

Assessing Media Coverage: The AWARE Controversy as a Case Study

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Introduction

This report looks at how media coverage of nationally important issues should be assessed. It uses the AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research) controversy of April and May 2009 as a case study. Although AWARE occupies almost all of this report, the aim is not so much to give a thorough account of the merits of the media coverage of the controversy as to use the particulars of the case to illustrate more general principles that should be used in critical appraisals of the media. In addition, this report makes the point that a full and proper assessment of media coverage needs to focus not just on what the media does, but also – for reasons of its own failings or otherwise – what it does not do.

Benchmarks for media performance

In general, three yardsticks can be used to assess media coverage of an event or issue:

- a) **Quality of coverage.** This concerns the articles found in newspapers or TV and radio stations, and whether they meet journalist standards of accuracy, fairness and balance, and whether in total they add up to a faithful version of the “truth”. The antithesis of fairness and balance is bias. Bias can be a result of selection/omission of information; placement of the article; headline of the article; photograph and caption; names and titles used to describe a person; statistics used to support the article; use of sources; and tone of the article².
- b) **Quantity of coverage.** This refers not just to the number and length of stories, but also to whether there are photographs and whether the ‘projection’ of the articles in terms of placing and position and promotion. The quantity of coverage should be a function of the newsworthiness of the story or subject³. Although most academic

¹ The author was a former journalist in *The Straits Times*. He acknowledges the help of research assistant Tan Simin and intern Ridhwan Mohamad Basor in the writing of this article.

² See “How to Detect Bias in the News” by the Centre For Media Literacy (<http://www.onvideo.org/cyberpod/media3.htm>). For balance and fairness and other issues of journalism ethics, see “The Associated Press Statement Of News Values And Principles”, available at <http://www.ap.org/newsvalues/index.html>

³ “What Is News? Galtung and Ruge revisited”, Tony Harcup and Deirdre O’neill, *Journalism Studies*, Volume 2, Number 2, 2001, pp. 261–280

research has focused on what media shows is newsworthy by analysis of what is published, there have been some normative lists based not what the media considers newsworthy but what it should consider newsworthy. One such list would include the following aspects of events which make them newsworthy: newness or timeliness, consequence or significance of impact on society, proximity to the reader or viewer and prominence of parties involved in the event; conflict; rarity of the event; and human interest of the event⁴. This shortlist will be used as the yardstick here for newsworthiness.

- c) **Beyond the initial story:** Another aspect of the quality of coverage is measured by the articles not written: are there important aspects of the event or issue that are not adequately covered? Events and issues often have implications beyond themselves, and whether they are covered adequately – in quality and quantity – is another measure of quality.

Applying these benchmarks to the contentious matter of media coverage of the AWARE controversy, three questions have to be considered:

- a) **Quality:** Was *The Straits Times* coverage biased against the “New Guard” of AWARE, that is the group of new members who took control of NGO’s executive committee at its annual general meeting? Related to this is whether the other media such as *Today*, *The New Paper*, *Channel News Asia* and *Lianhe Zaobao* were also biased, and if so why they were not accused of being so.
- b) **Quantity:** Considering the newsworthiness of the controversy, was the coverage too much, too little or just the right amount?
- c) **Coverage of implications:** Did the coverage miss out any important aspects of the controversy or issues arising from them?

Bias

So far, most the discussion about *The Straits Times*’ coverage only deals with the first question, while neglecting the other two. For instance, the New Guard and Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng have charged the newspaper with slanting the news. In a reply to questions from the media, he said:

“We must keep it that way by observing the rules of engagement. This applies also to the media. The media plays an important role reporting on the issues, the groups and the personalities involved. They need to do so dispassionately and impartially. MICA [the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts] had analysed the volume, tone and objectivity of the coverage of the AWARE episode, and found it wanting in some respects. Some of the coverage was excessive and not sufficiently balanced.

