

Back Cover (from left to right)

Television arrived in Singapore on 15 February 1963. About 500 VIPs and thousands of others watched the inauguration at Victoria Memorial Hall and at 52 community centres around the island.

The Radio and Television Towers on Bukit Batok. Antenna mounted on the high towers have beamed signals to Singapore homes since the early 60s.

Satellite dishes receive international programmes, such as the Oscars, and world sporting events. The 1974 World Cup match between Holland and Germany was the first signal beamed to homes and reached more than a million viewers.

Susan Lim and the Crescendos (John Chee, Leslie Chia and Raymond Ho) performing in the television studio. The Crescendos were a popular band in Singapore in the 60s and were the first local pop group to be signed by an international record label.

A cultural performance with Gus Steyn conducting the full Radio Orchestra. The occasion marked the launch of Suara Singapura, a new national and overseas radio service, in July 1961 by then Minister of Culture S Rajaratnam. The service was broadcast in the medium- and short-wave band.

Reflecting the multiracial character of Singapore, four charming ladies introduced on-air programmes daily. From left to right: Joan Chee, Nagaretnam Suppiah, Alice Chong and Asmah Laili.

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew delivers his address to the nation at Radio Singapore on 5 October 1961.

(Photo: Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore)

The purpose-built Mediacorp Campus at Mediapolis at One Stars Avenue. Designed by award-winning Japanese architect Maki & Associates, the broadcast centre took over from Caldecott Hill in 2017.

Back cover design: Philip Tay Joo Thong  
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This collection of 51 essays contains rich memories of Singapore's broadcasting pioneers based in their station atop Caldecott Hill.

ON AIR captures the breadth and depth of their experiences over 82 years on the Hill: from the founding in 1936 of the British Malayan Broadcasting Corporation, to Radio and Television Singapore (RTS), to Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC), and finally to what is today, Mediacorp. In this book, the writers have recorded eight decades worth of work and life experiences and have shared precious, untold stories from the Japanese Occupation of Caldecott Hill, to the fascinating behind-the-scenes happenings that cast light on well known and well loved shows.

Illustrated with rare, archival photographs, many not seen before, this publication is the first of its kind that gives an insight into the development of broadcasting in Singapore.



Marshall Cavendish  
Editions



ON AIR

Untold Stories  
from Caldecott Hill

ON AIR

Untold Stories from Caldecott Hill



Foreword by George Yeo

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Front cover design and photo courtesy of Tay Kay Swee  
The Radio and Television Complex on Caldecott Hill.  
The new TV Centre (foreground) was opened by  
Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew on 26 August 1966.  
In the rear is the new Radio Centre opened by Minister  
of Culture Jek Yuen Thong in 1975, which replaced  
the Old Radio Broadcasting House built in 1936.

For Review only

# ON AIR

Untold Stories from Caldecott Hill

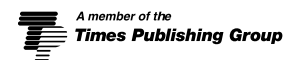
Foreword by George Yeo

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This book is dedicated to Mrs Wong-Lee Siok Tin who devoted her life to the profession of broadcasting in Singapore. Her tireless devotion and critical instincts at the helm of the national broadcasting station led the station through the early and difficult times of nationhood.



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## FOREWORD

BY GEORGE YEO

Former Minister for Information and the Arts

SHE IS NOT HERE TO contribute her recollection but her role in the early days of Singapore's independence was critical. I am referring to Mrs Wong-Lee Siok Tin who was Head of Broadcasting for many years. I knew her after joining the board of Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) in 1985. I was then a Colonel in the Singapore Armed Forces. Yong Pung How was the Chairman and Cheng Tong Fatt the Deputy Chairman. Mrs Wong-Lee circulated to us a draft speech she had written for Prime Minister (PM) Lee Kuan Yew who had agreed to speak at a dinner marking the 50th anniversary of radio broadcasting. It was not certain then whether PM Lee could attend because he had come down with a bad cold after an overseas trip. At the last moment, he did. I noticed that his speech followed almost word-for-word the draft penned by Mrs Wong-Lee. He said at the outset that, despite his not feeling well, he felt an obligation to turn up because he was grateful for the support the staff of Radio Singapore gave him over many years. Mrs Wong-Lee covered Lee Kuan Yew's overseas travels and constituency visits as a radio producer for many years from the early 60s. Chan Heng Wing remembers a diminutive Siok Tin from Central Productions Unit chasing after Lee Kuan Yew, lugging along the heavy Nagra tape recorder.

