

Surviving on the Edge in Singapore:
Mr. Brown's Satirical Podcasting Finds a Way Out

Hsiang-yi Tang (Eva)
A Master of Arts Candidate
Department of Journalism
National Chengchi University
Muzha, Taipei, Taiwan
Email: giatang@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examines the production of podcast by a Singaporean blogger Mr. Brown, who has been utilizing the outcome of a technological convergence — podcast, in a most creative way to express his political views. By his own unique style of satire, he has survived in this island state's closely regulated Internet sphere. It remains to be seen, however, whether Mr. Brown's citizen journalism can point to a way for alternative media in Singapore.

Key words: podcast, citizen journalism, alternative/ grassroots media, media control in Singapore

A paper presented at the *Conference on Convergence, Citizen Journalism & Social Change: Building Capacity*, Asian Media Information and Communication Centre(AMIC) conference at the University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia, March 25 to 27, 2008.

Surviving on the Edge in Singapore Mr. Brown' Satirical Podcasting Finds a Way Out

Background

Singapore has been under one-party domination since its independence in 1965.

Though widely acclaimed for its amazing commercial success, this city-state has long been criticized by liberal western democracies for its restrictions over freedom of expression and the press. Practicing government-say-so journalism (Lent, 1978) or media as partners in nation building and economic progress characterizes the country's media philosophy and environment. All Singapore's local print and broadcast media are dominated by the Singapore Press Holdings and the Media Corp. Although both are private-owned entities, their managements are closely linked to the government and generally hold a pro-government stance (Gomez, 2005). The curtailment of *Time*, *Asiaweek*, *Far Eastern Economic Review* and *Asian Wall Street Journal* during the 1970s and the 1980s by the then Lee Kuan Yew government now still reminds western journalists and media of the determination and the extent the Singaporean government wields its power in taming the media which it considers having over-stepped the tolerated bounds. While strong government scores high economically for Singapore, it has meanwhile contributed to the lack of the balance from oppositional parties or media surveillance (Gu, 2006).

Controls aside, the abundance of business and financial information has been

credited for Singapore's economic success. Thanks to the well-developed telecommunications infrastructure, a steady flow of such information is delivered to the business-minded both local and foreign companies. The popular adoption of Internet by more than 70 percent of the households networks the small state with all corners of the world and among the domestic population itself. At the same time, this well-developed telecommunication network makes it possible for the people to access something different from the traditional media. Political forums and online communities are being formed through the Internet. As seen in other countries, this decentralized technology promotes political discourse and participation (Porter, 1997), enabling different public interest groups and civil organizations in recruiting members, propagating their views, and attracting public attention (Ho et al.,2002), though often not without consequences.

As with other traditional media, complicated and onerous rules and regulations are promulgated to regulate online discourses. The Internet Code of Practice and the Class License Scheme draw lines for site content, as well as require individuals or groups engaged in political or religious discussion to register with the government's Media Development Authority (MDA). For instance, when asked to register as political organizations, the Singapore Internet Community (Sintercom), the first website for political posting and online discussion, and Think Centre, a website launched by the

long-time activist James Gomez to counteract mainstream media with activist style journalism, chose to close their open forums to eschew censorship. In George's (2006) words, these sites are practicing "contentious" journalism.

Unlike the seemingly obvious appeals of Sintercom or Think Centre, Mr. Brown aka Mr. Lin Kin Mun makes his comments about "L'infantile terrible of Singapore" through on-line publishing-- blogging and podcasting. What makes Mr. Brown's production different from sites mentioned above is the way he chooses to publicize his views on current affairs. His satirical writing and his sense of humor seem to have so far protected him well. Unlike his previous column in the English-language *Today*, the *Mr. Brown Show* since 2005 has survived the authorities' surveillance and continues to be widely disseminated and discussed.

As a matter of fact, Mr. Brown is not the only one that has the "funny" appeals. For instance, *Talking Cock.com* calls itself Singapore's Premier Satirical Humor Website. It consists of several sections such as news, columns, features, forums and the famous Coxford Singlish Dictionary (in contrast with the Oxford English Dictionary). Along with others like *The Void Deck* or *Sammyboy's Alfresco Coffee Shop*, these are the sites which gather works from mostly different anonymous authors. They provide forums for registered users or hyperlinks for reference. Therefore, the content is usually scattered depending on the incoming flow. In terms of site content or ways of

representation, the *Mr. Brown Show* has built up his own style and distinguished itself from all others.

During the 2006 General Election, he produced a series of podcasts titled “Persistently Non-political Podcast” (PNPP), which has made him especially famous. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong mentioned Mr. Brown in his National Day Rally speech on Aug. 10, 2006, saying, among other things, his podcasts are “hilarious”! By referring to one famous “minced pork noodle” (*Bak Chor Mee*) podcast made by Mr. Brown, PM Lee made known his attitude toward “new media”, as his National Day speech script is considered as a response from the authorities. The *Mr. Brown Show* has emerged as an interesting case which can be used to see how citizens or alternative media, with the help of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) could survive under Singapore’s media ideology and regulations that claim to have grounded on Confucian hierarchical order and harmony.

Citizen Journalism

Public journalism, or civic journalism, has since the 1990s been known as a movement led by news practitioners to experiment with ways to enhance civic commitment and participation. Its emergence is in response to the widening gap between governments and citizens, as well as that between news organizations and their audiences (Hass,

2006).

