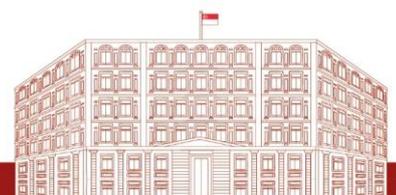


## **Engaging Hearts and Minds in these Turbulent Times**

1. Good evening. We commemorate today the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Singapore Press Club, which was founded in 1971.
2. Singapore was a completely different place then. The British were in the midst of pulling out their forces. Six years into our independence, the viability of the young nation-state remained in doubt. As it so happens, it was to you, the Press Club, where a founding father sketched a blueprint for our survival. In 1972, the Press Club held the first of its Eminent Speaker Series. Mr S Rajaratnam, a former journalist himself, delivered his now famous “Global City” speech. We should reimagine Singapore as part of a network of cities girding the globe, he urged, rather than just an entrepot serving the region. Our hinterland was the world, not just Malaya, as we had first believed; our market the 4 billion spread across the globe, not just the 10 million in the Common Market with Malaysia, which had failed to materialise in the two years we were part of the federation. I might add this year is also the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mr Rajaratnam’s “Global City” speech. I’m sure a few among the Hall of Famers would remember the occasion.
3. In 1996, the Press Club stumbled into history again when you invited then-Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, and asked him pointedly: Will Singapore survive you, Mr Lee Kuan Yew?
4. In response, Mr Lee spoke about two preconditions for Singapore’s survival. First, leaders of quality; And second, a citizenry aware of Singapore’s fundamental vulnerabilities and willing to pull together as one people.
5. It was in the same speech that he called upon young Singaporeans, in particular young journalists, to “Look at that horizon, follow the rainbow, go ride it”. I’m sure quite a few among you, not just the Hall of Famers, would remember that occasion.



6. Much has changed since 1996, when Mr Lee spoke to you, and since 1972, when Mr Rajaratnam did. But some fundamentals have not. As in 1972, Singapore cannot exist other than as a global city, open to the world. And as in 1996, integrity of leadership and unity of purpose remain the preconditions of our survival – as we saw in the COVID-19 pandemic.

7. Whether we compare to the 1970s or 1990s, the media landscape today is dramatically different. Much too has changed. But as for the rest of Singapore, some fundamentals should not.

8. Globally, this has been a challenging time for the media. Even before COVID-19, mainstream media advertising revenues had dropped precipitously. The pandemic made it worse. While the demand for quality journalism has not diminished, media outlets have had to find ways to monetise their digital initiatives and compete for eyeballs in an online space crowded with free content. Faced with such challenges, there is inevitably temptation. An editor might ask: ‘Do we capitalise on the public’s uncertainties and fears, sensationalise the news to gain readership or viewership?’ ‘Why not focus on feeding them what they like to consume, and forget about what they need to know?’

9. COVID-19 has also disrupted the way we work and live, including how we report and consume the news. Even your Annual Press Ball had to take a break for the past two years. Press conferences and media interviews went online. And of course, even as we waged a difficult battle with the COVID-19 pandemic, the press had to manage another battle in parallel – the COVID-19 info-demic. We saw how “fake news” about vaccine safety led to vaccine hesitancy in many countries. False claims around unproven medical cures for COVID-19 caused serious harm and even death in many cases.

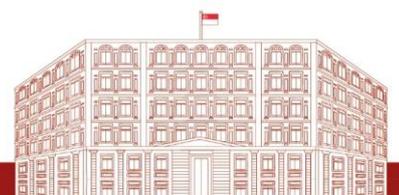


10. In Singapore, we were fortunate to have a media that sought to report not for the sake of eyeballs or clicks, but to serve the public interest. Throughout the pandemic, you kept our people informed of significant developments, helped them understand the considerations behind each public health decision, and consistently acted for the common good.

11. I will always remember some of your memorable headlines. For example, when PM Lee announced the Circuit Breaker in April 2020, “Lianhe Zaobao” had a stark front-page headline comprising of three characters “留在家”, or ‘Stay at Home’. What a brilliant headline. To keep Singaporeans mentally and physically active, many of you, including the local broadcast media, specially curated edutainment programmes, including talk shows for the elderly and fitness classes. This happened even as your own operations were affected by safe management measures. The disruptions to the journalists, to the newsrooms, to everyone who had to chipped in to get the production out were enormous.

12. But your sense of duty to inform, educate and engage Singaporeans made a big difference. Your efforts are one reason: Why Singaporeans cooperated and stayed at home during the circuit breaker; Why our people and businesses understood and could adjust quickly to changes in public health protocols and safe management measures; Why Singapore could achieve such a high vaccination rate, paving the way for us to advance towards the endemic phase of COVID-19; and above all; Why **trust** between the people and the Government – and equally important, trust among people – remained high.

13. These outcomes cannot be taken for granted. Serious researchers had found that low-trust societies suffered far higher mortality rates than high-trust societies. A peer-reviewed academic study, published in The Lancet, also confirmed that higher levels of trust in the government and among the population were associated with greater compliance with COVID-related restrictions and higher vaccination rates.