The history of national broadcasting in Singapore is inseparable from the history of independent Singapore. Lord Reith's classic encapsulation of the mission of the BBC – to inform, to educate, to entertain – applies as much to Singapore broadcasting. I adopted it as the mission of the new Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA). As a young country in formation, the role of broadcasting in education was a high priority for Lee Kuan Yew and that first generation of leaders. Speaking good English, wholesome content, elevating the use of Mandarin over dialects, careful treatment of racial and religious issues, aligning coverage of foreign affairs with Singapore's foreign policy, were all important considerations. Those responsible for running radio and television broadcasting, especially in news and current affairs, did not have an easy time. Instructions from the Prime Minister's Office (PMO) were frequent. Despite or because of high-level attention, the spirit was high. From the top down, the remarkable men and women of Singapore broadcasting were fired up by a sense

of mission. Their contribution to Singapore deserves to be recognised, as it was by Lee Kuan Yew.

It was my good fortune to be put in charge of MITA in November 1990 under PM Goh Chok Tong. Singapore's evolution had entered a new phase. With cable television and the proliferation of channels, a media revolution was underway, a revolution which continues with even greater force today. We had to liven up the media scene. To inform and educate, we must first entertain and attract eyeballs. This meant opening up the entire broadcast industry.

It was an exciting period for all of us who were involved and the many contributors to this book recount the pain and pleasure of that period with nostalgia. In 1994, broadcasting was privatised under Moses Lee. SBC became Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS), Television 12 (STV12) and Radio Corporation of Singapore (RCS). Censorship was loosened which led to much public debate. I remember *The Ra Ra Show* being particularly controversial. We took the criticisms in stride and pressed on with liberalisation, taking small incremental steps while adjusting to public feedback. Singlish and dialects were judiciously allowed. Without a stronger local feel, what Singaporeans saw on Channels 5 and 8 bore little resemblance to their daily life. Years later, Jack Neo remarked that without the relaxation, his movie career would not have taken off.

The production of local Mandarin drama started earlier under Cheng Tong Fatt. Its success marked a breakthrough in Singapore TV. Before that, we had to rely on foreign productions which felt foreign. To my surprise, I found Singaporeans holding local productions to higher standards than foreign ones. Singaporeans were more sensitive to scenes depicting sex and violence in local productions because they were about our own community. This was a healthy development. Parallel developments took place in local film and drama productions for which MITA progressively relaxed controls. A thriving local arts scene, dedicated primarily to Singaporean audiences, reflected a growing self-identity of ourselves as Singaporeans.

In 1994, an 18-year old American, Michael Fay, along with other youths, was sentenced to be caned for vandalism. One of them was the son of a much-respected Hong Kong producer working for Channel 8. Lee Kuan Yew, then Senior Minister, learned of this and invited the father to the Istana, in order to commiserate with him while explaining why the sentence (which was reduced for all those arrested together with Michael Fay as a result of President Bill Clinton's appeal) had to be carried out. He appreciated Lee Kuan Yew's gesture but left Singapore not long afterwards. The pain was too hard to bear.



George Yeo appeared as a guest on *Contact Y*, a current affairs programme reaching out to youths.

Striking a balance between freeing up and safeguarding our Asian identity was a continuing struggle. More TV channels were opened so that each official language had its own channel. On radio, we helped the Japanese and non-English speaking Europeans to have their own stations. Then, with the help of the Economic Development Board (EDB), we set out to make Singapore a broadcast hub. In 1994, I led a delegation on a visit to a number of big media companies in the United States promoting Singapore as a regional broadcast centre. We made a distinction between broadcast out of Singapore (for which there was almost no censorship) to broadcast receivable in Singapore (for which local rules applied). I remember telling Sumner Redstone of Viacom that MTV's *Beavis and Butthead* would be offensive in Singapore. Redstone did not object, adding that that would not be a problem at all. In quick succession, MTV, HBO, Disney, CNBC, Reuters, BBC and others set up shop in Singapore.

As to be expected, they poached talent from Caldecott Hill to staff their new operations. Those who left earned more and some became more famous. Within a short period of time, it dawned on us that many of our people in local radio and television were underrated and underpaid. We had to respond accordingly to retain and attract our share of talent. This was a healthy development and led to the growth of the media industry. With better prospects, more young talents were drawn into the industry.

We also grew in self-confidence. One day, Shaun Seow and Woon Tai Ho came to see me proposing the establishment of a separate English TV news channel. Knowing that MITA was on a tight budget, they assured me that they would not ask for more money. I was skeptical that it could succeed and told them so. However, not wanting to dampen their enthusiasm, I gave the go-ahead. But first I had to clear the proposal for Channel NewsAsia (CNA) with Cabinet. Cabinet was even more skeptical than me. Some Ministers were cynical. How could CNA possibly hope to compete with CNN and BBC? There was neither encouragement nor objection, which was enough. That was how CNA was born. I hardly watch TV nowadays but I do access the CNA app many times a day. CNA is the default TV channel in many gyms, lobbies and lifts, keeping us well-informed of what's happening in Singapore and the world. CNA has helped to promote the Singapore viewpoint in the region.