Citizen journalism, a specific form of citizen media as well as user-generated content, on the other hand, is initiated and led by the people (Willis & Bauman, 2003). Citizens take the initiative to collect, report, analyze and disseminate news, comments, or any other information. The idea behind citizen journalism is that people without professional journalistic training can make use of modern technology and Internet to create or verify factual errors (Glaser, 2006). The content of the media is both driven and produced by citizens.

Lasica (2003) includes civic participation in one of her six notions, or categories, of “participatory journalism”, which are:

- (1) Audience participation at mainstream news outlets.
- (2) Independent news and information websites.
- (3) Full-fledged participatory news sites.
- (4) Collaborative and contributory media sites.
- (5) Thin media (ex: mailing list and email newsletter).
- (6) Personal broadcasting sites.

This categorization is broad enough to take both public journalism and citizen journalism in, at least part of each. With most of his podcasts focusing on satirical political commentaries, the *Mr. Brown Show* fits in the sixth category.

Although public journalism can be distinguished from citizen journalism in terms of the initiating agent, the two actually overlap in at least their propagation of civic participation. Moreover, the “citizenness” of citizen journalism articulates notions of alternative media (Atton, 2002) and grassroots media (Gillmor, 2004). They both are interrelated, and have something to do with the development of ICTs.

Alternative media refer to practices that are radically different from those of the mainstream media. O’Sullivan (1994) elaborates that alternative media have its emphasis on a critical reassessment of traditional values, and it is committed to innovation or experimentation in form or content. By referencing Rodriques’s (2001) conceptualization of alternative media as “citizens” media, Atton (2003:269) argues that alternative journalism is practiced in a multiplicity of hybridized, context-specific and contingent ways. Radical content and promotion of social change are elements of a constructive definition for alternative media (Atton,2002:14).

Enabling citizens, i.e., the passive “former audience”, to play an active role in news production is the central concept to grassroots journalism of present Internet age (Gillmor, 2004). Participatory citizenship highlights again the core value of grassroots media “by the people and for the people”. Grassroots media offers the most thorough version of alternative news values. In these grassroots media, news is produced by the same people whose concerns they represent, from a position of engagement and direct

participation (Traber, 1985 as referred to in Atton,2002:16), getting to the very core of citizen journalism.

Online publishing is the most common way for grassroots media or alternative media to express the “former audiences”. Internet’s inherent democratic, chaotic, decentralized nature and its comparatively much greater freedom from official control make it appealing to civil society (Dahlgren,1996). Regarding civil society, Singapore has her own definition, that is the government emphasizes more on “civil responsibilities” rather than rights of citizenship of a more conventional understanding about civil society (Chua, 2000 as referred to in Lee, 2005:2).

Singapore, in the list of top 36 countries¹ with the highest internet penetration rate, ranked 17, with 71% of households having Internet access, according to Internet World Stats. Two in five residents aged 10 years old and above are broad-band users (Infocomm Development Authority, 2007). There’s no doubt that Singapore has become a “tech-savvy” country. While policymakers aim to transform the nation into a global infocomm capital (Soon & Kulver, 2007), Dong (2004:88) thinks all the infrastructure built in the nation makes Singapore a highly-surveilled society. She drew Michael Foucault’s notion “super-electronic panopticism” to describe how the government achieves control through Internet and surveillance cameras. It seems that

¹ Stats drawn from Internet World Stats. (<http://www.internetworldstats.com/top25.htm> date:2007/12/22)

the government is making the best use of the technologies to keep a closer eye on citizens, much more than citizens to be empowered by it. Singapore can be a paradoxical example for those believers in technodemocracy.

Nonetheless, characteristics of Internet and what it is capable of have made it difficult to regulate. Unlike the print and broadcast media that are indirectly state-owned (Lee & Willnat, 2006), the telecommunication infrastructure set up in the nation are owned by the authorities, which can block the access to over 100 porn sites even though they can not shut them down as if turning off water taps. Doing that would simply cause great too many consequences on such other vital activities as e-commerce (George, 2006). Therefore, the question is whether or not the authorities will turn off the faucet, but how tight or loose the authorities will adjust it.

In Singapore, all Internet Content Providers and Internet Service Providers are automatically granted a license and are bound by the Internet Code of Practice. Through the Class License system, self-censorship, self-regulation, self-discipline or self-constraint are the underlying purposes. The Media Development Authority (MDA), the regulator of site content, describes its regulation approach as taking a “light touch.” With the extent of self-censorship being practiced, laws and regulations constraining critical political engagement may be draconian, but are rarely called upon into action (Rodan, 2004:101).

To what extent the Singaporean authorities tolerate dissenting opinions is an intriguing question. The case of Think Centre and Sintercom are some indicators of how much is too much by the definition of “light touch”. As noted earlier, both closed shop when they were asked to register with MDA as political entities. Mr. Brown used to have a column in the English-language *Today*. After a letter sent by the authorities to the newspaper, the column was suspended. We shall return to this incident later.

As a techno geek, Mr. Brown started producing the *Mr. Brown Show* with a iTalk, a recording device connected to his iPod. Podcast refers to distribution of audio files through the Internet, and it allows users to subscribe with RSS, the service to receive new files automatically (Kuo, 2005). Thanks to such technological convergence that combines recording device and Internet access to upload, mobile broadcasting is made a reality. The main difference between podcast and web radio broadcast (in all their qualities) is that podcast is much more portable. With the time-shifting feature, iPod enables listeners to decide what, when and where to listen to podcast.

