the heart of Singapore's economic success. Economic partnerships inevitably also become political partnerships and sometimes cultural partnerships. This is certainly true of Singapore; it is the very essence of a modern, cosmopolitan nation.

Perhaps the most important trade sector that flourished in Singapore was electronic technology. The country became home to the manufacture of various electronic components such as computer hard drives and integrated circuit devices, as well as all sorts of audio and video components. Singapore thus became a world leader in electronic technology. Because electronic equipment was produced locally, it was readily available to Singaporeans and the wealth produced by the trade in technology meant that ordinary citizens could easily afford it. In the 1980s Singapore became a destination for travelers from all across Asia and the Pacific who visited expressly to shop for electronic items for their homes. It was commonly joked that Singapore had become the world's largest department store.

Because of the country's advanced technology environment, Singapore naturally became a leader in media fields too. As the chapters of this book clearly reveal, after a slow start there has been a steady development of radio. Although the authors show that the exact date of radio's beginning in the Straits Settlements is quite unsettled, there is little doubt that regular professional transmissions did not begin until the 1930s. This is perhaps a

decade after broadcasting began in other parts of the world. Even so, after this date the pace of radio's development picked up sharply, especially as Britain attempted to build up Singapore's radio services as World War II loomed.

The reader will see that radio has had a fascinating role in this nation. It has been a unifying force for a well informed and highly educated citizenry throughout its history. Indeed, it has enjoyed a central role in shaping Singapore's nationhood. In the pages that follow, the evolution of broadcasting is traced in great detail, making it beyond a doubt the most comprehensive and authoritative account of radio in Singapore ever compiled. It is obviously the work of scholars who love the medium and have a deep affection for Singapore in all its complexity.

—Drew McDaniel, Ohio University



# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

“All media work us over completely.”

—Marshal McLuhan

At first brush, the country or rather city-state of Singapore might not seem worthy to merit an entire book devoted to its radio industry. On the contrary, however, there is quite a bit to cover. The radio market in Singapore has always been quite fascinating and is more than deserving of attention on numerous levels. Moreover, we are clearly not the first to think so; Oei (2002, 2005) took on the subject couched within a larger treatise on radio in general, along with crafting the radio product, and aspects of digital radio more specifically. But as we know, the world of media moves quickly – nowhere is this more the case than Singapore, a world-class alpha city that prides itself on being first. In 2012, the country concluded its experiment with over-the-air DAB digital radio (originally referred to as Smart Radio), both free and subscription models; the decision made that it was not worth continuing. Also, we now see that many listeners, especially in the younger demographic groups, do not own physical radio sets, preferring instead to listen on laptops via streams available on websites or via specialized apps on gadgets such as smartphones and tablets. Given the plentiful nature of free Wi-Fi on the island, and generally affordable 3G and LTE rates, this practice is feasible here. There is much new material to discuss, not only from the technological-side of radio but also many other areas as well.

It is true that for much of its existence, and similar to many other countries the world over, radio in Singapore has served as a mouthpiece for the State. However, given the colorful history of Singapore, and the fact that radio is mostly a live medium of the immediate present, the programming has not always been so very boring. Moreover, in recent years, the content of some programs at the radio stations has become quite lively – enough so that the local papers have stepped in to cover the vibrant on-air antics of more than a few radio personalities and shows. In considering these and other areas, this book serves to update and fill in the

gaps, if you will, that exist with regards to reflections about radio in Singapore.