The multimedia revolution continued to gather momentum. Even as we worked to cable up the whole of Singapore, the internet exploded on the social landscape. It became even harder for Mediacorp channels to capture eyeballs. MITA scrambled to develop an initial framework for the regulation of cyberspace. It was rough and ready but we showed that it was always possible to have some control over broadcast (as opposed to narrowcast) sites. As a system discipline, I announced in Parliament that we would always censor 100 websites. Despite our initial fears, we were able to keep the major media spaces (those which attracted many eyeballs) relatively wholesome. In the main, Caldecott Hill held its position.

Without our knowing, others were watching our response to the new multimedia challenge with interest. In 1996, a high-level delegation from China, led by propaganda czar Ding Guangen, visited Singapore. In the delegation were two or three other minister-level officials. For six days, they studied every aspect of broadcasting (broadly defined) in Singapore – not only radio and television, but also cinema halls, bookshops, publishing houses, theatres and internet regulation. They called on Lee Kuan Yew. They felt assured that, despite Singapore's relatively liberal regulatory framework, we did not lose our Asian identity. Members of the delegation took no time off for shopping or sightseeing which surprised me. A few months later, China issued its seminal policy document on the internet. It was only then that I realised that the purpose of the visit was to check out aspects of their new internet policy against the Singapore experience. They were studying the immune response of the Singapore bonsai to external influences and abstracted lessons for themselves. On my subsequent visit to China, Ding expressed his appreciation by inviting me to a private dinner

at Zhongnanhai. The vibrancy of China's cyberspace today is a testimony to the brave decision taken in 1996 to open up. Singapore played a small role in that big story. However, buffeted by successive new waves of technological development, the multimedia drama continues to unfold, in Singapore, as in China and the rest of the world.

Generations of producers, directors, actors, actresses, newscasters, news editors, cameramen, soundmen, makeup artists, technicians, computer programmers and regulators have worked hard to make the multimedia industry in Singapore what it is today. At the core are the wonderful people who pass through the portals of RTS/SBC/STV12/TCS/RCS/Mediacorp, who inhabit Caldecott Hill like the heroes of Liangshanpo in *The Water Margin*. I count myself lucky to have been associated with many of them and write this Foreword with great affection for all of them.

Memories are important but they should also throw a light into the future. Lee Kuan Yew mastered radio. His series of radio broadcasts on *The Battle for Merger* changed the course of Singapore's history. He acknowledged BBC's help in mastering the new medium of television. However, when social media became suddenly important at the turn of the millenium, he dismissed it as a waste of time. He tried watching MTV once and said it gave him a headache. The challenges of social media can only become more severe. With big data analysis, the use of artificial intelligence (AI), and the manipulation of images and sounds, society is being shaken to the core. What is truth and post-truth in this new world? What do we believe? We need younger Singaporeans more familiar with the new medium to come quickly to the fore like those who contributed their memories to this book once did in the past.



IN AN EFFORT TO SHARE their life's work experiences in the broadcasting industry, a group of six like-minded former broadcasting staff have come together with the support of several other colleagues to write a book entitled *On Air: Untold Stories from Caldecott Hill*. Caldecott was the home of Singapore's national broadcaster for 82 years.

So, how did this book first come about? One day, Mun Chor Seng, the Supervisory Cameraman of our radio and TV station approached me to write a book recounting memories of those who not only built their careers on Caldecott Hill but had spent the larger part of their lives there. Mun knew that I was passionate about recollections as I kept a blog "Memories of Caldecott Hill".

Mun, himself, is an avid photo blogger in keeping with his vocation. Many of his archived photographs are shared in the "Singapore Memory" website. Mun believed that between the two blogs, we should be able to produce a good memoir with pictures and stories to share with fellow Singaporeans. After mulling over Mun's suggestion, I told him that I wanted to enjoy my retirement like many other silver-haired retirees. After that, nothing was said for the next five years.

At the beginning of this year, about 40 Caldecott Hill Old Timers (COTS) gathered at former TV producer Kok Ying Poh's Growlers Draft Beer and Bistro at MacPherson Road. It was our annual gathering to chit-chat and make merry with good food and good company.

In the midst of the laughter, alcohol and story-telling, Belinda Sunshine broached the subject of writing a book of all our stories on the Hill.

George Favacho, who is the head honcho of the group quipped that we had better do it quickly as age is fast catching up on all of us! As seniors have the habit of doing, we added together all our years and were pleasantly surprised to discover that we had more than 2,000 years of broadcasting experience between us! All the COTS unanimously agreed that I was the best person to lead the book project. After mulling again over the suggestion, assisted by a little too much alcohol, I agreed!