Podcast first appeared on the market in 2004, three years after the birth of Apple Computer’s iPod. Since 2005 people have been able to look up the word “podcast” in the Oxford English Dictionary (Miles, 2005). The word is considered as the combination of “iPod” and “broadcasting”, and this newly coined word has spread fast because of iPod’s stunningly successful sales. However, there are different

explanations. For one thing, one does not necessarily need an iPod to listen to podcast. Any MP3 player will do. Another interpretation is that podcast is Personal On Demand since users have the freedom to choose whose podcast to listen to (Descy, 2005).

Producing podcast is thus not such a technique question. Whoever knows the basics can produce podcast. One can play music as a DJ, tell jokes, comment on politics, or do anything. Precisely because of its low technological threshold, it makes a good platform for grassroots media. The only hurdle it has is that whether there are people who will eventually listen to a certain podcast.

Mr. Brown and the Mr. Brown Show

Mr. Brown, a.k.a. Mr. Lee Kim Mun, is a Singaporean who owns a 10-year-old blog and two-year-old podcast site. He calls himself the author of an accidental popular blog. The *Mr. Brown Show* started to broadcast in March 2005, with another two podcast shows launched in February 2007. The *WTF! show* is on electronic devices, and the *See What Show* is on films. Both are updated weekly.

The *Mr. Brown Show* did not set out to focus on “matters of national importance,” which is the title for one of its content categories. The first ones are conversation podcast, the recording of dialogues or discussions between Mr. Brown and his friends. He had a regular co-host Mr. Miyagi. Updates were not done on a daily basis.

Therefore, in this experimental stage, the form of the podcast was rather random and arbitrary.

Then, some guests were invited to talk in the show, making therefore the podcasts more thematic. Moreover, between October 2005 and July 2006, Mr. Brown and Mr. Miyagi made a series of podcasts named *Zhng My Car*, a show about car makeover inspired by a show in MTV station “*Pimp my ride*”. *Zhng My Car* has 10 episodes. The series scored quite some listeners. Apparently, the *Mr. Brown Show* now is far more organized than its first stage.

It was until the “*Persistently Non-Political Podcast*” (PNPP) of the *Mr. Brown Show* that he focuses more on matters of national importance. The jaw-breaking name was made in response to the ban of “persistently political content” by the Election Advertising Regulations during the 2006 General Election campaign². Among all the 11 episodes of the series, No. 6 is a skit allegedly allegorizes the then James Gomez incident into a quarrel between a minced pork noodle (*Bak Chor Mee*) vendor and a customer. This episode made Mr. Brown a celebrity podcaster (or blogger), especially when it was mentioned by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in his National Day speech. Other than that, the PNPP series is updated daily. It is worth noting that the popularity of the PNPP series has made the *Mr. Brown Show* a daily podcast that is now regularly

² Here is a news covering the ban “Podcasting is not allowed during elections”:
<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/201330/1/.html>

updated.

The *Mr. Brown Show* labels its podcast under several categories, such as “Entertainment”, “Matters of National Importance”, “Music”, “Merchandise” and so on. Matters of National Importance section takes the most part of the *Mr. Brown Show* and is closely related to current issues in Singapore. By putting up short radio skits, comments are being made on nearly all aspects of life in Singapore. No matter these are macro issues about governmental policies such as the Central Provident Fund’s (CPF) pension plan changes, impacts of price hike (such as more expensive coffees), Singapore’s relationship with her neighbor countries(i.e. ASEAN issues), or micro issues like cyclists’ road right, embargo on luncheon meat from China, comments on certain product advertisements, etc. Overall, it is in the Matters of National Importance column that Mr. Brown wields the power of new media to practice citizen journalism in a most creative way. He pokes fun at the practice of mainstream state-owned media with sarcasm or makes alternative, mostly humorous, comments about what is in the news.

As a blogger, Mr. Lee Kim Mun chose not to be an anonymous as most other bloggers. Unlike sites such as *Talking Cock*, *The Void Deck*, *Sammy Boy’s Alfresco coffee shop* that gather works extensively from various authors, Mr. Brown and his

regular co-hosts³ are the sole authors of the *Mr. Brown Show*. Moreover, his consistency makes his show just like radio shows people listen through FM/AM radio. Except that in podcast, listeners have first to take the initiative to subscribe.

Mr. Brown started out as a blogger. His blog *mrbrown.com* was a prize winner of Asian Blog Awards in 2004 and 2005. Besides blogging, he was a columnist for about 3 years in Singapore's English *Today* newspaper. The column was terminated after his "Singaporeans are fed, up with progress".⁴ The Ministry of Information, Communication and Arts (MICA) made a response to *Today*, strongly condemning Mr. Brown's view as "distorting the truth". Consequently, the column was suspended indefinitely. Apparently, his satirical writing in the traditional print media was not tolerated. The incident happened in July 2006. Nevertheless, Mr. Brown has continued his previous identity as a blogger except that his level of popularity has now grown considerably. But, one thing that has not changed is that Mr. Brown remains a Singaporean citizen through and through. These unique distinctions explain why the *Mr. Brown Show* is being chosen for a closer examination in this paper.

The *Mr. Brown Show* Analyzed

There are more than 500 podcasts on *mrbrownshow.com*, including the above

³ There's a list of the *Mr Brown Show* team on his site : <http://www.mrbrownshow.com/about/>

⁴ For the full text of the article, please log on <http://www.mrbrown.com/blog/popular/index.html> Since *Today* has taken it off its website.

mentioned categories. Since this study intends to examine how Mr. Brown practices citizen journalism with the help of technology, the following presentation of his podcast will demonstrate how it is connected with current issues and how he integrates his satirical style into podcast, to explain why he is considered an alternative to the mainstream.

