

STEWARDSHIP OF THE SINGAPORE MEDIA: STAYING THE
COURSE

THE SINGAPORE MEDIA'S LONG AND WINDING ROAD: 1824 TO 2022

IPS-NATHAN LECTURES BY MR PATRICK DANIEL
11th S R NATHAN FELLOW

Lecture Outline

Part I: Press Freedom vs Regulation

- 5 Issues at heart of today's Press Freedom debates
 - Singapore's Media Laws
 - What do Singaporeans think?

Part II: Looking Back at the History

- The English Press and Straits Times History
 - Singapore's Vernacular Press
- The Government's Crackdowns on the Media
- Government Interventions to Reshape Media Landscape

Part III: The Last Two Decades

- Disruption in the Media
- The formation of SPH Media Trust

Next 2 Lectures

Lecture 2: Grappling with the Darker Side of the Internet: A Global Challenge

Lecture 3: Accelerating Trends: Challenges for Singapore and the Media

As I walked to the door of his office, the prime minister called me back. I remember his words:

“Nathan – I am giving you the *Straits Times*. It has 150 years of history. It has been a good paper. It is like a bowl of china. If you break it, I can piece it back together. But it will never be the same. Try not to destroy it. “

I said nothing. He said, “You are keeping silent.”

I said, “Sir, you have told me what to do. Also what I should not do. What is there for me to say? I’ll try.”

And so I left

**Excerpt from
Mr S R Nathan’s memoir,
*An Unexpected Journey:
Path to the Presidency***



PART I: PRESS FREEDOM VS REGULATION

5 Issues in today's Press Freedom debates

1. Freedom of Expression
2. Freedom of the Press
3. Media Laws
4. The “Marketplace of Ideas”
5. The Press as the “Fourth Estate”

First Amendment

Constitution of the United States

The Bill of Rights, introduced to Congress in **1789** and adopted in 1791, includes the first 10 amendments to the Constitution of the United States

First Amendment

Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights

Article 19

Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.

Article 30

Nothing in this Declaration may be interpreted as implying for any State, group or person any right to engage in any activity or to perform any act aimed at the destruction of any of the rights and freedoms set forth herein.

European Convention of Human Rights

ARTICLE 10

Freedom of expression

- 1 Everyone has the right to freedom of expression. This right shall include freedom to hold opinions and to receive and impart information and ideas without interference by public authority and regardless of frontiers. This Article shall not prevent States from requiring the licensing of broadcasting, television or cinema enterprises.
- 2 The exercise of these freedoms, since it carries with it duties and responsibilities, may be subject to such formalities, conditions, restrictions or penalties as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society, in the interests of national security, territorial integrity or public safety, for the prevention of disorder or crime, for the protection of health or morals, for the protection of the reputation or rights of others, for preventing the disclosure of information received in confidence, or for maintaining the authority and impartiality of the judiciary.

Declaration of the Rights of Man (1789)

(French Constitution)

11. The free communication of ideas and opinions is one of the most precious of the rights of man. Every citizen may, accordingly, speak, write, and print with freedom, but shall be responsible for such abuses of this freedom as shall be defined by law.

The Singapore Constitution

Freedom of speech, assembly and association

14.—(1) Subject to clauses (2) and (3) —

- (a) every citizen of Singapore has the right to freedom of speech and expression;
- (b) all citizens of Singapore have the right to assemble peaceably and without arms; and
- (c) all citizens of Singapore have the right to form associations.

(2) Parliament may by law impose —

- (a) on the rights conferred by clause (1)(a), such restrictions as it considers necessary or expedient in the interest of the security of Singapore or any part thereof, friendly relations with other countries, public order or morality and restrictions designed to protect the privileges of Parliament or to provide against contempt of court, defamation or incitement to any offence;

Freedom of the Press

- Most countries do not have press freedom rights in their constitution.
- Press Freedom is an extension of Freedom of Expression
- Individual free speech is not exactly the same as press freedom

Media Laws

- Most countries have laws that restrict media freedom
e.g. libel laws, privacy laws, ownership laws
- Rationale for media laws: control power of the press (to do harm)
- Journalists and media owners also need ethical guidelines

The “Marketplace of Ideas”

- Economic marketplace: Best product wins?
- “Marketplace of Ideas”:
 - Best idea wins?
 - Separates fact from falsehoods?