Five other COTS – Joan Chee, Raymond Anthony Fernando, Mun Chor Seng, Belinda Sunshine and Horace Wee – spontaneously offered to tell their stories for the book. It may be true that the pen is more powerful than the sword but surely a pint of Tiger is far more persuasive!



Annual gathering of Caldecott Hill Old Timers (COTS) at Growlers Draft Beer and Bistro.

In February 2018, we had our first meeting at Thomson Plaza Food Court. We charted out the tasks ahead with growing anxiety now that our heads were clearer. But our sense of purpose remained firm as we were following the dictates of our hearts. Not least of our worries was how would we be able to get people already in retirement to jog their memories and share their stories. When we asked around, there were hardly any takers but to my delight, Raymon Huang a 93-year-old veteran responded immediately with a write-up on Mrs Wong-Lee Siok Tin, one of our former bosses. This was particularly precious as the much-loved Mrs Wong-Lee had already passed on.



The first meeting of the *On Air* book team at the Thomson Plaza Food Court. From left: Raymond Fernando, Belinda (Sunshine) Yeo, Philip Tay, Horace Wee, Joan Chee, Mun Chor Seng. Photo by Mun Chor Seng.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It was a blessing in disguise when I learned that at least a dozen COTS had their experiences recorded by the National Archives Oral History Department and with some persuasion, we secured ten more scripts. Among these were industry leading lights like Cheng Tong Fatt, Moses Lee and Maureen Liew whose contributions helped to draw others to this meaningful project.

The biggest windfall we had was when former Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo, spontaneously agreed to write the Foreword to the book.

This book is a collection of memories that would have otherwise been lost in time. They are personal anecdotes of the lives and work of the men and women who dedicated themselves to bringing information and entertainment to the people of Singapore over the last 82 years.

In this book, we provide rare perspectives into the history of our national broadcasting station, how the Japanese Occupation during WW2 affected the running of the station; a look behind-the-scenes of radio and television production where attention to the minutest detail was *de rigueur* especially for political programmes; where presence of mind and adaptability were constant demands as situations were fluid and changed quickly; how broadcasting became part and parcel of our daily lives; and how it has evolved over the years.

Whether we came from radio or television, whether we were in front of the camera or behind, whether we were in production or in support of it, one thing was common to us all – our workplace was our second home where often we would spend more time than in our real homes. To our friends and audience in Singapore, we present our stories in 51 chapters. But more than stories, it has been for each one of us a personal journey into a time in our lives that was meaningful and precious.

We hope that you will enjoy reading this book, as much as we have enjoyed writing it.

Sincerely  
Philip Tay Joo Thong  
Project Leader

WE EXTEND OUR DEEP APPRECIATION to the National Archives of Singapore for granting us access to the recordings in the Oral History Centre and to Mediacorp for their strong support for this book project.

Our deep gratitude to Mr George Yeo, former Minister for Information and the Arts, for graciously writing the Foreword to this book.

Our heartfelt thanks to our bosses, Mr Cheng Tong Fatt and Mr Moses Lee, who readily contributed and encouraged us to embark on this endeavour. And to Mr Raymon Huang who contributed two valuable essays to kick-start the project.

Special thanks to Ms Amy Chua for tirelessly going through the scripts, correcting errors and giving editorial advice, and for meeting with the editorial team to go through the contractual terms.

Thanks to Kenneth Liang and Chan Heng Wing for sub-editing selected chapters.

Throughout this journey we have been warmly encouraged by our former colleagues from the comments in the Caldecott Hill Old Timers (COTS) Chat Group to those who shared their personal stories and experiences, in particular, Susan Ng, David Christie, Karen Yew, Clarence Pong, Aileen Yip, Lucy Leong, Cynthia Tan, Lee Kim Tian, Suhani Jais and George Favacho.

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4. The Marketing & Communications Division of Mediacorp;
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Thanks to the team members Mun Chor Seng, Joan Chee, Raymond Fernando, Horace Wee and Belinda Yeo who believed in the idea for the book and gave support wherever required to Philip Tay Joo Thong whose passion drove it.

And, but not least, we would also like to thank spouses and family members who encouraged the authors to contribute to the book and write their essays.

If we have omitted the name of any person or organisation that has contributed to the publication of this book, we deeply apologise for the inadvertent oversight.



An aerial view of the Mediacorp campus at Caldecott Hill.







Radio Building at Caldecott Broadcast Centre.