Our journey on the subject of Singapore radio begins intently in Chapter Two, with a discussion of the various roles that radio has played in the history and current state of the Singapore nation. The role of radio is a subject matter that is of utmost importance not just in Singapore, but certainly other countries as well. Much has been written about the role that radio has played in the United States both historically and presently for example. Authors have examined the various facets of the radio broadcast from early ideas of who should control radio (Douglas, 1989), to what effect the programs might have on listeners (Barker, 2002), and from debates about the commercialization of the medium (Smulyan, 1996; Cox, 2008), to presidential use of the airwaves (Sigelman & Whissell, 2002; Lee, 2006), and much more. Radio has received ample attention though even here radio studies scholars will admit it has decreased over the years – as even the term radio itself has fallen slightly from favor in the academy. While radio is alive and well in Singapore, such is not the case for the written word about radio in Singapore, where much of what is known or recorded in print is historical and comes from bits and pieces – brief newspaper articles, or short passages in other works not focusing on radio. While the issue of respect for radio studies as an academic subject is not one of the stated topics of this book, it is a theme that pervaded the back of our minds as we wrote it. So, the role of radio is the focus for Chapter Two, and here we are interested in the ways that radio has been conceptualized by the powers-that-be (and the powers have changed a few times). Also, we are interested in the ways that radio has evolved in the region, as radio waves transgress national borders and affect changes in different ways.

Writing in a more chronological fashion, Chapters Three, Four, and Five explore radio from its official start in 1936 up to the present day. Chapter Three covers the period from 1936 to 1965, which is right up to the birth year of modern Singapore. As in most places, determining which signal was first, who was operating it and with what programming, is not always an easy task. And for Singapore, there are a few dates that come up. Not that it is crucially important, but establishing an official start date makes momentous sense in a discussion of the topic, and so Chapter Three endeavors to weigh in on the matter and provide that information. As radio began in the Malay Peninsula, there were most probably two countries with a greater influence on the setting-up and running of the broadcasts – the Netherlands and Britain. We discuss those influences. Notably, World War Two and the Japanese occupation of Singapore occurred within this



time frame, and so the powers-that-be shifted, and a different type of programming came to the airwaves of Singapore for a brief time. There are a handful of sources that we look to for clues about this period, including some writings from the Japanese perspective. Following the war, local interests came more to the fore concerning radio programming, yet there was still a reliance on what had come before and the way things had been operating.

Chapter Four then picks up the story as the island breaks away from Malaysia to form independent Singapore on August 9, 1965. We attempt to trace the connections that the countries had via the radio at that time, and what the separation meant for the radio signals. One thing for sure is that Singapore acted quickly to put radio into action for its own (survival) purposes; radio was key to providing information, and maintaining social order at a time when the fledgling country's fate was not being given much of a chance in international circles. We also discuss the ways that radio broadcasters were regulated at this time, and how this philosophy has carried forward.

Chapter Five traces the modern radio landscape from 1994, a period of seeming deregulation, to the most recent activities on the radio dial of the Red Dot – a recently coined term used to describe the country of Singapore based on its representation on world maps; the country is so small that it is often the case that all one can see of it on a map is a red dot with the country's name beside it. There is a lot to cover in recent years, including the opening up of frequencies on the dial, the movement of MediaCorp Radio's facilities, to legendary U.S. radio star Casey Kasem's son Mike joining long-time local radio favorite Jean Danker on the airwaves at Class 95 FM (and his later move to join Joe Augustin at Gold 90.5 FM), to ESPN TV personality Jamie Yeo's joining Power 98's morning show (and then Gold FM). We also discuss the TV Mobile radio service; as well as the curious case of Passion FM, and the fate of Rediffusion Radio. The largest of the three chapters, due in part to the lack of the information being chronicled elsewhere, Chapter Five contains this information (and more) and attempts to paint the most recent portrait of Singapore radio. Chapters Three, Four, and Five, therefore, provide the bulk of the story about Singapore radio, but there are more areas in need of greater exploration.