Media as the Fourth Estate

- Power to check on abuse by those in authority
- “Hold truth to power”

Press Issues in the Singapore Context

Where the Government Stands

- Does not believe in US definition of free speech with no caveats
- Does not buy idea of “Marketplace of Ideas”
- Does not agree with notion of media as the Fourth Estate
- Wants media to help promote values and “nation building”
- Must guard against subversion against the media

Main Provisions of the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (1974)

- No foreign ownership of media
- No local newspaper barons either
- No foreign funding of the local media
- Control of appointment of directors
- Licensing of media titles
- Foreign papers must give government right of reply

OTHER LAWS WHICH AFFECT THE MEDIA

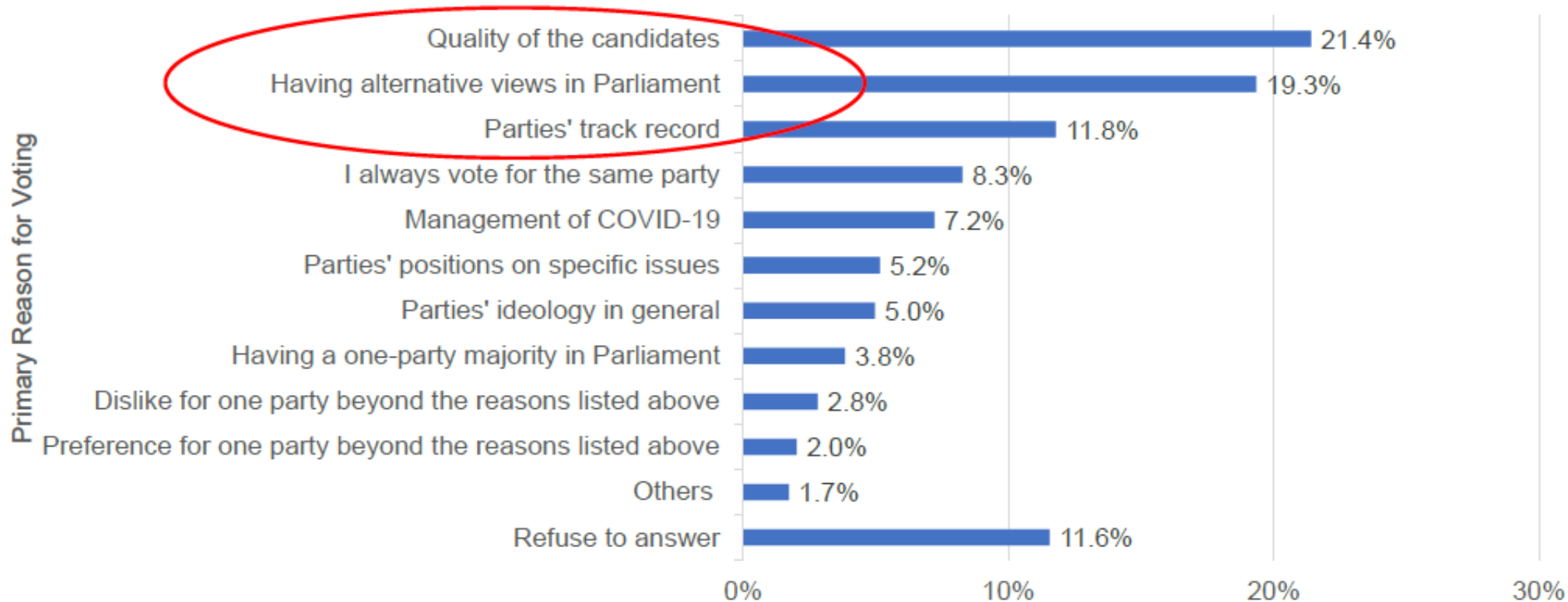
- Broadcasting Act (1994)
- Defamation Act (1957)
- Official Secrets Act (1935)
- Internal Security Act (1960)
- Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (2019)
- Foreign Interference Countermeasures Act (2021)

What Do Singaporeans Think?

- Do the laws allow the media to do a good, professional job?
- Is there room for a responsible watchdog role?
- Should the media play a "nation-building" role?
- What about the notion of a "marketplace of ideas"?
- What changes are needed to allow for a greater diversity of views?

Primary reasons behind people's votes

“Which of the following was the primary reason behind your vote this election?”