# For Review Only

## MILESTONES

BROADCASTING ON CALDECOTT HILL SINGAPORE	
Year	Event
1935	Private company British Malayan Broadcasting Corporation (BMBC) granted broadcast licence.
1936	Start of a private radio service (on medium wave 225 metres) at Caldecott Hill by BMBC.
1937	Opening of Caldecott Hill Station (known as ZHL) by Sir Shenton Thomas, Governor of the Straits Settlements.
1941	BMBC acquired by Straits Government and UK Government and re-organised as the Malayan Broadcasting Corporation (MBC) with the main studio facilities located at Cathay Building.
1942	Japanese attacked and overran Caldecott Hill Station and Cathay Building Studios. During the Japanese Occupation, station operated as Syonan Hoso Kyoku.
1945	Japanese surrendered. Station took over by Publicity and Printing Unit of the British Military Administration.
1946	When Singapore was part of the Federation of Malaya, the station operated as Radio Malaya, Singapore, with its HQ in Singapore.
1950	<div>On 18 Aug, Sir Franklin Gimson, Governor of Singapore, opened the new Broadcasting House Building (BH) on Caldecott Hill.</div> <div>A black and white photograph showing a group of men in suits and uniforms gathered around a large stone being lowered by a crane. One man is holding a ceremonial mallet. The stone has "RADIO MALAYA" written on it. The background shows other people and structures.<div>Ministry of Information and the Arts Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.</div></div> <div>Laying the foundation stone for Broadcasting House.</div>

1951	Radio studio facilities at Cathay Building moved to BH, Caldecott Hill.
1957	Station renamed Radio Singapura (previously Radio Malaya) when Malaya became independent from the British.
1959	Singapore achieved self-government from the British. Station renamed Radio Singapore.
1961	<p>Launch of fourth medium wave Radio Service, Suara Singapura, at Victoria Theatre by Encik Yusof Ishak, Yang di-Pertuan Negara of Singapore.</p>  <p>Concert to mark the launch of Suara Singapura.</p>
1963	<p>Launch of television (TV) at Victoria Memorial Hall (Feb).</p>  <p>Members of the public watched the first television broadcast from Victoria Memorial Hall.</p> <p>Launch of second TV channel, Channel 8 (Nov).</p>

1963	<p>Merger with Malaysia, the broadcast stations were renamed Radio and Television Malaysia / Singapura.</p>  <p>Metal badges with the name of the station.</p>
1964	Launch of commercials on TV (Jan).
1965	PM Lee Kuan Yew announced Singapore's separation from Malaysia on TV (Aug). Radio Singapura and Television Singapura renamed Radio and Television Singapore (RTS).
1966	<p>First National Day Parade at Padang (Aug).</p> <p>New TV Centre at Caldecott Hill opened by PM Lee Kuan Yew on 26 Aug.</p>
1967	Launch of Educational Television Service (ETV).
1969	Launch of FM Stereo 92.4 (Jul).
1974	First colour transmission on television, live coverage of World Cup.
1978	End of dialect shows on TV (Jul).
1980	<p>With the passing of the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) Act in Dec 1979, SBC was formed on 1 Feb 1980 with Mr Ong Teng Cheong as Chairman, Mr Cheng Tong Fatt as General Manager and Mrs Wong-Lee Siok Tin as Deputy GM.</p>  <p>Painting the new SBC logo on the TV Centre at Caldecott Hill.</p>




1982	First locally-produced Chinese drama, <i>Seletar Robbery</i> (July).
1984	<div>SBC Training School opened on Caldecott Hill.</div> <div>Launch of third TV channel, Channel 12, by Minister for Culture S Dhanabalan (Jan).</div> <div></div> <div>From left: S Dhanabalan, Wee Mon Cheng (partly hidden), Mrs Wong-Lee Siok Tin and Choo Hoey (right) at the launch of Channel 12.</div> <div>Production of Chinese drama, <i>The Awakening</i>, to celebrate Singapore's 25th year of independence (Feb).</div>
1988	Launch of <i>Star Search</i> (Feb).
1990	Goh Kim Leong succeeds Cheng Tong Fatt as Deputy Chairman.
1991	Moses Lee succeeds Mrs Wong-Lee Siok Tin as SBC General Manager.
1994	<div>Launch of Radio Singapore International (RSI) shortwave service (Feb).</div> <div>Inaugural <i>Star Awards</i>, Zoe Tay crowned as winner (Feb).</div> <div>Privatisation of SBC: Television Corporation of Singapore (TCS), Radio Corporation of Singapore (RCS) and Television Twelve (STV12) formed as companies under the management of holding company Singapore International Media (SIM).</div> <div>First locally-produced English drama <i>Masters of the Sea</i> (Oct).</div>
1995	Launch of two television stations, Prime 12 and Premiere 12. Channel 5 and Channel 8 begin 24-hour transmission (Sept).

