

## **Opening Remarks by Minister S Iswaran at the Opening Ceremony of the Asia TV Forum and Market and ScreenSingapore on 1 December 2020**

Distinguished guests  
Ladies and gentlemen

Good morning to all of you. Let me first extend a very warm welcome all of you who are here physically, as well as those joining us virtually, at this year's Asia TV Forum & Market, and the Singapore Media Festival.

### **An Extraordinary Time**

2. These are extraordinary times. For the first time, the Asia TV Forum & Market is hosting its programme - which comprises virtual trade markets, conferences, and business-matching opportunities - all entirely online. I think it is an apt reflection of the extraordinary times we are living in. In the face of COVID-19, we have been compelled to make profound shifts and also adapt to new operating norms. I think it is also important to recognise that the pandemic has also catalysed innovation and generated new and exciting opportunities as well. So, whilst there are dark clouds, we should also be looking at the silver linings.

3. The theme of this year's Festival - "Asian Storytelling, Reimagined" - captures this sense of change and renewal. I want to share with you briefly my thoughts on how media companies can chart their paths forward, and also in turn how the Government is supporting the industry to be ready for the next wave of growth.

### **Moving Quickly to Tackle Immediate Challenges**

4. We know that the impact of COVID-19 on the media sector has been keenly felt. Because of the safe distancing measures, many productions were halted and cinemas had to close temporarily to safeguard public health. Global travel restrictions also affected multiple overseas productions. During this period of economic uncertainty, the Government's highest priority has really been on the one hand, to help the industry deal with its immediate challenges, and at the same time, also ensure that we are preserving and enhancing the sector's capabilities for the long term. This is crucial because this crisis will also pass and when it does, we have to emerge from this stronger and we have to emerge from this with our capabilities not just intact, but where possible, enhanced. In a sense, this is a measure of our conviction in the potential of our media industry and our commitment to nurture and grow its talent.

5. Soon after the pandemic hit our shores, we rolled out a suite of measures to protect jobs and livelihoods. In particular, we introduced the Job Support Scheme and we also introduced training and upskilling support under the Talent Assistance

(T-Assist) Programme. This is really the first wave of support that we wanted to do to preserve that capability and to continue to build it.

6. To grow the pipeline of projects and productions for media companies, IMDA launched the Public Service Content (PSC) Fund in partnership with Mediacorp, Singapore Press Holdings and Vidsee. To date, a total of 78 projects have been commissioned, benefitting 67 companies, including August Pictures, Verite Productions and Butterworks.

7. Our media companies have also stepped up, contributing significantly towards our fight against COVID-19. For example, Mediacorp produced advisory updates, artiste-fronted interstitials and social media postings pro-bono, to support public communications on COVID-19. Digital publishers - TheSmartLocal and Our Grandfather Story, helped to increase awareness of government support measures, and featured stories of everyday Singaporeans coming together to overcome challenges posed by the pandemic, and in the process, also foster solidarity.

### **Emerging Stronger through Adaptability and Innovation**

8. This brings me to the point on how can we ensure that the media sector continues to stay vibrant and emerges stronger in the next bound.

9. It is clear that consumers will continue to seek out compelling, inspiring and relatable content and stories. Today, with the rise of hyper-personalised and on-demand services, consumers also expect greater control over what they watch, when they watch it and how they watch it. I think all of us who are involved in the media industry one way or another are keenly aware of this. We have seen the pandemic create a surge in media consumption globally. The impetus for media companies to create a wider variety of content – from short-form and micro-content, to premium dramas and feature films – and deliver it in new and exciting ways, has never been greater.

10. At the same time, we have also observed substantial growth in demand for Asian content, fuelled by fast-growing access to the internet and mobile devices in the region. In Southeast Asia, the revenues for the online video sector alone is projected to grow to at least US\$11 billion by 2024.<sup>1</sup> As much as consumers enjoy big international blockbusters, they have also shown an appetite for stories and content that are tailored to our regional cultures and tastes. Consequently, global media players like Netflix, Amazon, Tencent and ByteDance have turned their attention to the Asian market, and expanded aggressively in Singapore in recent years.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a 2019 report presented by Media Partners Asia at the Asia-Pacific Pay-TV Operators Summit (APOS) 2020.

11. There is much promise in the Asian media market, and there are opportunities for us here in Singapore. With our quality digital infrastructure, high technological penetration and vibrant multi-cultural society, we are well-positioned to capitalise on these trends and stake our claim to remain a key hub for both international content and for Asia-centric material.

12. So to maintain this competitive advantage, we are making concerted efforts in three broad areas:

- a. Developing a robust digital infrastructure;
- b. Supporting innovation; and
- c. Nurturing talent.

### **Digital infrastructure and regulations framework as the foundation**

13. Let me say a little bit about each. First, on digital infrastructure. **We are investing in new and emerging technologies like 5G, and are on track to achieve nationwide 5G coverage by 2025.** This will open new and exciting possibilities for media companies. Enabled by the technology's increased speeds and lower latency, local media start-ups have already begun experimenting with AR and VR technology to enhance storytelling for broadcasting and presentations. To enable these experiments, we launched the 5G Living Lab@PIXEL in September this year, which serves as a test-bed for companies to innovate with 5G applications. It is a nascent technology, but it is a technology that holds much potential.