⁴ News Writing, by George A. Hough, 1994; and “News Writing and Reporting for Today’s Media”, by Bruce Itule and Douglas Anderson, 2003.

There were indeed important issues at stake, such as the proper limits for religious activism. But the AWARE episode was surely not the most important challenge facing Singapore, deserving such extensive and even breathless coverage. Whatever happened in AWARE was not going to change Singapore, or the Government's social policy. Journalists should not get caught up in the stories they are reporting, however exciting the stories may be. The Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts has given this feedback to the editors."⁵

There was also the case of the Member of Parliament Sin Boon Ann who quoted an unsubstantiated claim in Parliament from an email that "*The Straits Times* has not been honest in presenting the full picture to the public", and which he had to subsequently withdraw.⁶

Noteworthy in this episode is that many of the usual detractors of *The Straits Times*, that is, the more "liberal" sections of society, who were wont to criticise the press here for being controlled and pro-establishment, were on the side of the newspaper for once. Also unusual is that the government stood at the sidelines until quite late in the game both in the struggle between the "New" and "Old" Guards at AWARE and in the trajectory of *The Straits Times'* increasingly controversial coverage of that struggle.

The Straits Times editor Han Fook Kwang has also defended his newspaper's coverage of the AWARE controversy against criticisms from Christian right campaigners such as lawyer Thio Su Mien, university don Thio Li-Ann and other parties about its alleged bias against the now-deposed coup leaders of the women's advocacy group⁷. In Singapore, trying to get your point of view across publicly after a telling-off by the Government brings with it certain repercussions: that his commentary followed unequivocal criticisms of *The Straits Times'* reporting of the affair by Deputy Prime Minister Wong no less, a move which will be seen as the paper trying to get the last word in after the government has spoken, shows that how strongly Mr Han felt that a public defence was necessary.

Mr Han's argument was that:

a) *The Straits Times* gave the New Guard many chances to come open about their objectives and motives, but they dodged the questions time and again until lawyer Thio Su Mien, Ms Josie Lau and her compatriots showed their cards at an overdue press conference, which *The Straits Times* covered extensively and objectively.

⁵ "Q&A with DPM on Aware saga". *The Straits Times*, 15 May 2009. (http://www.straitstimes.com/Breaking%2BNews/Singapore/Story/Straits_TimesStory_376723.html)

⁶ "MP apologises for oversight". *The Straits Times*, 28 May 2009. (http://www.straitstimes.com/Breaking%2BNews/Singapore/Story/STISStory_382800.html)

⁷ "Why we covered Aware saga the way we did", *The Straits Times*, 30 May, 2009. (see http://www.straitstimes.com/breaking+news/singapore/story/stistory_383613.html)

b) *The Straits Times* did not itself hold any negative sentiments against the New Guard for apparently having a hidden agenda and a religious agenda, but was merely reporting the sentiments held by society at large.

Since critics such as Dr Thio Su Mien and Dr Thio Li-ann did not give details about where specifically the coverage was biased, it would have been hard for him to go any further in answering the very general charges made. I found Han's defence adequate enough except in two particulars:

- a) *The Straits Times* started off as a reporter of the news, and stayed objective for the duration of that. But when the New Guard started to make accusations against it, the paper could only be expected to defend its honour and professionalism. It had willy-nilly become part of the news, a news-maker. So in its commentaries, it attacked the New Guard in its defence of itself. But it remained largely objective in its news coverage.
- b) If there was an instance of bias, it would be a photograph carried in the print edition on April 24 of the aforementioned press conference. It showed the belligerent gestures and expressions of the new executive committee (exco) members. The picture would not likely have won them any converts among a nation not inclined to be sympathetic towards public displays of disharmony and hostility. It is not clear if the selection of this image was a sign of conscious bias, a result of unconscious bias or purely accidental (that is, no one thought about this particular effect of the picture, or it was the best picture in terms of quality or in terms of how it represented the proceedings of the press conference.) However, this was the only instance of an unflattering picture among the many used during the controversy.