His series of “*Persistently Non-political Podcast*” also makes the Mr Brown Show a significant choice for analysis. Being his most popular podcast, especially the *Bak Chor Mee* podcast, has been downloaded more than 100,000 times, not including the ones sent via email or mobile phones. Also, at the time it was widely disseminated, it ranked number 5 on Liberated Syndication⁵, a hosting company that specializes in podcast worldwide. During the 2006 election, some incidents drew much public attention and discussion. For instance, the dispute over James Gomez and the defamation case of Singapore Democratic Party on National Kidney Foundation (NKF) controversy. Responses to the above incidents as reconstructed in PNPP No.4, No.5 and No.6, are thus chosen for analysis.

On the other hand, how the *Mr. Brown Show* survives and expands the media scope in Singapore is worthy of investigation. The interaction between the authorities and the *Mr. Brown Show* means a lot in this account. As mentioned, Prime Minister Lee Hsien

⁵ Here is the rank
http://www.mrbrown.com/.shared/image.html?/photos/uncategorized/libsyn_hott100_no5.jpg

Loong made reference to the *Bak Chor Mee* podcast and shared his point of view about new media in Singapore in his national day rally speech. Afterwards, Mr. Brown made a podcast named “A harmless podcast”, which was taken as a response to the speech.

These three incidents will first be briefly described with their corresponding podcasts analyzed to demonstrate the podcast versus authority interactions.

The Incidents and Their Podcast Reconstructions

1. The James Gomez Incident and *Persistently Non-Political Podcast No. 5*

James Gomez was the candidate representing the oppositional Worker’s Party during the 2006 General Election. The incident was triggered in the administrative process of Gomez submitting a form of minority certificate. He claimed he had submitted his form and accused the Election Department (ELD) of losing it. Later on, ELD revealed a closed circuit television footage showing that he had put the form in his own briefcase and left without submitting it⁶. Although Gomez apologized publicly, his qualification as a candidate was cancelled. His passport was also confiscated, but eventually released after intense investigation. The ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) condemned him fiercely. Questioning his integrity, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew called him a “liar” and dared the Worker’s Party to sue him as well as the government⁷.

⁶ Here is the coverage by CNA

<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/205255/1/.html>

⁷ Here is the news covering LKY when he called James Gomez a liar.

PAP leaders considered Gomez's apology insufficient and the form incident an intended trick or a strategy attempting to dishonor ELD. The incident was conspicuously reported in all Singaporean media.

PNPP No. 5 was Mr. Brown's response to the form submission case. Scene A contained a dialogue between the PM and ELD while Scene B was about a press conference. In the podcast, it was not Gomez who had failed to submit the form. Instead, it was the fictitious PM Jeff Lopez who had claimed his submission until ELD showed a CCTV footage of him bringing the form home. Then, Lopez declared at a press conference that he had passed a bill to abolish penalties regarding late submission of forms. The podcast went on to say that this statement was not true because his wife had called to let him know that he had left his bag at home with a bill in it.

In this case, Mr. Brown created a skit to reflect, in a mocking way, the reality. This was so much a dejavu, because, in actual reality it was Gomez who had suspected ELD of misplacing his form, while in the podcast it was the PM Lopez who had forgotten to submit the form. It was the same story with the leading actors reversing their roles. In reality, Gomez accused ELD of malpractice while in the podcast the ELD person defended itself by saying that "we are very on one", meaning we are very efficient. In

actual reality, Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yeow called Gomez a liar. In the podcast, PM Lopez challenged the ELD person by saying “Are you calling me a liar?” On the other hand, in the podcast, the ELD CCTV footage not only showed Lopez bringing the form home, but also recorded Lopez having dinner with his wife, suggesting the likely invasion of privacy by the use of CCTV in Singapore. At the end of the podcast, when PM Lopez couldn't find his car keys, an unknown voice was heard saying "in the lower left drawer". Again, this was to show how invasive CCTV could be, obviously referring to the ubiquitous invisible eye and surveillance in Singapore.

PM Lee Hsien Loong National Day Speech and PNPP No.6

This was the famous *Bak Chor Mee* podcast. Fictitious PM Jeff Lopez went for lunch. He ordered a bowl of minced pork noodle (*Bak Chor Mee*) at a noodle stall, and got himself into a quarrel with the vendor. They argued over whether PM Lopez said he didn't want pieces of *Tur Kwa* (pork's liver) in his noodle. So Lopez claimed he had indeed said no pork's liver, while the vendor insisted he didn't say so. Surprisingly, and fortunately, the vendor had a CCTV installed in his stall so that he could prove to PM Lopez that he didn't exactly say no pork's liver. Thus, Lopez apologized, wanted to pay and get it over with. But the vendor was reluctant to accept his apology, insisting on an explanation of why Lopez didn't say no pork's liver yet claimed he had said so.

Again, Mr. Brown created a dejavu. In this podcast, the form submission incident was allegorized into a quarrel over pork's liver. Not submitting the forms contrasted with not saying I don't want *Tur Kwa*. The roles in the podcast turned the ones in reality upside down. PM Lopez apologized several times, but he was still not accepted by the vendor. In reality, Gomez apologized but invariably received strong accusations. The vendor kept asking him to explain why he seemed to lie about *Tur Kwa*. Just like the Lee family's attitude toward Gomez when the CCTV showed him putting the form in his own bag. The podcast seemed to suggest both the vendor and the Lee family were making a fuss out of the incident. The ridiculous plot in the podcast also seemed to insinuate that the whole form submission incident was not so reasonable at all. Or, there could have been an alternative solution.