What Do Singaporeans Think?

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Reporters Without Borders World Press Freedom Index 2021

159	Sudan	52.93
160	Singapore	55.20
161	Somalia	55.47

Source: Reporters Without Borders

World Press Freedom Index

Reporters Without Borders

- Index evaluates level of freedom available to media
- Not an indicator of quality of journalism in the country
- RSF's main issue: Media laws are a breach of press freedom
 - Re earlier discussion on 5 issues of debate
 - POFMA caused Singapore's ranking to drop by 7 places in 2020
 - Another drop likely with FICA
- Questions over methodology



PART II: LOOKING BACK AT THE HISTORY

Singapore Media in Colonial Times

- 1867: Opening of the Suez Canal
- 1871: Sea cable laid to Singapore, cable news began
- 1914: Launch of *Malaya Tribune*, by Dr Lim Boon Keng, a Queen's scholar.
- 1923: Opening of Johor Causeway and start of Malayan railway.
 - The Straits Times began coverage of the Malay States.
- 1930s: Intense media competition.
- WWII years: The Straits Times became the *Syonan Times*, and later the *Syonan Shimbun*.
- 1948: End of Straits Settlements: Singapore a separate crown colony.
- 1950: The Straits Times became a public company on Stock Exchange.

The Maria Hertogh Riots (1950)



Source: Dateline Singapore: 150 Years of The Straits Times
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Singapore Media in Colonial Times

1959: First Elected Self-Government.

- The Straits Times and press freedom became an election issue.
- Furious attacks by LKY against ST for being anti-PAP.
- PAP's win forced The Straits Times to move to Kuala Lumpur

Leslie Hoffman

**Editor-in-Chief of The Straits Times
for 14 Years from 1956**



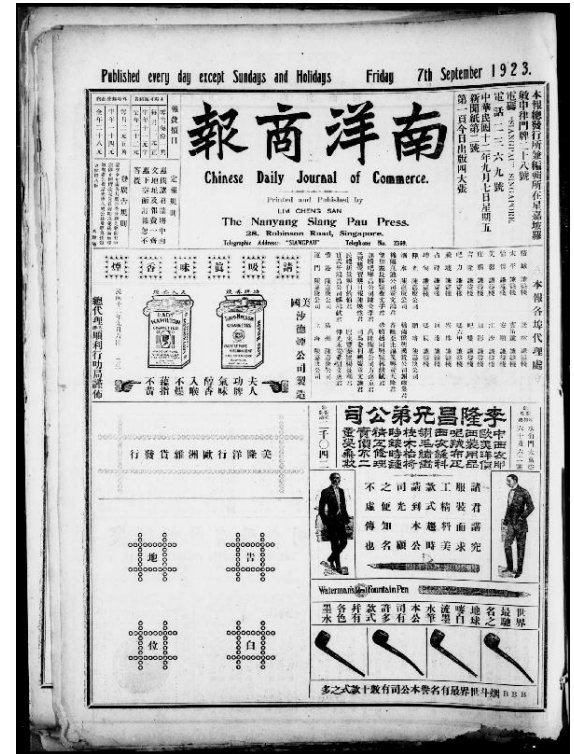
Source: Dateline Singapore: 150 Years of The Straits Times
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Vernacular Press in Singapore

Chinese Language Media

- 1923: Nanyang Siang Pau was established
- 1929: Sin Chew Jit Poh was established
- 1967: Shin Min Daily News was established
- 1983: Nanyang Siang Pau merged with Sin Chew Jit Poh to form Lianhe Zaobao and Lianhe Wanbao

Source: Nanyang Siang Pau, 7 September 1923, Page 1
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Vernacular Press in Singapore

Malay media

- From 1876: 3 papers in the Jawi script
- 1957: launch of Berita Harian (by STP)

Tamil media

- From 1887: Many Tamil papers
- 1935: launch of Tamil Murasu

Berita Harian akhbar untuk keluarga

Siapa yang mahu berita yang berkesan dan berkesan untuk keluarga? Berita Harian adalah akhbar yang terbaik untuk keluarga. Ia mengandungi berita-berita yang menarik dan berkesan untuk semua ahli keluarga. Berita Harian adalah akhbar yang paling banyak dibaca di seluruh Malaya. Ia adalah akhbar yang paling dipercayai dan paling berkesan.