Chapter Six was developed out of a conference paper that took on aspects of censorship in Singapore; a topic that has received much attention over the years by many authors. Presented at the Conference on Media and Society (C-MAS 2012) in Kuching, East Malaysia, the title was a bit provocative, "Ratings, risks, & reprimands: What you cannot air on

Singapore radio”, and drew a lively discussion from the panel participants (Freeman, 2012). As revised for the chapter book format, it now takes on a slightly broader subject area. This chapter may qualify as the sprightliest merely for the fact that it covers those unplanned things that invariably happen due to the dynamic nature of the radio broadcast. Most of the incidences we look at come from the past decade, as details and information on such activities before this time are difficult to uncover – they were not discussed publicly and thus did not draw similar attention. We consider the Media Development Authority (MDA) guidelines and the co-regulatory approach of recent years.

Chapter Seven, Education and Campus Radio, similarly began life as a conference paper, this time for “The Radio Conference: A Transnational Forum” held at the Auckland University of Technology in January of 2011 (Freeman, 2011). The paper entitled: “Internet killed the radio star: Music listening habits and perceptions of campus radio in Singapore” features data from a longitudinal survey of Singapore university students that began in 2006. The instrument was refined and deployed every two years to gauge the students’ uses of radio, as well as their general attitudes and opinions about radio.

Chapter Eight takes a closer look at the economics of radio in Singapore. The chapter examines how radio has been funded over the years since its inception, and the changes that have occurred in this area. This chapter should be of interest to those who investigate the economic machinations of the media. Naturally, there are many who believe that the programming and operations are to a large extent directly correlated and beholden to the way it gathers the funding to continue operations. So this chapter uncovers how Singapore radio has been funded and to what extent various forces can have an impact on the content of the programming that is created.

In Chapter Nine, we take a look at the political underpinnings of radio in Singapore. Here we are interested in discussing aspects of radio news programming as it is related to the ruling People’s Action Party (P.A.P.). Much of what we know about how the majority ruling party thinks about radio comes from what we know about how they feel towards the media in general. On this point, we are able to reference a few notable authors who have experience with this topic. Though, again, much of what is written in this area comes from writers who are dealing with other forms of media. Nevertheless, the lessons learned ultimately do apply to radio as well, especially when we consider the programming of news. In this chapter, we also highlight two incidences from Singapore’s past that serve to highlight and provide the rationale for seeing Singapore radio as part of the “nation-

building” apparatus – namely the Maria Hertogh Riots and the Hock Lee Bus Company Riots.

The radio listening experience is the primary subject matter for the second part of Chapter Nine, which is dealing with the cultural and social aspects of the medium in Singapore. Some of the main items covered in the chapter include the choices of languages that would be heard on the radio, aspects of radio programming and formats that have a decidedly local flavor. Radio also sometimes is used to promote other cultural events and campaigns, and so we make mention of those times when radio was utilized to promote such activities. We also touch on the use of radio plays (Ramakrishnan, 2007), and the lack of particular programming formats, such as classic rock, hip-hop, religious, and certain ethnic programming. We also talk briefly about the music that is featured on Singapore radio.

Around the globe, most listeners will tell you that they are curious about the people behind the voices that they hear on the radio. In Chapter Ten, we attempt to draw up a list of some of the names behind the voices of Singapore radio – the radio announcers and personalities. Unlike the archives of print media which have been reconstituted and offer us a greater glimpse into the past, Singapore radio broadcasts have largely and sadly been forever lost to time. Our aim for this chapter was to provide some semblance of a list to preserve for posterity the names of those who helped to build the radio industry in Singapore. In cases where we were able to find out more information on any of the people behind the voices, however brief, we provide that. We also discuss aspects surrounding the annual “Singapore Radio Awards.”

The current buzz in radio revolves around how this old medium is dealing with the newer digital medium of the Internet. Chapter Eleven is an offshoot of a project that resulted in an article for the online journal known as *First Monday* titled “Radio and Facebook: The relationship between broadcast and social media software in the U.S., Germany, and Singapore.” (Freeman, Klapzynski, & Wood, 2012). Working together with an undergraduate research assistant, we focused here on the Singapore radio station websites and their use of Facebook and Twitter. We sent surveys to the stations concerning their social media use, and we examined the stations’ use of social media thoroughly. So this chapter contains mainly information from the observations that we made of the stations’ online presences. In Chapter Twelve, we briefly discuss the technological aspects related to radio in Singapore. Finally, in Chapter Thirteen, following the format of BBC newscasts, we wrap up with the main points from the book and provide a few notes as to the future direction of the medium of radio in Singapore.