In his 2006 National Day speech, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong addressed five key issues: digital age, economy, region, domestic population, and “heartware” (national identity). The PM first made some efforts to address how the digital age has already arrived and spoke of its impact on Singapore. Then, he mentioned the infrastructure built in the nation, that Singapore will be covered by wired and wireless. Moreover, the government has to adapt to the digital age. Laws and regulations have to change. The provision governing podcast during election is one example for updating laws on political video in response to the digital age. The PM supports the government

to update its managerial skills to keep up with the fast-changing environment.

Messages are coming across through art, humor, or wit. He referred to two of his campaign footages as instances to be the harmless form of the new media.

Emphasizing it is not just fun and games, he said “*Mee Siam Mai Hiam*” to compete with the funny *Bak Chor Mee* podcast. Later on, there were discussions about whether it was “*Mee Siam*” or *laska*, or it was “*Mai Hum*”(no oyster) or “*Mai Hiam*”(no chili), since *laska* is the dish with chili and oyster. Then, he mentioned Mr. Brown, including his ex-column and current podcast production. The PM said “Mr. Brown is a very talented man. His podcasts are hilarious,, but when he takes on government and makes serious accusations [meaning Mr. Brown’s column in *Today*], government has to respond. ... It is not the way to carry on public debate on national issues and especially not in the mainstream media”. The PM seemed to be drawing a distinct line between mainstream media and alternative media.

The Singapore Democratic Party Defamation Incident and PNPP No. 4

The Democratic Party (SDP), an oppositional party in Singapore, published in one issue of its party organ *The New Democrat* in early 2006 criticizing the government for mishandling and covering up the infamous National Kidney Foundation Scandal that had rocked Singapore. Since SDP was not able to show any evidence of wrong doing

beyond financial mismanagement. Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew and PM Lee Hsien Loong fought back, demanding SDP to apologize or otherwise face a lawsuit⁸. SDP Secretary General Chee Soon Juan and the editor of *The New Democrat* refused to apologize.

PNPP No.4 is in response to the defamation case of Singapore Democratic Party. The podcast transformed SDP into Sometimes Hastily Apologize Democratic Party, or *Shad Ap*, pronounced closely as "shut up". The scene in the podcast was at a party campaign at which *Shad Ap* shared the party's manifesto while reporters kept asking if they were going to apologize. Mr. Brown took the lyrics of an English song "Sorry seems to be the hardest word" by Elton John to be the content of the manifesto. Here are some excerpts of the podcast dialogue between the party and the reporter:

Shad Ap □ What have I got to do to make you love me
What have I got to do to make you care
What do I do when lightning strikes me
And I wake to find that you're not there
Reporter □ Do you believe that your manifesto can help you win more votes this time?
Shad Ap □ What do I do to make you want me
What have I got to do to be heard
What do I say when it's all over
And sorry seems to be the hardest word
Reporter □ so what you are saying is that your party is preparing to apologize? To the minister for the alleged slander in your recent publication?
Shad Ap □ It's sad, so sad
It's a sad, sad situation
And it's getting more and more absurd

⁸ Read related news here:
<http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/204256/1/.html>

It's sad, so sad
Why can't we talk it over
Reporter □ So you are not going to apologize?
Shad Ap □ Oh it seems to me ah...
That sorry seems to be the hardest word

In the podcast, SDP became the “shut-up” party, allegorizing oppositional parties being shut up in Singapore. Instead of scripting afresh something to speak for the dissent, the Elton John lyric of “Sorry seems to be the hardest word” fits the condition neatly. Thinking the apology demand from the Lee family as lightening, responding with “why can’t we talk it over”, to highlight the government’s strategy in limiting the options for them to choose from.

Oppositional parties are never able to get many seats in Singapore’s parliament, prompting the fictitious Shad Ap manifesto to question “what have I got to do to make you love me ?” or “what have I got to do to be heard ?” By ingenuously recasting a widely known lyric, Mr. Brown once again succeeded in alluding to the reality of oppositional parties in Singapore.

Then, PM Lee Hsien Loong’s national day rally speech mentioned his *Bak Chor Mee* podcast. In response, Mr. Brown, in another podcast, reviewed some of the points in the speech. He mentioned the controversial remark made by PM “ *Mee Siam Mai Hiam*”(no chili in the noodle), since PM took it to compete with Mr. Brown’s funny podcast. Then he played a pop song named ” My Humps” by Balck Eyed Pee and

Fergie. Remixing some of the sentences the PM said in the speech, “*Mai Hiam*” was contrasted with “my humps”, creating a unimaginably entertaining ambience that written words could not deliver the vibes thoroughly.

There were three explanations after the PM said “*Mee Siam Mai Hiam*”. No chili, no oyster, or he mistook “*Mee Siam*” with laska, which is another noodle dish usually with chili and oyster. “My humps” means breasts. One has nothing to do with the other. But once they were put together, the combination presents an incredible attraction.

In his National Day speech, the PM said Singapore has to keep up with time, keep updating, and so have laws on new media. He emphasized, although we can laugh over Talking Cock or Mr. Brown, but it is not all fun and games, implying the problem of taking a light attitude on serious issues, people will be getting, in the PM’s words, the “distortions, half-truths or untruths, and this is race to the bottom”, and that is not the way to deal with serious issues.

In the podcast, besides the *mai hiam* /my humps part, sentences such as “It’s not all fun and games, so you don’t want everybody to be singing the same note. *Mai hiam Mai hiam Mai hiam*, that’s the way we should be in the digital age”. Suggesting on one hand, the government wants the citizens to be creative, while on the other, the patriarchal sermon is everywhere telling people “that’s the way we should be”.