UCHAP SELAMAT KETUA MENTERI KAPADA AKHBAR BERITA HARIAN

Sebuah ucapan selamat telah disampaikan oleh Ketua Menteri, Dato' Onn bin Ya'cob kepada akhbar Berita Harian semasa kunjungan kerjanya ke Kuala Lumpur. Beliau mengucapkan terima kasih kepada akhbar ini kerana telah memainkan peranan yang penting dalam menyampaikan berita-berita yang berkesan kepada rakyat.

Begitu juga dari Raja2 Melayu

Ucapan selamat yang serupa juga telah disampaikan oleh Raja-Raja Melayu kepada akhbar Berita Harian. Mereka mengucapkan terima kasih kerana akhbar ini telah menjadi saluran komunikasi yang efektif antara pemerintah dan rakyat.

... (Small text columns on the left side of the page) ...

UMNO TERIMA RANG PERLEMBAGAAN

ITU LAH YANG BAIK SEKALI KITA DAPATI KATA DATO RAZAK

Perwakilan UMNO menerima rang perlembagaan yang telah disediakan oleh kerajaan. Dato RAZAK menyatakan bahawa ini adalah langkah yang baik dan menunjukkan komitmen kerajaan terhadap pembangunan negara.

275 mati di-Amerika oleh sebab taufan

Sebuah taufan dahsyat telah melanda Amerika, menyebabkan 275 orang meninggal dunia. Bencana ini telah menimbulkan kemarahan dan kesedihan yang mendalam di kalangan rakyat.

Have a CAPSTAN

WAKIL KELUAR PERSIDANGAN

... (Text regarding the representative of the assembly) ...

UMNO mahu sekolah di-segerakan

Perwakilan UMNO meminta agar pembangunan sekolah diutamakan dalam perancangan pembangunan negara.

RED LION

தமிழ் மூரசு

"TAMIL MURASU" Tri-Weekly.

THE LEADING AND THE MOST INFLUENTIAL TAMIL NEWS PAPER IN MALAYA.

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சர்வாதிகாரி ஹிட்லர் சரிதம்

... (Large article text in Tamil) ...

... (Continuation of the article text) ...

Government Crackdowns against the Media

1971

- Closure of The Eastern Sun
- Suspension of Singapore Herald license
- Crackdown on Nanyang Siang Pau
 - Arrest of 4 staff under ISA

**The editor-in-chief for the Eastern Sun newspaper,
Mr Sam Krishniah, at a press conference**



Source: The Straits Times
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**The editor of the Singapore Herald,
Mr Ambrose Khaw at People's Park
Complex**



Source: The Straits Times
© SPH Media Limited. Permission required for reproduction

Shamsuddin Tang Tao (Left) and Ly Singko

**Former Nanyang Siang Pau Staff
Detained under the Internal Security
Act**



Source: The Straits Times

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Government Crackdowns against the Media

1976: Crackdown on Berita Harian

- Arrest of 2 BH editors in Singapore
- Arrest of 2 BH Malaysia executives

1959-1981: LKY vs The Straits Times (“The Knuckleduster Era”)

Government Interventions to Reshape Media Landscape

- Merger of Chinese papers; formation of SNPL
- Formation of SPH; merger of STP and SNPL
- SPH and Mediacorp: Merger or competition?