The goal of our full-fledged book is ultimately the same as the aim we indicated previously for our chapter, “we shall endeavor to provide as complete a picture as possible about the history and current state of radio broadcasting in the Merlion state – from its humble “Kampong” (‘Malay’ word for village or community) beginnings, to its regional status, and finally to its proud ‘global alpha city’ digital future” (Freeman & Ramakrishnan, 2012, p. 219).

## References

- Barker, D. C. (2002). *Rushed to judgment: Talk radio, persuasion, and American political behavior*. NY: Columbia University Press.
- Cox, J. (2008). *Sold on radio: Advertisers in the golden age of broadcasting*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Douglas, S. (1989). *Inventing American Broadcasting, 1899-1922*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Freeman, B. C., Klapzynski, J., and Wood, E. (2012). Radio and Facebook: The relationship between broadcast and social media software in the U.S., Germany, and Singapore. *First Monday*, 17(4). Retrieved from: <http://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/3768/3194>.
- Freeman, B. C. (2011, January). *Internet killed the radio star: Music listening habits and perceptions of campus radio in Singapore*. Unpublished paper presented at The Radio Conference: A Transnational Forum. Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand.
- . (2012, September). *Ratings, risks, and reprimands: What you cannot say on Singapore radio*. Unpublished paper presented at Conference on Media and Society (C-MAS2012), Kuching, East Malaysia.
- Freeman, B. C., and Ramakrishnan, Y. (2012). Red dot on the dial: Singapore radio then & now. In J. Hendricks (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of global radio* (pp. 299-319). UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Lee, M. (2006). *The First Presidential Communications Agency: FDR's office of government reports*. NY: SUNY Press.
- Oei, R. (2005). *Borderless bandwidth: DNA of digital radio*. Singapore: Times Academic Press.
- . (2007). *Riding the bandwidth: Producing for digital radio*. Singapore: Marshall Cavendish.
- Ramakrishnan, Y. (2007). *The radio play*. Singapore: McGraw-Hill.
- Sigelman, L., and Whissell, C. (2002). "The Great Communicator" and "The Great Talker" on the radio: Projecting presidential personas. *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, 32(1), 137-146.

Smulyan, S. (1996). *Selling Radio: The commercialization of American broadcasting, 1920-1934*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.



## CHAPTER TWO

### SINGAPORE AND THE ROLE OF RADIO

“When you listen to radio you are a witness of the everlasting war between idea and appearance, between time and eternity, between the human and the divine.”

—Herman Hesse

In September of 2012, Singapore welcomed its newest radio station in over 20 years, KISS 92 FM, raising the number of radio stations from 18 to 19 on the island. Following a tender for bids on two open dial positions, the media company SPH UnionWorks Pte Ltd was successful in procuring the one opening that was ultimately allotted at 92.0 MHz with a proposal to have the station target mainly women listeners, but also included in the anticipated target audience – families. The local paper featured a summary quote from the new station’s program director about the preferred listener: “Mums with the kids in the car on the way to school in the morning can get great music, all the info they need to start the day and they won’t have to worry about the DJ being crass or crude in front of children” (Durai, 2012, n.p.). Understanding why this suggested format would appeal most to the government office charged with awarding the frequency (keeping in mind Singapore’s falling birth rate, for example in this case), offers an insight into the mindset of the government and the role that they cultivate the media to play in Singapore. It is also worth noting that this is a country with a government matchmaking agency, the Social Development Network (SDN). Singapore is a unique place worth getting to know, and its radio follows suit. The other frequency, 89.3 MHz formerly used for the audio portion of a TV Mobile service, was left open. Other companies bid to operate both frequencies (Chin, 2011), however when one was allocated, the companies were no longer as interested in pursuing the matter.