Conclusion: A harmless podcast ?

Podcast analysis shows there are some regular tricks or recognizable patterns in the *Mr. Brown Show*. He takes events in the real world as cues to create a kind of tacit understanding between the show and its listeners. He often plays the word game and uses puns by making up pseudo but traceable names, and uses them repeatedly in different podcasts to build rapport with his listeners. His podcasts seem to have a central production formula that resembles the ones so commonly found in FM/AM radio shows. The communication channel may be alternative, but among the alternatives, the *Mr. Brown Show* is probably leaning more toward the mainstream in terms of the format of production, if not in substance. In the podcast, through the acting in the skits, Mr. Brown could express viewpoints that may not be accepted or tolerated in the mainstream media. His podcasts serve as an exit or a valve for listeners under the climate of fear about politics. By exaggeratory and surrealistic acting, he brings to his listeners something they can not experience in real life. This makes Mr. Brown popular among his listeners while tolerated by the government.

Several conditions also account for the emergence of Mr. Brown. Within the context of a controlled media environment, when print and broadcasting media are indirectly connected with or controlled by the government, there is invariably a desire for something different. Furthermore, the Internet infrastructure built up in the nation

paves the way for its citizens to make use of it, and the government can not, or has found it difficult to, prevent people from using it as a way of self-expression. Therefore, the Singapore government make rules to regulate this new technology on the one hand, while at the same time inculcating in the citizens an ideology of necessary self-censorship for the sake of social responsibility.

As a survivor, the *Mr. Brown Show* is off limits in the mainstream media. He can only own his piece of territory in the cyberspace. His former column in *Today* was suspended while his podcast has survived. He is testing the authority's tolerance of his satirical dissents. Atton (2002) thinks alternative media has its specific context of emergence. Burke (1939) observes the most innovative satire work emerges under censorship rather than liberalism. Both remarks are applicable to the *Mr. Brown Show*. So far his survival seems to be suggesting a way for alternative media operation and survival in a controlled media environment like Singapore's.

As an active participant in the civil society, Mr. Brown has made good use of a technological convergence, that is the podcast, to display and spread his creativity through the Internet. He practices citizen journalism through political satire, expanding the media scope in the nation and providing something alternative to mainstream coverage of current affairs. It is not only his participation as a citizen that is worthy to note, but also his practice may provoke others to attend more to public affairs and

participate more as a citizen. Mr. Brown did not set out to become a celebrity blogger. His accidental catapult to fame may very well become a landmark in the development of democracy in the predominantly apolitical Singapore.

References

- Atton, C.(2002). *Alternative Media*. London: Sage.
- Atton, C.(2003). What is “ alternative” journalism? *Journalism* 4(3):267-272.
- Bowman, S. and Willis, C.(2003). "We Media: How Audiences are Shaping the Future of News and Information.", The Media Center at the American Press Institute.
- Dahlgren, P.(1996).Media logic in cyberspace: Repositioning journalism and its publics. *Javnost-The Public* 3(3):59-72.
- Descy, D.,E.(2005) Podcasting: online media delivery...with a twist. *Tech Trends: Linking Research & Practice to Improve Learning* 49(5):4-6.
- Dong, J.,J.□2004□.The development of surveillance society under authoritarian regime and knowledge economy: The case of internet regulation in Singapore. *Taiwan Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 2:85-13. (Mandarin literature).
- Glaser, Mark(2006) .Your Guide to Citizen Journalism, *Media Shift*, retrieved from: http://www.pbs.org/mediashift/2006/09/digging_deeperyour_guide_to_ci.html (Date :2007/12/19).
- George, C.(2006). *Contentious Journalism & the Internet: Towards Democratic Discourse in Malaysia & Singapore*. Singapore & USA: University of Institute of Policy & Studies Washington Press.
- Gillmor, D.(2004). *We the media: grassroots journalism by the people, for the people*. CA: O'Reilly.
- Gomez, J.(2005).*Freedom of expression and the media in Singapore*. Base Line Studies on 7 Southeast Asian Country. London: Article 19. Report access: <http://www.jamesgomeznews.com/article.php?AID=280>
- Gu, C., Y.(2006). *Singapore: The changing forty years*. Taipei: Wu-Nan Book Inc. (Mandarin Literature).
- Haas., T.(2006). Public journalism: a reply to critics. *Journalism* 7(2):238-254.
- Ho., K.,C.; Baber., Z.& Khondker., H.(2002). 'Sites' of resistance: alternative websites and state-society relations. *British Journal of Sociology*.53(1):127-148.
- Kuo, L., W.(2005). Carry web-radio with you- preliminary on podcast. *Taiwan CNET*(online magazine), retrieved from <http://taiwan.cnet.com/cnetlife/digilife/0,2000079913,20100414,00.htm>

