

**Summary of  
IPS Roundtable on  
“Journalism’s Uncertain Future”**

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The Institute of Policy Studies recently held a roundtable discussion on “Journalism’s Uncertain Future” led by Dr Cherian George, journalism professor, editor of an independent paper for children and a former journalist with a Singapore newspaper. Dr George spoke of the challenges professional journalism faces -- both in Singapore and globally -- with increasing consumer choice and technological advancements.

One of the key concerns undergirding Dr George’s presentation on the sustainability of professional journalism was the issue of continued and stable employment for journalists, present and future. He observed that journalists have generally taken two approaches to the looming challenges: the first is a renewed emphasis on the values of the profession, and the second (which has been taken up more widely) is to re-align the profession according to the market’s values. In this light, he predicted that the newspaper industry will see a “shakeout” and there may be a shift in market structure where news providers would choose to specialise on different “levels” of content provision.

A second concern that Dr George had was that the death or the decline of professional journalism in its present form may impact negatively on the public sphere and the national conversation. Consumer choice, he said, may cater to individual tastes and preferences but does not help in enlarging and enriching the public sphere. As a result, society may suffer as consumer choice continues to shift towards the niche and customisation of content.

Dr George suggested that the tension between consumer choice and the public good could be mitigated through public funding. Such public funding could come from individuals and organisations as well as the government.

During the discussion, participants responded to Dr George’s presentation with suggestions for sustainable business models. One suggestion that participants put up is for content providers to begin specialising in specific “levels” of reporting and content provision, so as to meet the demands placed by consumer choice and the trend towards niche content.

However, there are other challenges, particularly in the Singapore context, which participants felt needed to be overcome. The issue of competition and media regulation policy are two such challenges. Some agreed with Dr George's contention that the current lack of competition hinders the development of professional talent in Singapore, a situation exacerbated by media control. Media control, in turn, inhibits the full expression of journalistic talent and further development. It was noted that there is already a lack of adequate professional talent to maintain the reporting standards required by professional journalism

Some respondents also questioned the place for professional journalism as we know it in today's landscape. Alternative media, it was argued, is already providing space for the enlargement and enrichment of the public sphere. It was also suggested that the national conversation may not necessarily occur only in the national media; indeed, there have been overlapping even through fragmented conversations that are occurring through Web 2.0 technologies.

On the issue of public funding, participants generally recognised the possibility of this as a solution. However, it was emphasised that when a news outlet is funded by individuals or organisations outside of the government, the element of public trust must be there in order for the outlet to gain acceptance.

On the whole, the roundtable pointed out the inadequacies of current journalistic practices and the need for a major re-think on issues of competition and media regulation. It recommended public-funded journalism in broadcasting and print media as a supplement to the market driven model which is driven by the profit motive and political correctness.

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