



Report on the Asia Journalism Forum 2018 Power Shifts in Journalism: Impacts and Implications

By Shawn Goh and Nadzirah Samsudin

One must have the “heart of an activist, but the intellectual centre of a journalist”.

The Asia Journalism Forum, hosted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and supported by Temasek Foundation Connects, was held on 20–21 September 2018 at Orchard Hotel Singapore. It was convened by Dr Carol Soon, Senior Research Fellow at IPS and Associate Director of the Asia Journalism Fellowship (AJF).

This year’s forum looked at the power shifts surrounding journalism and the media industry due to digitalisation and increasing political polarisation. It raised important questions on how these developments affect areas of governance, public opinion and community building. The forum kicked off with a roundtable with Keynote Speaker, Mr Sree Sreenivasan, on 20 September, followed by a full-day conference on 21 September. Thirty-five participants and 105 participants attended the roundtable and conference respectively.

Full-Day Conference on 21 September 2018

Introductory and Welcome Remarks

Dr Soon said, in the past few years, the word “disruption” has often been used to describe changes to the economy and the media industry. However, the word primes people to see the glass as half empty. The term “power shifts”, on the other hand, brings attention to the stories of how people with little resources make a mark on a changing media landscape and how individuals and communities use journalism to make the world a better place.

Mr Lim Hock Chuan, Chief Executive of Temasek Foundation Connects, said AJF is an excellent platform for journalists to build personal and professional networks. He hoped that the friendships and connections forged among the fellows would last through their professional life and beyond.

Mr Janadas Devan, Director of IPS, spoke about the two crises facing journalism — the crisis of relevance and the crisis of economy. The former questioned whether journalism can remain

objective in the future, while the latter looked at the challenge of monetising quality journalism in the age of the Internet.

Opening Keynote

In his Opening Keynote, Mr Sree Sreenivasan, Social Media Expert & Co-Founder of Digimentors, stressed the importance for journalists to build and maintain both offline and online connections. Journalists should constantly build their own digital community through platforms like LinkedIn and Twitter, and ensure that they have a personal network that they can tap into when necessary. They should be strategic in building these connections. For example, it is not about connecting with people who have the most followers, but connecting with those who can add value to their work.



Ms Farah Abdul Rahim and Mr Sree Sreenivasan during the Q&A session.

The Question-and-Answer Session (Q&A) was moderated by Ms Farah Abdul Rahim, Deputy Chief Editor of Mediacorp. One participant asked how news organisations can use social media to promote their content more effectively. Mr Sreenivasan said newsrooms should avoid relying heavily on algorithms to distribute their content. Instead, they should focus on building a strong social media presence and creating content that generates online traffic. However, promoting content on social media is not about posting new content all the time, but knowing what to share, how much to share, and when to share. For instance, journalists should be more sensitive and respectful when sharing on social media, especially after an unfortunate incident, such as a mass shooting, has happened.

Panel I: New Players, New Models, New Audiences

The first panel was chaired by Mr Gilles Demptos from Public Policy & Government Relations, Google Asia-Pacific. The panel looked at how digital technologies have enabled newer and smaller players to enter the journalism industry, and how they have experimented with new journalistic styles and business models to reach niche audiences.

Professor Ang Peng Hwa from Nanyang Technological University spoke about the challenge of declining advertising revenue faced by news organisations in going online, often due to increasing expectations of free news content and Internet intermediaries taking a major share of the revenue away. He listed several successful strategies such as having paywalls, and using data analytics to improve social media strategies and build closer relationships with audiences. He also provided different business models such as crowdfunding, membership and foundation-funded models, but stressed the importance of understanding the strengths and weaknesses of each. For instance, crowdfunding models are unlikely to be sustainable because research suggests that people who have donated once are not likely to do so again. He concluded that there is neither an “ideal model” nor a best solution to these challenges. Instead, news organisations need to have an entrepreneurial approach to the media — experiment, trial-and-error, and be ready to pivot.

Mr Mustafa Kassim, Chief Executive Officer of Roar Media, also recognised the challenge of declining revenue, and spoke about the potential of native advertising in sustaining digital media. As a platform providing vernacular content to primarily South Asian Internet users, native advertising — content sponsored by brands but written in an unbiased manner — constitutes 75 per cent of Roar Media’s total revenue. It has been reported that 25 per cent of global advertising budgets are expected to shift from traditional to native advertising within the next four years.

Mr Simon Park, Content Strategist at Mediati, spoke about the importance of focusing on the audience in media innovation. Mr Park said although media start-ups in South Korea have a stronger will to innovate than established media organisations, they have the mindset that building good products would naturally attract consumers, and do not think about the audience. Thus, Mediati focuses on four key areas — problem, solution, competition and uniqueness — to help media start-ups learn who their audience is, what their problems are, and how to solve them.



From left to right: Mr Simon Park, Professor Ang Peng Hwa, Mr Gilles Demptos and Mr Mustafa Kassim.