- Date:2007/05/30. (Mandarin literature).
- Kenneth, B.(1939).The Calling of the Tune. *The Kenyon Review*(1):272-282.
- Lasica, J. D.(2003).What is Participatory Journalism?. *Online Journalism Review*.
Retrieved from: <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/workplace/1060217106.php>
- Lee, T.(2005). Online media and civil society in the “new” Singapore. Working paper No.123. School of Media, Communication & Culture & Asia Research Centre. Murdoch University. (access from <http://wwwarc.murdoch.edu.au/wp/wp123.pdf> access date:2007/05/01).
- Lee, T. and Willnat, L.(2006). Media research and political communication in Singapore. Working Paper No.130. School of Media, Communication & Culture & Asia Research Centre. Murdoch University.(access from: <http://wwwarc.murdoch.edu.au/wp/wp130.pdf> date:2007/05/01).
- Lent, J.(1978). Mass Communications in the Third World: Some Ethical Considerations. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Speech Communication Association Summer Conference on Intercultural/International Communication (2nd, Tampa, Florida, July 17-21, 1978, retrieved from <http://0rz.tw/ba3yo>
- Miles, S.(2005/12/07). Podcast makes word of the year. *Pocket-Lint Gadget News and Reviews*, retrieved from <http://www.pocket-lint.co.uk/news/news.phtml/2056/3080/view.phtml> (Date: 2007/05/30).
- O'Sullivan, T.(1994).*Key concepts in communication and cultural studies*. London and NY: Routledge.
- Porter, M. (1997). Cyberdemocracy: Internet and public sphere. In D. Porter (Ed.), *Internet Culture* (pp. 201-217). New York: Routledge.
- Rodan, G.(2004). *Transparency and authoritarian rule in Southeast Asia*. London: Routledge.
- Soon and Kulver.(2007). The internet and online political communities in Singapore. *Asian Journal of Communication* 17(3):246-265.

Main Websites list:

1. Singapore internet stats:

Internet World Stats <http://www.internetworldstats.com/top25.htm>

Infocomm Development Authority

<http://www.ida.gov.sg/Publications/20070822125451.aspx>

2. Sites of communication authorities in Singapore:

Media Development Authority: http://www.mda.gov.sg/wms.www/index_flash.aspx

Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts: <http://www.mica.gov.sg/>

3.Sites of Mr. Brown

Blog □ <http://www.mrbrown.com>
Podcast site □ <http://www.mrbrownsnow.com/>
PNPP No.4 □ <http://www.mrbrownsnow.com/?p=65>
No.5 □ <http://www.mrbrownsnow.com/?p=66>
No.6 □ <http://www.mrbrownsnow.com/?p=67>
A harmless podcast □ <http://www.mrbrownsnow.com/?p=197>

4. Background information drawn in the paper :

PM LEE's national day speech script □
<http://www.singaporeangle.com/2006/08/transcript-of-pms-rally-speech-in.html>
Channel News Asia(English version) □ <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/>
The Straits Times □ <http://www.straitstimes.com/>
Today □ http://www.todayonline.com/txt_main.asp

Appendix: Scripts of the 4 podcasts

1. Persistently Non-political Podcast NO.5

Length □ 4:44 □ Date □ 2006/4/29

Access: <http://www.mrbrownsnow.com/?p=66>

PM is abbrev. of fictitious Prime Minister Jeff Lopez □ ELD represents The Elections Department.

Narrator □ This is the persistently non-political podcast team reporting from the parliament. Addressing the parliament is the PM Lopez. The PM who recently got elected despite discrepancies with his submission of his forms on nomination day. If you recall, he disputed the submission of his forms and acclaimed he really did submit his forms. But CCTV revealed that he brought his forms home.

(Conversations begins)

PM□ Oh ah, I got submit, you saw me fill out the form, right□ I was there, submitted the form.

ELD□ No, no Sir, I checked already, the form is not in our possession.

PM□ What do you mean□

ELD□ It's not. You never submit.

PM□ I submitted.

ELD□ we are very on one□ we are very efficient □, the form, if we get it, we will have it in our hand, we will do it for you sui sui (nicely)

PM□ Hello, Are you saying I am a liar□

ELD□ Wait ah, I show you the video tape of the CCTV when you come that day.

A-Huat□ a name□ Show the video tape to him, please□ You see you see, you put the form in your bag.

PM□ Ah...

ELD□ Ya, then after that you went home and then you saw your wife and you all have dinner and then your...eh...Ok, never mind about that part.

PM□ Why you know all about that□

ELD□ Eh.. never mind about that part. Just your form must submit uh, next time submit properly la ah, or else can not be prime minister , thank you uh.

At the press conference...

Narrator□ And we are here outside parliament house, where new prime minister PM Jeff Lopez, who was elected despite not filling up a form correctly have just arrived.

Reporter□ Hi, Mr. Lopez, what are you going to announce today in your press conference□

PM□ First of all, just call me the Prime Minister Jeff Lopez, the man and his ideas.

Reporter□ Eh... Yes. Prime Minister Jeff Lopez, the man and his ideas. What will you be announcing today□

PM□ Well, my friend, you will just have to wait and see and hear. Ya...thank you.

Narrator□ And now here we are Live at the press room of the parliament house.

PM□ Ladies and gentlemen, I have passed a bill in parliament to abolish penalties for late submissions of government forms. As well as to abolish all penalty kicks in foot ball. Questions please□

Reporter□ Sorry Sir, did the parliament really pass the bill□ We didn't hear of it eh.

PM□ Ah, I passed it to someone in parliament, I know I passed it to somebody. got lah, got passed lah.

(Picking up cell phone)

PM□ Hello... Hi, Darling...Ah□...I left my bag at home□ Oh...I see. There was a bill in there□ Ah... I see. Uh, Darling, can you drop it off on the way to work....Before

noon ☐ Can not eh... Ah...like that eh...ah...then never mind, Bye ☐
☐phone hung up ☐
PM ☐Ladies and gentlemen, I have bad news...
Unknown voice ☐Better go home and get the bag now.
PM ☐Erm...Anyone seen my car keys ☐
Unknown voice ☐Lower left drawer,
PM ☐Who said that ☐
Unknown voice ☐In the..☐the sound is extremely small, difficult to recognize ☐
PM ☐Who's talking ☐ ☐

2.Persistently Non-political Podcast No.6

Length ☐2:58 Date ☐2006/5/01

Access: <http://www.mrbrownsnow.com/> ☐p=67

PM as in Prime Minister Jeff Lopez, BCM as in Bak Chor Mee man is the noodle stall vender.