Radio still holds a prominent role in the lives of Singaporeans, as a newspaper article in 2014 attested to this with the headline: “Gaga over radio; Despite competition from social media and Internet radio, local stations still pull in listeners”, going on to report that “the total number of

listeners for all stations has increased from 3.731 million last year to 3.761 million this year” (Hadi, 2014, n.p.).

The founding of the new station, KISS 92 FM undoubtedly played a role in increasing radio listenership, and it lies at the heart of this chapter, to briefly describe Singapore and examine how radio fits into the overall *family* of mass media, more precisely the role that it has played and currently plays in Singapore society. Some of the recognized roles of radio around the globe are: informer (and ‘disinformer’), entertainer, arbiter of taste (in music at least), educator, promulgator of societal norms, change agent, mobilizer, promoter of films and other media, supporter, creator of a sense of community, avenue of advertisements, advocate of peace, beacon of reality, disseminator of propaganda, inciter of hatred and war, societal commentator, friend/companion, entertainer, educator, voice of the people, voice of the establishment, gadfly, and finally, radio can be a surveyor of the environment, purveyor of the new, stalwart of the traditional, and/or a watchdog of sorts. These are some of the roles that radio plays in society. The list is open to debate and additions, and certainly not all of these functions are found in the radio markets of any one country – only a few are found in Singapore radio.

Describing Singapore is a lot more difficult than pointing it out on a map, but not by much. As an island country of only 710 square kilometers, it is one of the smallest countries in the world (though there are still others smaller). It is not a city in China. In a lecture delivered in New York, a Singapore Law Minister once contended that Singapore should in many respects be considered as a city, rather than a country (*Speech by Minister*, 2009). These comments sparked much debate in online forums. Perhaps it is best to say that Singapore is a country, state, and city all rolled in one. As Velayutham (2007) said: “Singapore’s dual orientation toward both the nation-state and the global city raises interesting questions about national identity in the global age” (p. 3). From a radio standpoint, it is one market, the boundaries of which are not in accordance with the borders of the nation – radio waves, as economic concerns, transcend national frontiers. Moreover, concerning identity, of course, language also plays a role. Singlish, a localized version of English, is sometimes heard, but there is a general tendency to avoid Singlish in the media. In one case, a local citizens’ committee (known as PACE, and mentioned later in the book) “signaled its concern about the use of “excessive Singlish” on air” (Wong, 2009, n.p.). Thus, in Singapore, American-accented International English seems preferred on the radio – and a few of the announcers are even from the States.



Located on the lower tip of Peninsular Malaysia, control of Temasek, literally 'sea town' as it was once known, has changed hands a few times – and these changes have affected its growth and identity, and later its radio industry. Singapore, or Singapura – 'Lion City' from the original Sanskrit name (though there are no lions in the city – save the iconic Merlion, an imaginary creature that is part lion and part fish), started its modern existence as a British colony with Stamford Raffles establishing things in 1819. The island was around and inhabited long before that time. Nevertheless, this is the date and story that modern Singapore accepts as its heritage. The city grew steadily in numerous ways hence, until the Japanese occupation during World War Two. After the war, the city joined the Malay Federation, later Malaysia, but on August 9, 1965 (National Day) Singapore became an independent country. During this time, radio and the connections between the regional signals were a bit complicated. Yet, radio was there to report the activities at the various government offices. Though the initial years proved difficult for the fledgling country, it prevailed and in the past few decades, Singapore's impressive transformation has gained it notoriety and praise around the globe. It is one of the few countries whose GDP exceeds that of its old colonial manager. The population exceeds five million and discussions of how many more residents in total that the island can hold have been quite lively in recent years. The majority of the population is of Chinese descent while smaller proportions are of Malay heritage and Indian-origin. The ethnic make-up of its people provides one explanation for the kinds of radio programming found on the dial; government policies offer another. Ethnic stations are culturally linked with less commercial inclination due to smaller market size and spending compared to the English and Chinese stations. The population make-up justifies this.