1995	<div>TCS launches its first satellite channel, TCS International (Oct).</div> <div></div> <div>TCS CEO Lee Cheok Yew launches the TCS Satellite Channel in Taiwan.</div> <div>Kwa Chong Seng succeeds Dr Cheong Choong Kong as Chairman of SIM.</div>
1997	Lim Hup Seng appointed as CEO of SIM and CEO of STV12 on 12 May.
1998	<div>Launch of Raintree Pictures (Aug).</div> <div></div> <div>Publicity poster for <i>1965</i>, one of the movies produced by Raintree Pictures.</div> <div>Collection of Daniel Yun</div>



1999	Launch of Channel NewsAsia (Mar). Cheng Wai Keung appointed Chairman of TCS (Apr). SIM renamed as Mediacorp Singapore (Jun).
2000	With revamp of STV 12, Suria replaces Prime 12, Central replaces Premiere 12 and comprised of three belts: Kids, Vasantham and Arts. Ernest Wong succeeds Lim Hup Seng as Mediacorp CEO (Oct). Launch of Sports City channel. Launch of Channel NewsAsia International (Sept). Launch of <i>TODAY</i> newspaper (Nov).
2001	Launch of TV Mobile, digital TV on buses. Television Corporation Singapore (TCS) renamed Mediacorp TV.
2002	Kwa Chong Seng reappointed Chairman of Mediacorp (Apr).
2003	Launch of <i>TODAY</i> online (Jul).
2004	Ho Kwon Ping appointed Chairman of Mediacorp (Jul). Mediacorp and SPH merge TV and free newspaper (Sept).
2005	Lucas Chow appointed Mediacorp CEO (Dec).
2006	TV news get real-time subtitling (Dec).
2007	Mediacorp invests in Indonesia PT Media Nusantara Citra (Jun). Launch of MOCCA, Mediacorp's online advertising classified (Jul). Mediacorp launches first HD channel, HD5 (Oct).
2008	Mediacorp invests in China's Dahe Media Company (Feb). Vasantham relaunched as full channel (Oct). Launch of okto channel (Oct).
2010	Launch of XinMSN online portal with Microsoft. Teo Ming Kin succeeds Ho Kwon Pin as Mediacorp Chairman (Jul).
2011	Shaun Seow appointed Mediacorp CEO (Jul).
2013	Launch of MeRadio.sg, a one-stop music service portal (Jan). Mediacorp invests in luxury online retailer, Reebonz (May). Mediacorp invests in online gaming, Cubinet Interactive (May).

2014	All seven channels go digital (DVBT-2) with Channel 5, Channel 8, Suria and Vasantham in high definition. Launch of Toggle (Feb).
2015	Official opening of Mediacorp Campus at one-north by PM Lee Hsien Loong (Dec).
2016	Launch of Customer360, the world's first cross-media audience planning solution. Ernest Wong appointed as Chairman of Mediacorp.
2017	All magazines under Mediacorp Publishing go completely digital. Launch of The Mediacorp Experience, an interactive tour for the public. <i>TODAY</i> moves to a fully digital future. Ms Tham Loke Kheng succeeds Shaun Seow as Mediacorp CEO.
2018	Niam Chiang Meng succeeds Ernest Wong as Chairman of Mediacorp. Launch of Mediacorp Enable Fund.
2019	Channel NewsAsia celebrates 20th anniversary and rebrands itself as CNA with a new logo (March).  Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and the team at CNA. okto ended transmission and merged with Channel 5 (1 May).

IT WAS A JOURNEY THAT began in the last century, 1936 to be precise. The British Administration wanted to set up a means of communication to reach out to the people. Singapore was not a nation but only a British outpost, albeit the most important one in the Far East. At the very centre of the island stood a hill. Though small, it was special even then. It took the name from Sir Andrew Caldecott, the British Administrator, the most powerful official in the land with authority bestowed directly by the King of England.

Caldecott Hill rose above the surrounding hills. In *feng shui* parlance, it was a white tiger doing battle with a winged snake that was no match for it below. At the highest point of the hill the first broadcasting station in Singapore was built with a transmitting tower that rose impressively into the sky.

For the next 79 years, this was to be the media heart of the country as it grew from colony to nationhood. Beginning with only radio transmission, broadcasting grew to include television – from black-and-white to colour, from analogue to digital, and from national broadcaster to broadcaster to the world. Nothing was static – even its name went through many iterations starting with the British Malaya Broadcasting Company to finally, Mediacorp.

In the early days, radio broadcast activities were carried out in a cluster of single-story huts that was later to be known as OBH for “old broadcast houses”. As the station grew and television was introduced in 1963, we built two medium-rise structures and called them simply, the “Radio Building” and the “TV Building”. Some time later an annex rotunda was added and then, a multi-storey admin block and a canteen-cum-carpark. The buildings, sprawled over the crown of Caldecott Hill, were not glittering structures. They were functional and unpretentious affairs that would never win any architectural award but what dwelled inside them was an entirely different matter.