From my discussions with some journalists and a reading of the articles, it would seem that:

- a) There were some in *The Straits Times* who were "on the side" of the Old Guard. That journalists have their own views are only to be expected. Professional codes of practices are there to ensure that newspapers are objective, fair and balanced where it is germane, such as in news reports as opposed to commentaries. The test is in their published articles, not in the views they hold private or even those they communicate publicly via other channels.
- b) With the exception of the one photograph, the coverage was objective, fair and balanced; *The Straits Times* tried to give everyone the opportunity to make their case and to have the right of reply. It did not mix comment with the news in its news stories.
- c) If the coverage in *The Straits Times* was fair, why did the New Guard come across poorly to some readers, a point to which even the detractors of the New Guard would submit? Perhaps *The Straits Times* was indeed biased against

them. But the fact is that even when a newspaper is objective, fair and balanced, some newsmakers will come across badly because readers don't approve of their words or actions or because they have poor public relations. The New Guard failed on both accounts. On the public relations question, the New Guard shot themselves in the foot by refusing to answer questions about themselves and their intentions for too long; they naturally came across as being evasive and seemingly guilty of having the hidden agenda they at first did not claim to have. And when it later emerged that there was indeed a hidden agenda set by a mastermind in the background, *The Straits Times* reported the news straight without innuendo on its front page⁸, letting the New Guard tell their stories, using neutral words such as "said" and "added" instead of loaded ones such as "claimed", and also reporting the questions they raised about *The Straits Times'* motives in its "pro-gay" coverage⁹. Yet the failure to be upfront from the start lost the New Guard much credibility, without the media having to do anything other than to report the news as it was. That is, under these circumstances, any fair and balanced reporting of the events would not have made many originally neutral readers sympathetic to the New Guard. It was a fiasco for the New Guard, but one not so much engineered by *The Straits Times* as self-inflicted.

- d) The commentaries by reporters such as Mr Alan John and Ms Chua Mui Hoong and the newspaper's editorials (which lay out the view of the newspaper or its editors) were not sympathetic to the New Guard¹⁰. But this was opinion, and there was no attempt to hide opinion as news. Two other commentaries were neutral¹¹. A commentary by an academic said that New Guard's takeover was not a bad thing¹². It is not known if any other commentaries supporting the New Guard were sent to *The Straits Times* and were not published, that is, censored. This is unlikely because *The Straits Times* would give that right of reply at this stage, as the government had not weighed in for either side at this stage, and also because the whole strategy of the New Guard or their supporters at first was not to say anything. It should be noted that when Thio Li-Ann criticised *The Straits Times* in Parliament, the paper duly carried not just a report but an edited transcript of her speech. The first two letters carried in the Forum pages were on opposite sides of the fence, showing *The Straits Times'* attempt to be even-

⁸ "The 'Feminist Mentor': Lawyer's key role in Aware coup." *The Straits Times*, 24 April, 2009

⁹ "New exco members tell of death threats." *The Straits Times*, 24 April, 2009

¹⁰ "Too many questions left unanswered" by Alan John, *The Straits Times*, April 23, 2009; "Aware saga: A new militancy emerges" by Chua Mui Hoong, *The Straits Times*, April 25, 2009.

¹¹ "Let's stay civil, minus the nannies" by Andy Ho, *The Straits Times*, April 23, 2009; "Dangerous turn in a domestic dispute" by Paul Jacob, *The Straits Times*, April 20, 2009;

¹² "Best to let change run its course" by Theresa W. Devashayam, *The Straits Times*, April 23, 2009.

handed¹³. There were no letters published that took issue with the commentaries by Mr Alan John and Ms Chua Mui Hoong or with the newspaper editorials. It could be that letters were sent in by readers, but they were not run. This is unlikely, since *The Straits Times* endeavours to publish new points of views, whether they are for or against any of its columnists or its own editorials, or even the Government.