It is not out of the realm to suggest that Singapore has been experiencing growing pains of late. The rapid growth from the 1980s and 1990s was perhaps bound to come with some side effects. The country is dealing with some of those effects, such as an aging public transportation system and population concerns – and often the stories relating to such matters will make it to the airwaves of the local radio stations. After all, one of radio's roles from its inception has been to provide information to the public. In Singapore, much of the time that information has been carefully crafted to avoid confrontation and to provide a normative view of happenings in the country and its surroundings – information that the government has either directly provided or tacitly approved. So although radio might be seen as a watchdog of government (and other sectors of society) in some countries, in others, and this would include Singapore, it

is more of a tool that the government can use to disseminate its information and perhaps downplay others. In the case of Singapore, radio (and other media) is part of the broader nation-building exercise and as such it is not the place of radio to criticize or question the activities of the government. The logic is that the nation is still new and that it can make greater progress if all sectors of the society work together to support it, rather than criticize or pull it down. Referring to radio as the national broadcaster, Prime Minister Lee was quoted in a newspaper article (*Radio here*, 1996, n.p.) as saying:

In times of crisis, radio must provide information and reassurance, and give strength to people. Radio played this role well in the 1950s and 1960s, during the violence and uncertainty of the communist agitation and the communal riots. Even in our present tranquil circumstances, RCS [Radio Corporation of Singapore] must go beyond entertaining Singaporeans, to educate and motivate them, and help to form a national consensus.

Further, there is a sense that the Singapore experiment can still fail and that the survival of the state is contingent upon all sectors assisting in the nation-building process (Chua & Kuo, 1991). There is a slight parallel to this notion and that of civic journalism, but the analogy does not entirely work if examined too closely. On occasion, live radio will touch on current events and how things are running, especially if something seems too obvious to ignore, such as frequent breakdowns on the commuter train lines or procedures for student placement in local schools. On the one hand, for radio to avoid the subjects entirely might strain credulity; while on the other hand, the announcers must handle the situation carefully so as not to inflate the situation artificially. Over the many years since its arrival, radio has learned to be sensitive in how it covers the news, especially with regards to certain topics (though in practice they have not been perfect). A list of these topics, incidences, and further explanations can be found in chapters six and nine.

Providing news and information is a valid role for radio around the globe and is often mentioned first among news-oriented media users, it is also true that Singapore radio strives to keep the public informed. Moreover, when it comes to international affairs, listeners do get the news. There are a few news-oriented stations, including a station dedicated to the BBC's world service. That being said, in many countries today radio serves first and foremost as an entertainer. And for Singapore, the role of entertainer is a principal one. The connection between the recorded music industry and radio is a timeworn relationship that has benefited both industries. The Singapore music scene has certainly been active of late;

some local artists are getting airplay. However, radio has also worked with the sports industry, and others, in providing entertainment fare for the listeners. This works out for a lot of radio stations because it allows them to have lower overall operating costs, music formats are usually less expensive than others to run, and it also usually means that the operators can to a large degree avoid political topics. Music tends to be a real drawing point for listeners as well. Though as we know, music itself can sometimes be political whether through its lyrics or associations that may be made – manifest or latent (see Gwee, 2016). Along these lines, Singapore has occasionally banned some music from its airwaves (songs by Katy Perry, Jolin Tsai, and Janet Jackson, for example); and historically, some bands have been unable to perform live. A writer described a particular ‘hairy’ incident regarding Led Zeppelin in 1970s Singapore (see Jackson, 2015). On this note, however, it should be noted that in 2011 Janet Jackson did perform live in Singapore, and earlier in 2009, Buffalo, New York singer-songwriter, activist, and ‘righteous babe’ Ani DiFranco performed. So, issues revolving around these concerns are not always cut-and-dried, and changes have taken place.