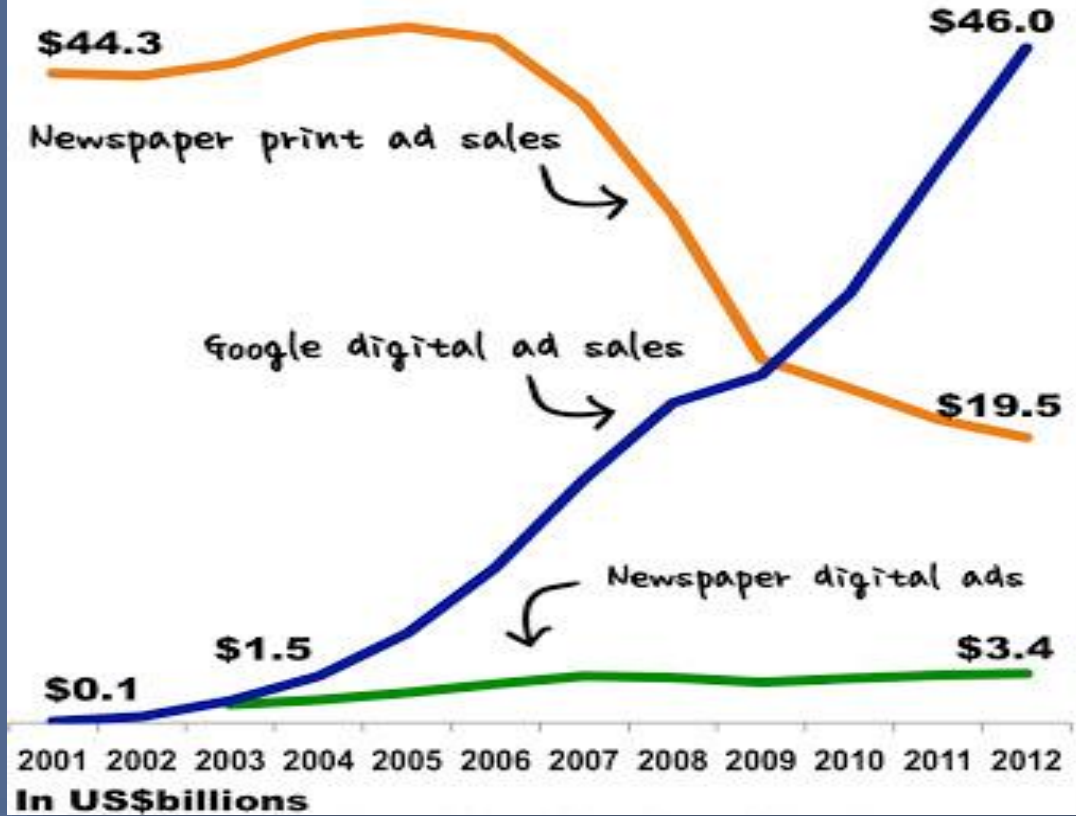


PART III: THE LAST TWO DECADES

The Last 2 Decades

- Disruption in the media: Incumbent's dilemma
- SPH Media Trust: A new model

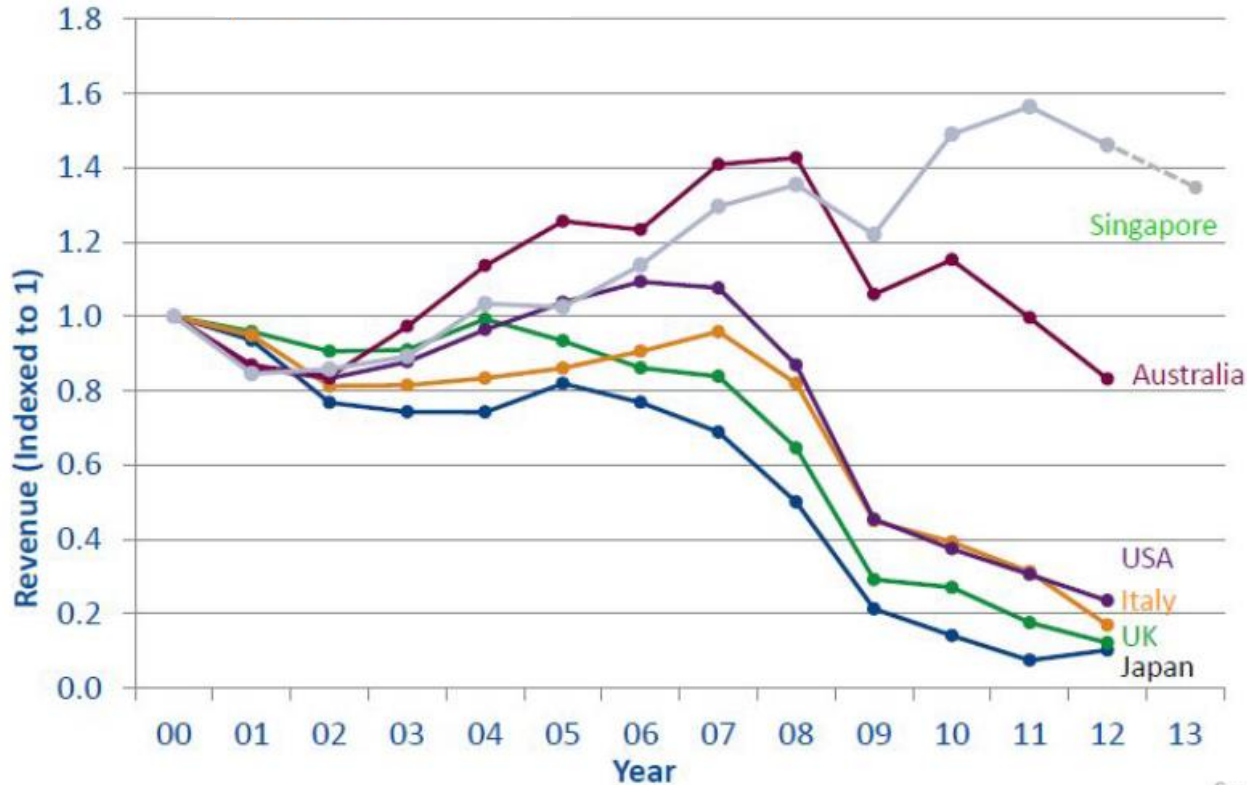