Amount of coverage

Mr Han did not address the issue of “volume” raised by Mr Wong Kan Seng in particular. But no doubt there was a lot of coverage of the issue in *The Straits Times* and other media. On some days, as much as two and a half pages in *The Straits Times* were devoted to the news. As noted, there were also commentaries.

There are two ways to measure the appropriateness of the amount of coverage. One is relative to other newspapers, and relative to a journalistically correct optimum or ideal. On the first, between 10 April and 30 May, *The Straits Times* published a total of 130 news articles and commentaries, compared to 59 in *Today*. Hence *The Straits Times* had twice the number of articles than its rival. But this is not unusual, as it routinely carries devotes more space to important issues (in terms of the number of articles and in the length of each article). For instance, between 17 Jan to 22 March 2009 there were 162 articles on Parliament proceedings in *The Straits Times* compared to 108 in *Today*, a ratio of 1.5. *The Straits Times* thus devoted somewhat more coverage to AWARE than it did Parliament. This could be because *Today* under-covered AWARE or *The Straits Times* over-covered it. It could be both, meaning that the ideal amount of coverage lies somewhere in between. It could also be because *The Straits Times*, which broke the story, had a greater interest in pursuing it.

¹³ “Give new leaders a chance to produce results” and “Committee needs to make its stance known”, *The Straits Times*, April 14, 2009;

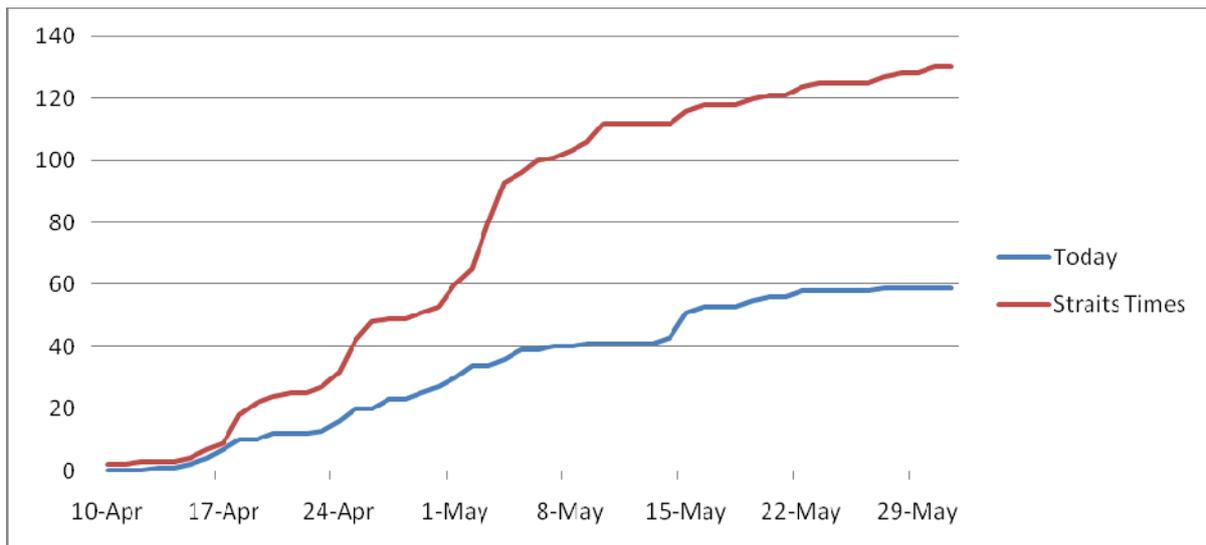


Figure 1: Number of articles in The Straits Times and Today (cumulative)

As for the journalistic ideal in terms of amount of coverage, there can be two justifications for the extensive and sustained coverage of the AWARE controversy, indeed, of any news event.