During the Q&A, Mr Demptos asked the panel what some other challenges relating to monetisation were. Both Mr Kassim and Mr Park said while native advertising and sponsored content might work for media companies with small audiences, this might not be as feasible when up-scaling media operations. In such situations, subscription models would be a better way. Both speakers also expressed concern about relying too much on Internet intermediaries and stressed the importance of engaging and owning audiences.

Panel II: Changing Lives, Changing Worlds

The second panel looked at how mainstream and independent journalism provide a voice to the marginalised and make a difference in the lives of people. The panel was chaired by Mr Alan John, Director of AJF.

Associate Professor Cheryl Soriano from the Department of Communication at De La Salle University highlighted the role journalism plays in reporting stories of marginalised communities, and how these stories can be re-told after being published as conventional news articles. This is made possible through “transmedia solidarities” – a cooperative practice where artists and academics draw on journalistic reports and re-cast them into stories and creative works that are accessible to different audiences. One example was the creative works that followed reports on the fatal shooting of 17-year-old Kian Delos Santos in the Philippines.



Ms Devi Asmarani spoke about the work her magazine, Magdalene, does during the second panel.

Ms Devi Asmarani, Editor-in-Chief of Magdalene, spoke about the magazine as an online platform that raises awareness on important issues often not covered by Indonesia's mainstream media — like sexism and sexuality — through essays and commentaries by readers. Magdalene also collaborates with community groups working on gender-based initiatives, such as one that raised awareness of sexual violence. The initiative not only resulted in women coming forward to share their stories for the first time, it pushed for an anti-sexual violence bill in Indonesia.

Mr Premesh Chandran, Chief Executive Officer of Malaysiakini, spoke about how Malaysiakini, a platform that provides an alternative perspective of mainstream media news, quickly gained traction due to an appetite among citizens for quick and fast independent news. Despite challenges such as police scrutiny, Malaysiakini has grown into a respected and reliable media platform, which prominent politicians such as Najib Razak and Mahathir Mohamad have granted interviews to. A reason for Malaysiakini's success is its ability to provide independent, ethical and good journalism.

During the Q&A session, one participant asked how journalists should draw the line between reporting the news and activism. Assoc Prof. Cheryll acknowledged that the line is blurry as journalists are often inadvertently mobilised as activists in seeking the facts. Ms Asmarani said while the role of the journalist should come first, how a journalist frames the story is also important — for example covering an issue through a feminist lens. Mr Chandran said that one must have the *“heart of an activist, but the intellectual centre of a journalist”*.

Panel III: Established Brands, New Ways

The third and final panel was moderated by Ms Lau Joon-Nie, Program Director at the World Association of Newspapers and News Publishers. It looked at how established and legacy newsrooms have been experimenting with new formats and building new partnerships to stay ahead of the curve in the age of technological disruption.

Mr Warren Fernandez, Editor of The Straits Times (ST), said being an “old” brand was not a problem as ST has always adapted to changing readership and technology, connecting with its audience via a range of platforms. For instance, ST broke down barriers — both physical and operational — between its print and digital teams to strengthen each platform, and engage readers in a platform-agnostic manner. He listed some upcoming initiatives for the newsroom, including building a new video studio to produce more engaging content, and targeting more international readers.

Ms Stephanie Phang, Singapore Bureau Chief of Bloomberg, said Bloomberg has always focused on technology and their readers. The Bloomberg Terminal allows journalists to engage with market transactions and accurately report market reactions, and provides links to data that readers can look into for themselves. Readers can access Bloomberg’s content via multiple social media platforms such as Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube, and in various formats including articles, TV interviews, and even audio recordings. Journalists need to continually keep audiences in mind and work under “constructive paranoia” to keep innovating.

Mr Yonden Lhatoo, Chief News Editor of South China Morning Post (SCMP), said that one challenge for SCMP was to view itself as more than just a print paper. Since SCMP’s acquisition by Alibaba Group, its content has been available online for free and has reached more people, beyond its print subscribers. Thus, SCMP has tried to keep its print paper relevant is by including exclusive and “behind-the-news” content. This does not mean that the online product is “inferior”. Surviving the digital transformation is a necessity because newsrooms either adapt or perish.



From left to right: Mr Yonden Lhatoo, Ms Lau Joon-Nie, Mr Warren Fernandez and Ms Stephanie Phang.

During the Q&A, one participant asked how news organisations can engage younger audiences who are less active in consuming the news. In response, Ms Phang gave the example of Bloomberg's Tictoc, a Twitter live blog that breaks down global news in short video clips, as a way to target younger audiences. Both Mr Fernandez and Mr Lhatoo spoke about the importance of ensuring that the voices and stories of young people are reflected in the news. Mr Fernandez gave the example of Stirr, an initiative led by millennial journalists in ST's newsroom to create content that would connect with their peers.

Closing Remarks

In the Closing Remarks, Dr Soon gave three takeaway points for the participants. First, stories are important, and there are many ways to tell a story. Second, journalists need to engage and build communities around stories. Lastly, it is important to understand audiences, and tell stories that are relevant to them.

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