14. Complementing this digital infrastructure is our regulatory architecture, so that companies can innovate, create and distribute media content and products with assurance. One indicator that affirms our work in this regard is our ranking second in the world and top in Asia for IP protection, in the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report 2019.

### **Investing in innovation and driving synergies between media and tech**

15. The second aspect is about **the innovation landscape and how do we ensure that it remains vibrant.** Since the merger of the Infocomm Development Authority and the Media Development Authority in 2016, there have been several initiatives to strengthen synergies between media and technology and that nexus and convergence is I think, rich in opportunities in general, but also specifically for us in Singapore given our positioning and also our predisposition to use technology. IMDA's PIXEL lab is one example of how we are strengthening the synergies between media and technology. It is a dedicated facility that provides content creators immersive media companies and tech innovators the space and tools to ideate, experiment and build new digital experiences.

16. We are also developing the capabilities of local and regional media companies and professionals, so that they are well-equipped to take on regional and global markets. Under IMDA's Capability Partnership Programme which was launched last year, we have developed a pipeline of projects for local media SMEs to partner and learn from global media players. This is important because we want to create that virtuous interaction between our local industry and international players. This series of collaborations are expected to benefit nearly 90 local media companies and over 700 media professionals in 2021 through job creation and opportunities for upskilling. One project in the works is the Audible Accelerator training programme, under which promising original stories will be produced in an audio series and beamed to an international audience via the Audible platform.

17. Also, we are committed to help businesses access new markets and opportunities in Asia. And Singapore, I think, and we believe, is in a unique position in this regard, because we are home to a multi-cultural society, cosmopolitan people, with a global perspective.

18. The Singapore Media Festival continues to be a key event in the industry calendar, it helps international players navigate Asia and forge partnerships with regional enterprises and regional creative talent. In 2019, IMDA launched the Southeast Asia Co-Production Grant (SCPG) to encourage film talent in Singapore and Southeast Asia to jointly produce quality Asian stories for the international market. IMDA has since awarded grants to 14 projects, one of which is *Cu Li Never Cries*, a film by Vietnamese director Pham Ngoc Lan, produced by accomplished Singapore and Vietnamese talents Lai Weijie, Teh Su Ching and Tran Thi Bich Ngoc. This epitomises the kind of collaboration we are seeking to spark – Singaporean talent working with regional counterparts to create compelling stories, which will have appeal in our part of the world and beyond.

## **Nurturing Talent**

19. Finally, on talent itself. **We are home not only to creative talents, but also those who are able to straddle that intersection between tech and media.** One example is filmmaker Low Ser En, who combined her love of storytelling and filmmaking with technology to start Sendjoy, an online platform for individuals to book personalised video messages from celebrities for their loved ones. Launched just before the start of the circuit breaker this year, the service has helped families and friends celebrate and connect with each other in a very novel way. It has also enabled media personalities and celebrities to monetise their digital appearances. So it's win-win really. And Sendjoy is in the midst of developing AI-powered personalised recommendations to their users as well. So this is the kind of innovation that this unusual circumstances have sparked, and it is something that we are encouraging and supporting.

20. We have programmes and initiatives to help our media professionals enhance their skills, and nurture the next generation of local talent in the media industry. To help young media professionals gain training and experience in established media companies, IMDA launched the Story Lab Apprenticeship. 28 young professionals formed our first batch of apprentices and commenced their training in January this year. One of them is Tong Khoon Mun, who is currently training as an Assistant Producer at the local film company MM2. And he has had the opportunity to work on feature films such as Number 1, which recently won Best Makeup and Costume Design at the 2020 Golden Horse Awards.

21. And mentorship programmes like WritersLab and ProducersLab, done in partnership with LASALLE, and Producers Mentorship, with the British Film Institute, also help media professionals sharpen the tools of their trade.

## **Conclusion**

22. I have basically taken this opportunity to share with all of you the range of initiatives that are already underway, not just from the Government, but also what is being done by the private sector, by our partners in the industry. All in response to some of the challenges that have been thrust upon us, but at the same time also capitalising our creative energies to overcome, and in the process become more competitive, more creative and ultimately prevail.

23. So I want to conclude by affirming our deep conviction to the future of the media industry in Singapore. We believe that it is a very promising one. And although the pandemic has wrought its fair share of challenges, it has also accelerated innovation and sparked new opportunities for the industry. And on our part, the Government working in partnership with the industry, will continue to invest in our infrastructure, ensure we have a vibrant innovation ecosystem, and ensure also that we are investing in the talent that we have in the industry, so that we are able to work together to seize these opportunities. And I want to welcome all our partners to collaborate with us and leverage on Singapore's position as a media hub, and also use us as a springboard to the region and the rest of the world.

24. I want to thank our partners in the industry, especially Reed, for organising this hybrid event. I wish everyone a stimulating and fruitful time at the conference and the festival.

25. Thank you very much.