First, a newspaper can argue that, using the journalistic benchmarks discussed at the beginning of this report (proximity, conflict, newness, etc) there is a lot of interest among the public for the news, hence it is merely giving what its readers want. Of course, there are ethical questions raised by this editorial approach. For instance, serious papers will try to treat news in a non-sensationalistic manner because doing otherwise is unprofessional. The temptation is strong though, because newspaper companies have to sell newspapers and giving readers what they want is one way of doing it. Indeed there is a “race to the bottom” among, for instance, British newspapers as cutthroat competition drives even the “quality papers” to ever more sensationalist reporting. The AWARE controversy was very much a scrap between two fiercely opposing camps, fulfilling the news value of conflict; hence it made for good copy. But a survey of the articles in *The Straits Times* shows no evidence of sensationalising the news. Indeed its accusers did not point to any transgressions in this respect. Was there a lot of interest among the public? No doubt, many found the blow-by-blow accounts absorbing. Was the public hoodwinked by the coverage into thinking that the issue is bigger than it was? Perhaps, but then we enter the slippery terrain of saying that the public is not able to make their own judgement about what is important. There were complaints that the coverage was just too overwhelming, thus undermining the justification of wide public interest somewhat though not completely, as it is not clear how representative these complaints were.

Second, a newspaper can argue that it is devoting so much to the coverage of an issue on the grounds of newsworthiness. If we take the journalistic benchmarks again, then the AWARE controversy satisfied almost all the qualities that make for newsworthiness:

newness or timeliness, consequence or significance of impact on society, proximity to the reader or viewer and prominence of parties involved in the event; conflict; rarity of the event; and human interest of the event. The only caveat, if at all, is the question of the prominence of AWARE. Some argue for its importance as one of Singapore's oldest and most respected civil society groups, while others dismissed it as a fringe organisation. Nevertheless, the controversy contained enough journalistic elements to make it extremely newsworthy.

The question of the impact of society merits more discussion. It is in the public interest for media to cover issues with impact on society. It is important that the public knows about the issue in question. The media's role is that of giving the public what it needs to know, even if it does not necessarily want to know. This public interest reason alone justifies the extensive coverage that *The Straits Times* and other papers give to political news in the many cases when the number of people who actually read the news may be limited. For instance, extensive coverage is given to sittings of Parliament, sometimes more than a few pages a day. Another example would be the prominent display of foreign news on the "prime" pages of the newspaper even though there is likely to be very little reader interest, for instance, the front page coverage of the first post-election violence in Iran.

Of course there are other dynamics going on in determining the amount of and the prominence given to the coverage of an issue on any given day. These include factors such as whether there is other news on the day which is more exciting, how "big" the newspaper is in terms of number of pages in total for the day (which is driven by advertising), and the idiosyncratic judgement of the changing roster of editors for that day. The front-page Iranian story described above, for instance, appeared on a Monday, which follows a typical dry-news Sunday, when nothing much happens. (Desperate Sunday editors who have to fill the pages for Monday would pray jokingly – sometimes only half so – "oh, if only there is an earthquake somewhere!")

Because the AWARE controversy happened over a period of several weeks, these chance factors can be expected to cancel one another out. So how much is the news in the public interest? Minister Wong Kan Seng acknowledged that the news was in the public interest: "There were indeed important issues at stake, such as the proper limits for religious activism." He also hinted at an objective measure of the public interest content in the news, whether what the AWARE controversy was "going to change Singapore, or the Government's social policy". In fact, the AWARE controversy did lead to changes in policy, namely on the review of the Comprehensive Sexuality Education programme taught in secondary schools by a new committee to vet external programme providers. From this perspective, *The Straits Times* can argue a public interest justification for at least a considerable volume, if not all, of its AWARE coverage.