Newspaper vs. Google ad sales



Source : Newspaper Association of America and Google, as reported in Reflections of a Newsosaur

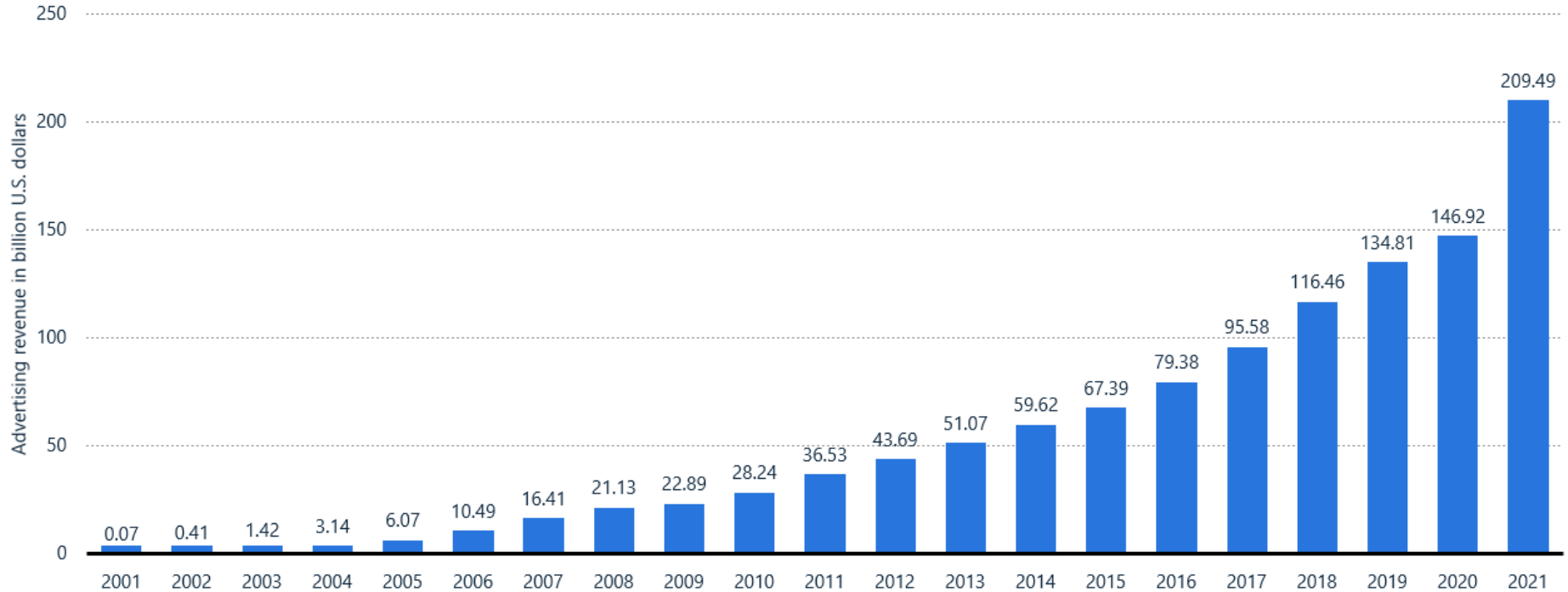


Have we crossed the tipping point?