Hidden from the public eye and completely protected by barbed wire fencing all around was a community that grew from only a small number to five thousand over eight decades. Here was the private world of producers, actors, hosts, engineers, technicians, archivists, admin officers, sales personnel, support staff, and many more. Working on the Hill consumed a major part of our lives. Round-the-clock we would be working to put together content for radio and television and

ensuring efficient and smooth delivery to homes throughout Singapore. Perhaps “work” would not be the right word as it was more a “calling” for us to inform and disseminate the news, to educate the mind, and to delight and entertain the hearts of Singaporeans which, in the fullness of time, grew into eight television channels, eleven radio channels, and many publications.

We were divided into tribes, so to speak, each responsible for delivering a particular content for radio, television or print. What was it like inside the newsroom? What happened in the interview or forum in the studios? How did it feel to be on a drama set that ran for 24 hours or more? How did we cope with the rigid and demanding timelines that were sacrosanct and inviolable?

Indeed, between the tribes, the sub-cultures, work processes and pressures were different and diverse but one understanding was unvarying – production was a collaborative process and we depended heavily on one another.

Time was a factor we did not control. It consumed us like a demanding mistress and turned many of us into workaholics. Only later we learned that it was a habit we could not shake off as many of us found too much time on our hands upon retirement. This led many of us to gravitate towards doing charity work – from heading Singapore’s largest charity, the Tote Board, to sewing woollen mittens for the chronically sick.

We were a breed of our own, we knew each other intimately and shared our personal stories with one another but often not beyond the Hill. Many pioneers are no longer with us. The oldest living member\* among us, now 94, shares his story as a young man in WW2 when the invading Japanese army took over the Hill and renamed it Radio Syonan. His story, like so many others, was destined to be lost with fading memories and eventual departures.

It’s ironic that although the product of our professional work was seen by all Singaporeans, our existence was not in public consciousness. The generation that was part of the Caldecott era are getting on in years and before their stories are lost – and while we can still remember – we would like to share them with anyone who cares to listen.

*\*Editor’s Note: At the time of writing this Introduction, Mr Joseph Seah was the oldest surviving member of the Caldecott broadcast community. Sadly, on the 21 February 2019, Joseph passed away and leaves with us his story in the first chapter of this book.*

## CHAPTER 4

**RADIO AND TV MEMORIES**

RECOLLECTIONS OF MAUREEN LIEW

MRS MAUREEN LIEW (NEE GOH) received her early education at Fairfield Girl's School and Methodist Girl's School. She went on to further her studies at the University of Malaya and graduated with an honours degree in English. After graduation, she started work as a teacher and taught at Paya Lebar Methodist Girl's School. Some years later, Maureen secured a job as a radio producer at Radio Singapore. She wrote scripts and produced a series *English By Radio* for broadcast to schools. She later became a full-time broadcaster, producing programmes such as *Story Time* and *Music and Movement* with her colleagues Mildred Appaduray and Aisha Akbar.



Mrs Maureen Liew in her office.

**Raising the standard of radio**

In 1961, commercial radio started and Maureen was promoted to English Programme Organiser (EPO). She took over from Vernon Palmer who was appointed Head of Commercial Radio. That was the beginning of radio commercials slotted in between the music played on-air. There was also sponsorship of airtime by companies such as Unilever in shows like *Double Your Money* and *Talentine*.

During her years in radio, several changes took place but there were two important milestones in the late 60s and early 70s. One was the introduction of the first ever FM stereo service for classical music. There were initial problems as the newly-recruited announcers had little knowledge of classical music and composers. The correct pronunciation of names like Chopin and Bach was a big challenge. We heard "Chopping" and "Batch" for a start but with time and training, their pronunciation and presentation improved by leaps and bounds. Gradually, the announcers who did not appreciate classical music began to take a liking to the service.

Another milestone with even bigger problems was the abolishing of dialect programmes on the Chinese service. It was the norm to broadcast the news in Teochew, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka and Hainanese, besides Mandarin and to hear programmes in the various dialects such as stories told in Cantonese by the popular storyteller, Lee Dai Sor.

When the Government issued the directive to speak Mandarin on the Chinese radio service, all dialect programmes had to be taken off-air. There was a deluge of complaints, especially from senior citizens. But, it was a policy which had to be followed. The new policy directed by the Government was for all Chinese to speak a common language, Mandarin. This would result in better communication and create an advantage for business and trade between Singapore and China which was beginning to open up its markets.

For programme planners like Maureen, the move to abolish dialects was a blessing in disguise. It was in fact, increasingly difficult to find good dialect speakers as presenters/announcers. In order to support the Speak Mandarin Campaign, radio



Cora (left) and Mildred Appaduray (right) in the English county unit, 5 September 1961.