14. Nothing is more vital in a public health crisis than trust. That is why we obsessively guarded trust throughout the crisis, always anxious that people were well-informed, trusted the information we put out, and trusted the sources of information too, including the media.

15. We could not have maintained the trust of Singaporeans over the past two years if our media had not reported the course of the pandemic truthfully and accurately. I thank all of you sincerely for the honourable, rational and essential role you played throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

16. Our local media has managed to maintain and build public trust all these years because you have always striven to provide accurate, objective and timely reporting.

17. There is also mutual trust and respect between the Government and the media. This relationship has been instrumental throughout our existence as an independent nation. Like all relationships, it is not without tension. It has to be constantly managed, but it has worked. Far from being apologetic about it, we should make every effort to sustain it.

18. At its heart, this relationship is built on the significant value that the Government places on the role of our local media in nation-building. I am certain that this will continue under the 4G leadership. If you are wondering how we will engage with the media, consider how we functioned during the COVID-19 pandemic: The Multi-Ministerial Taskforce held regular press conferences to share the latest developments and public health measures and addressed the media's questions candidly. In the early stages of the crisis, especially during the Circuit Breaker period, Ministers Gan Kim Yong and Lawrence Wong held as many as three or four media conferences a week – so often, I'm told some of you protested! Where we had to update our policies in view of the evolving scientific evidence, we promptly communicated the changes and the reasons for doing so. We shared information – including details of cases – promptly and fully. No vital information was withheld from the media or the public. For



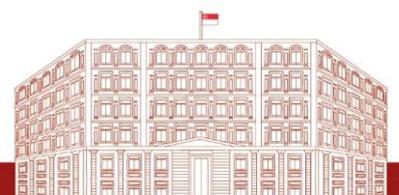
example, we were among the few countries in the world who reported not only PCR-positive numbers, but also Serology-positive numbers.

19. As a result, the local media was able to reflect the situation accurately and present information to the public in ways that were easily understood. You produced countless explainer pieces and conducted interviews with medical experts to unpack the details of Government policies and the latest science. Singaporeans appreciated your insightful and well-researched reporting, and thus turned to you as trusted and reliable sources of information. And, unlike in many other countries, Singaporeans did not become divided along ideological lines about mask-wearing or vaccinations or safe distancing measures.

20. Of course, people – including journalists – had different opinions on a variety of issues concerning the pandemic. On some occasions, you wrote op-eds disagreeing with the Government. But we all operated on the same set of facts. This was as much due to the Government and the medical authorities as to you - editors and journalists in all the language streams.

21. Your chronicles of Singapore's struggles, innovativeness and resilience in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic will be told and retold by future generations. Stories that will allow our children and grandchildren to appreciate how Singapore stood tall to overcome 'the crisis of our generation'. And Singapore was able to stand tall these past two years in large part because our media too stood tall. This will be your legacy.

22. The world today is just as complex, if not more so, than at your founding 50 years ago. Geopolitical tensions, the ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict, existential challenges, such as climate change and technological disruptions, keep all of us up at night. Add to that, the speed with which misinformation and disinformation can spread online, and our vulnerability to hostile information campaigns.



23. Your significance will only grow in the coming years and decades. You will continue to play a vital role in strengthening social harmony and upholding the values in our Pledge. Our vernacular media will continue to play a key role in preserving our multi-lingual heritage.

24. But you will also face severe challenges. We recognise that our local media institutions will need support to successfully transform and stay relevant to readers and viewers. It is for this reason that we continue to support Mediacorp with Public Service Broadcasting funding and decided recently to fund the digital transformation of SPH Media Trust.

25. To all our local media companies, I have two words for you: “*Go forward*”. *Go forward* to innovate with new and better experiences, whether it is for our seniors, working adults or young digital natives. *Go forward* to experiment with new and better content – through accurate and engaging writing; robust editing; and compelling visuals. *Go forward* to achieve greater excellence in serving our people – through news stories that not just capture eyeballs or clicks, but lift our minds and unite our hearts.

## Conclusion

26. As for the Press Club, I look forward to your continual efforts to transform yourself and keep up with your members’ evolving needs.

27. In 2020, you started the Freelancer Network, which took into account how the gig economy would impact our workforce, including media practitioners. Even amidst COVID-19, you continued to organise online talks so that your members could gain a deeper understanding of unfolding events.

28. Tonight, as the Club looks back on Singapore’s history, and pays tribute in your “Hall of Fame” to those. Who have made outstanding and lasting contributions to the



media industry in Singapore, you will also be presenting the inaugural 'Rising Stars Awards' to recognise young media professionals who have excelled in their craft. You will also be presenting the inaugural Sustainability Journalism Award – an area of journalism that will be increasingly important and relevant to the world.

29. I look forward to seeing the Club and your members pen many more chapters in the story of Singapore's media.

30. I wish all of you an enjoyable and fruitful evening. Thank you!

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