Advertising revenue of Google from 2001 to 2021 (in billion US dollars)

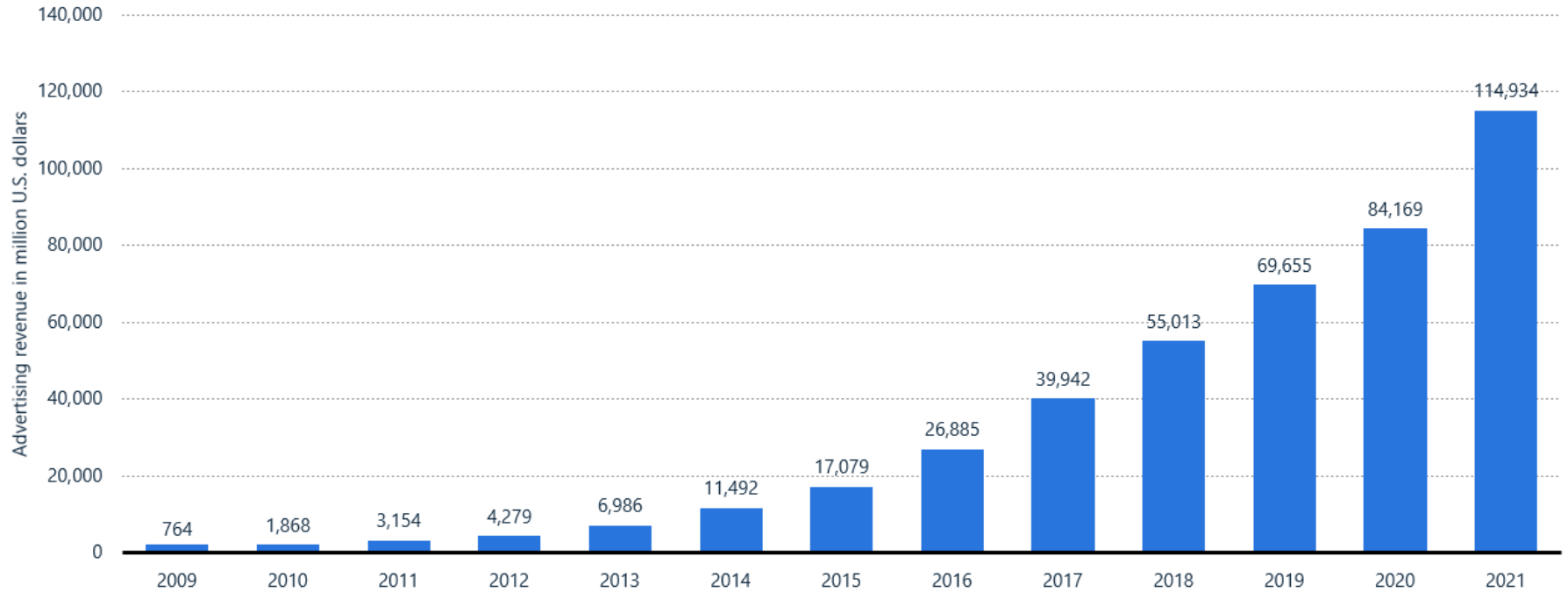
Google: annual advertising revenue 2001-2021



Source: Statista

Meta's (formerly Facebook Inc) advertising revenue worldwide from 2009 to 2021 (in million US dollars)

Meta: advertising revenue worldwide 2009-2021



Source: Statista

We don't really have
an audience problem



Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act (1996)

"No provider or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider."


SPH Media Trust: A New Model

- Annual government funding of \$180m for 5 years
- Invest in technology and capabilities
- Acknowledgement that trusted media is a public good
- Assurance of editorial independence
- A new “commercial-public” model



Patrick Daniel, 65
SPH Editor-in-Chief, English/Malay/Tamil Media Group
(2007 to 2016)

“The days when ST enjoyed profit margins above 30 per cent are gone – savaged by the technology platforms which have sucked up the bulk of advertising revenues. I’m convinced that newspapers have to find a new ownership model to survive - either be owned by a billionaire or convert to a public trust. I much prefer the latter, and predict ST will go that way and live to celebrate its 200th anniversary.”



What you are, the world is.
And without your transformation,
there can be no transformation
of the world. *Krishnamurti*