Another measure of the public interest is the less objective one of the "importance" of the issues brought up by AWARE. It can be argued that a whole series of issues met this benchmark. They include:

- a) The way in which interest and civil society groups ought to engage one another, namely, whether the anti-gay lobby ought to found an alternative to AWARE instead of infiltrating it.
- b) The meaning of the 'democratic' as applied to the AWARE elections and which with application to civil society organisations and even electoral politics. For instance, was the fact that the new AWARE executive committee members were elected in an open election sufficient for it to be called democratic, even though their real intentions for holding power were not revealed? And can their actions also be considered democratic when the intention is ultimately anti-democratic in the sense that it was aimed at silencing the allegedly pro-gay lobby within AWARE, rather than to engender an open and public debate about the issue?
- c) The role of religion in society, and the meaning of secularism in the context of Singapore. What is the nature of Singapore's secularism? What form should Singapore's secularism take? Does the changing religious landscape – the rise of the religious right, for instance – warrant new thinking about the limits of secularism and religion's participation in civic life?

Even if *The Straits Times* did not get the amount of coverage right, is it better to over-cover a public interest matter or to under-cover it? When it emerged that some people thought that *The Straits Times* was writing the subject to death, *The Straits Times* could have mounted some of these arguments for its continuing interest in the AWARE issue as a way to remind readers why it thought they should be informed. Unfortunately for *The Straits Times*, it did not during the controversy itself or in Mr Han's defence of his newspaper.

Missing Discussions

An assessment of quality must deal not just with commissions, but omissions. A case could be made that *The Straits Times* actually did *not* give enough coverage to certain aspects of the AWARE controversy or issues arising from it. In terms of journalistic professionalism, too much coverage is a problem, but too little is a far greater one. The three public interest issues mentioned above all failed to receive the full public discussion in the media that they deserved: engagement between interest groups; democratic means versus non-democratic ends; and secularism with Singapore characteristics.

A fourth area hinted at above which was also not fully discussed was that of the Comprehensive Sexuality Education programme. Among the questions that were not raised, much less answered, and which *The Straits Times* and other media would have done a great service posing were:

- a) What exactly is the Comprehensive Sexuality Education programme, its purposes and its content? Since the knowledge and maturity of a secondary two child is vastly different from that of an 18-year-old one, does the programme differentiate, as it should, between the different age groups by delivering different kinds of information graded to the level of schooling?

- b) What makes for a good programme and who should make the decision on what is 'good'? How was the programme devised, both in principles and in its implementation? How does the society we are and wish to be impact on these questions?
- c) What exactly was in the programme that AWARE was teaching at schools?
- d) Was the programmes offered by different groups doing the right thing? For instance, should parents worry about children learning that abstinence is the only way to stop teenage pregnancy or prevent the spread of sexually-transmitted disease, or that – as some anti-scientific groups claim in the face of incontrovertible evidence – “condoms do not work or do more harm than good”?
- e) Do parents know enough about the programme? Should they? If they should and don't, why do they not?
- f) What exactly should the role of parents be in children's sexuality education? How about the role of schools?
- g) Should parents have a role in deciding the contents and approach of the Comprehensive Sexuality Education programme, or at least chose from a variety of programmes from the tolerant variant used by AWARE to the conservative ones desired by the new AWARE group?

Late in the controversy, when these questions were ready to be foregrounded, the Government stepped into the debate. It is not clear whether the mainstream media's shortfall in not turning its attention to these issues was caused by journalistic inadequacies or resulted from official directive. Whatever the reason, the debate in the media was unfortunately closed even before it started. They still remain pertinent issues, and await open discussion.

Conclusion

Assessments of media coverage of an event or an issue must be based on a series of tests, including that of quantity and quality. There are certainly universal-enough yardsticks that can be used to measure whether coverage is too much or too little, and whether it meets or fails short of high journalistic standards. Additionally, the overall assessment must include not just commissions but omissions in coverage. Furthermore, in certain media environments where editors do not have a completely free hand (because of corporate, governmental or other controls), sometimes the failures of the media are not a result of inadequacies in the news room but have roots that lie elsewhere.