For Singapore, radio’s role is decidedly that of an entertainer (there are more music format radio stations which are commercialized), followed closely by its part as an informer of basic information – such as weather, traffic information, and international news. It is not a site for debate of domestic public policy or an avenue for criticism of it. Radio shows provide information, not disinformation, in a generally professional, neutral manner. It is, by and large, an instrument of the government, ensuring dissemination of economic plans, educational initiatives, housing policies, jobs and other matters, and it by no means seeks to investigate or scrutinize these issues or the leaders in charge of them. It also serves as a method to send out civil defense information, as messages for the active and reserve forces are aired via the radio. Though again, it is mainly a source of entertainment first, and information second. It also serves to project ideas about Singaporean identity, though, in this regard, the strategy for such has not been made directly evident. Radio is a product of all of the forces that shape media content everywhere (Shoemaker & Reese, 1996): the individual air personalities, the routines of the media employees, the advertisers, but above all the government owners and the dominant ideological forces are what play the largest part in shaping and determining programming content. These forces are less apparent as time has gone on. However, they are still there. Singapore radio’s “crucial role is that of a responsible medium in harmonizing different migrant societies in Singapore; further as a means of supporting the continual process of

nation-building (and furthering economic growth)” (Freeman & Ramakrishnan, 2012, p. 301).

## References

- Chin, D. (2011, July 13). Five parties bid for two stations on FM band. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved via the Factiva Database on February 17, 2016.
- Chua, B., and Kuo, E. C. Y. (1991). *The Making of a New Nation: Cultural Construction and National Identity in Singapore*. Paper presented at the Cultural Policy and National Identity Workshop at East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii. Singapore: National University of Singapore.
- Durai, J. (2012, July 19). SPH’s Kiss 92 to woo women. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved via the Factiva Database on May 16, 2013.
- Freeman, B. C., and Ramakrishnan, Y. (2012). Red dot on the dial: Singapore radio then & now. In J. Hendricks (Ed.), *The Palgrave handbook of global radio* (pp. 299-319). UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gwee, K. (2016, February 13). The problem of politics in Singapore’s growing music scene. *Bandwagon.asia*. Retrieved from: <http://www.bandwagon.asia/articles/singapore-music-scene-politics>.
- Hadi, E. A. (2014, July 24). Gaga over radio; Despite competition from social media and Internet radio, local stations still pull in listeners. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved via the Factiva Database on May 16, 2013.
- Hesse, H. (1929). *Steppenwolf*. New York: Henry Holt.
- Jackson, A. (2015, February 13). Only Zeppelin could be banned from a country for their long hair. *WZLX*. Retrieved from: <http://wzlx.cbslocal.com/2015/02/13/only-zeppelin-could-be-banned-from-a-country-for-their-long-hair/>.
- Radio here. (1996, April 21). Radio here must fulfil role as national broadcaster. *The Straits Times*. Retrieved using the Factiva database.
- Shoemaker, P. J., and Reese, S. D. (1996). *Mediating the message: Theories of influences on media content*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. White Plains, NY: Longman Publishers.
- Speech by Minister. (2009, October 28). *Speech by Minister for Law K Shanmugam at the New York State Bar Association Rule of Law Plenary Session*. Retrieved online at: <http://www.mlaw.gov.sg/news/speeches/speech-by-minister-for-law-k-shanmugam-at-the-new-york-state-bar-association-rule-of-law-plenary.html>.

- Velayutham, S. (2007). *Responding to globalization: Nation, culture, and identity in Singapore*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.
- Wong, A. (2009, September 3). Radio: Moulding a strong identity. *Today*. Retrieved using the Factiva database.