Jeff Lopez, the man and his ideas goes for lunch.

BCM ☐ Hello ☐Uncle, Chia simi ☐☐what would you like to eat? ☐

PM ☐ You have noodles ☐

BCM ☐ Of course got noodle lah, I am the Bak Chor Mee stall.

PM ☐ Ok very well, one Bak Chor Mee, please, Mee Pok ta , mai hiam (no chili)

BCM ☐ Mee Pok Ta , Dry huh ☐ Don't want chili, huh ☐

PM ☐ Yes.

BCM ☐ Anything else ☐

PM ☐ No, thank you.

BCM ☐ Ok.

(After a bit)

BCM ☐ Nah, Mee Pok Ta, Mai hiam.

PM ☐ Thank you...wait wait, hang on, this has Tur Kwa (pork's liver) in it.

BCM ☐ Ya lah , it is got Tur Kwa liver one mah

PM ☐ But I said I didn't want Tur Kwa.

BCM ☐ No, you didn't.

PM ☐ Yes I did.

BCM ☐ No you didn't.

PM ☐ Yes I did

BCM ☐ No you didn't and I can prove it to you uh ☐

PM ☐ Very well, prove it ☐

BCM ☐ Ok, you come over here, I show you the CCTV camera of my stall.

PM□ The what□

BCM□ Nah, you see you point to the mee pok then you say dry, then you point to the chilli and you shake your head, you never say you don't want to have the Tur Kwa□

PM□ Ah...ok, how much is this then□

BCM□ Can see it or not huh□ Can see you never say you don't want the Tur Kwa□ huh□ huh□huh□

PM□It's Ok. I really don't want to pursue the matter, How much is my Bak Chor Mee□

BCM□You agree or not□ that you never say don't want the Tur Kwa then you tell me why you say you tell me that you don't want theTur Kwa while you didn't□

PM□Look, can we move along now and let me eat□

BCM□no□no□no□ You explain to me first.

PM□Explain what□

BCM□Explain why you say you told me you don't want the Tur Kwa while you didn't say you don't want the Tur Kwa□

PM□What the ... Ok, Ok, I am sorry Ok□

BCM□Sorry not enough, you must explain why□

PM□Explain why what□

BCM□Explain why you said you tell me you don't want the Tur Kwa while you didn't say you don't want the Tur Kwa□

PM□Ok, fine, I am sorry ok□ Please accept my sincere apologies if my actions cause distress or confusion to you, the Bak Chor Mee man. Look, it is only a few pieces of liver, Let's move on.

BCM□Move on□ move on your si lang tao(dead man's head)move on... my shop always here ok□But sorry must explain very well.

PM□I am so sorry I am sorry that I confused you alright□

BCM□Sorry also must explain...

3. Persistently Non-political Podcast No.4

Length□2mins Date□2006/4/28

Access□<http://www.mrbrowshow.com/?p=65>

Reporter is the reporter in the podcast, and Shad Ap is the party name Mr. Brown made up for Singapore Democratic Party.

Narrator: We now go over to the press conference conducted by the *Sometimes Hastily Apologize Democratic Action Party*, SHADUP[sic], or shad ap, according to the press release, the party will be sharing the manifesto with the press. this is the secretary general of *Shadap* reading from the manifesto

Shad Ap□What have I got to do to make you love me

What have I got to do to make you care

What do I do when lightning strikes me

And I wake to find that you're not there

Reporter□Do you believe that your manifesto can help you win more votes this time?

Shad Ap□What do I do to make you want me

What have I got to do to be heard

What do I say when it's all over

And sorry seems to be the hardest word

Reporter□so what you are saying is that your party is preparing to apologize? To the minister for the alleged slander in your recent publication?

Shad Ap□It's sad, so sad

It's a sad, sad situation

And it's getting more and more absurd

It's sad, so sad

Why can't we talk it over

Reporter□So you are not going to apologize?

Shad Ap□Oh it seems to me ah..

That sorry seems to be the hardest word

Reporter□So what is your position? What is your manifesto?

Shad Ap□What do I do to make you love me

What have I got to do to be heard

Reporter□So you are going to apologize?

Shad Ap□What do I do when lightning strikes me

Reporter□So you are not going to apologize?

Shad Ap□What have I got to do

What have I got to do

When sorry seems to be the hardest word

4. A Harmless podcast

Length□2:10 Date□2006/8/22

Access□<http://www.mrbrownsnow.com/?p=197>

Mr. Brown□The other day we heard the national day rally speech, and there were something that were being said which turned out to be very controversial later. People arguing over the meaning and arguing over what they heard and what they did not hear. What we feel is something in the speech that's very repeating, so for the sake of clarity,

and public discussion, we are going to use our technology, our IT skills and trying clear up what was said and possibly what was meant. Yeah, check it out.

(Music starts)

I give you an example. You put out a funny podcast, you talk about *Bak Chor Mee*, I would say *Mee siam mai hiam....*

(as the music goes) I would say *mee siam mai hiam*. Mai Hiam Mai hiam... Mai Hiam Mai Hiam.

And it is just not all fun and games. So you (pause) don't want everybody to be singing the same note. Mai Hiam Mai hiam... Mai Hiam Mai Hiam.

And that's the way we should be in the digital age. Mai Hiam Mai hiam... Mai Hiam Mai Hiam.