The abolishment of dialect programmes meant that popular Cantonese storyteller Lee Dai Sor could no longer go on air.

and television produced special programmes to help listeners learn and improve their Mandarin. After a number of years, it became clear that the Government had achieved its purpose.

### Small screen, large workload for radio

When television came on the scene in 1963, it brought more exciting times and challenges. Maureen recalls the early days of small budgets and a small staff strength. Her radio staff took on the additional role of presenters as newsreaders and hosts of television programmes. She also had to recruit part-time staff such as Tan See Lai and Duncan Watt to be newsreaders.

After Singapore gained independence, television also became a tool for promoting national policies. For example, the Eat More Wheat campaign was brought to the public from the Singapore Conference Hall with cooking competitions and demonstrations thrown in.

Perhaps more entertaining was the first mass wedding organised by radio and television at the same venue – the Singapore Conference Hall in 1968. Maureen organised the entire show, which attracted more than a hundred willing



Left: Tan See Lai (left) hosting a woman's magazine programme on jewellery.

Below: How to cook was a popular segment on *Women's World*.



Left: Maureen Liew was the model for a local artist featured on the women's magazine programme.



couples who were very excited about the idea of getting married on television. Maureen selected 120 couples, working closely with the Registry of Marriages. An unexpected problem that cropped up was from parents of the brides and grooms. They were unhappy there was no wedding banquet but only a tea party following the wedding ceremony. Fortunately, all went well with the events covered on television by producer Domingo Raquiza and Belinda Yeo, the bubbly radio personality.

### Another milestone for Maureen

In 1972, Maureen was promoted to Controller of Radio, in charge of all radio services. It was a smooth transition for her with the support of all the staff from the four language services and various departments in the organisation.

During this period she was tasked to put together cultural shows for VIPs at the request of the Prime Minister's Office. She remembers well the first show which involved many children from the combined school choirs and cultural troupes. Most memorable was the show produced during the visit of Queen Elizabeth II to the Lion City. The logistics of holding the performance at the Istana grounds, dealing with various cultural groups, threat of rain and the high expectations of the Prime Minister made it very stressful. However, working under the eyes of Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew taught her one important lesson: aim for perfection. This goal was also extended to the shows for the National Day Rally which took place annually, a week or two after 9 August.



Maureen Liew attending an audition held in the radio auditorium (left) and officiating at the certificate presentation for participants of a singing course organised by RTS (right).

The invited guests were entertained by a cultural show before the Prime Minister addressed the Rally which was televised live on all language services on radio and television. The Prime Minister had to be on stage to address the audience at 7:30 pm exactly. Given the number of performers involved in the show – the Malay dance group under Som Said (Sri Warisan), People's Association, Indian Cultural Association, etc. – just about anything could go wrong. "Fortunately, there was never a disaster, by the grace of God and excellent teamwork."

Another "national service" for Maureen was organising the entertainment segment for the National Day Parade (NDP). A gem of an idea came to Maureen – why not hold the show after dusk when the military segment was over. The performance by the People's Association and other cultural groups would be much better under the floodlights and good television lighting.

The idea was "sold" to Lim Siong Guan, Permanent Secretary of Defence, with the help of Cheng Tong Fatt, then Deputy Chairman of Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC). SBC's technical team was tasked to light up the National Stadium with powerful television lights. The result was the first-ever night telecast of the NDP in 1986.

### A "golden era" for radio and television

Big changes for radio and television took place in 1980. Radio and Television Singapore was restructured to become SBC. A number of directorates were formed including: corporate planning, engineering, news and current affairs, programme acquisition and scheduling, production services, finance and administration.

This period marked the beginning of locally-produced Chinese drama. Foreign talent and artistes from Taiwan and Hong Kong were recruited to jump start local drama. Many of the actresses were housed in a hostel at Old Broadcasting House on Caldecott Hill. But before long the Taiwan ladies had to be sent home for moonlighting – big limousines were frequently seen picking them up for dates. It became clear that SBC had to recruit local talent for its drama productions. This led to talent-hunting through the contest *Star Search* which discovered talents like Pan Ling Ling, Edmund Chen, Zoe Tay, Fann Wong and Christopher Lee. More discoveries and drama training courses followed and this led to new developments – the formation of the SBC Dancers and Singers and the SBC Orchestra which provided support to the popular variety shows.

Dance choreographer George Pearce and well-known singer Poon Sow Keng were key to the success of new recruits. Drama became a new department under producer Lee Beng Hoon. Beng Hoon also headed a Dubbing Unit with native Mandarin speakers who lent their voices to our local dramas.

When the standard of Mandarin spoken by the actors and actresses improved, the Dubbing Unit was eventually shut down. However, other doors opened – a children's workshop emerged and *Mat Yoyo* came on the scene. The next step was a new training school for full-time staff. This training school was built on Caldecott Hill where producers, scriptwriters, cameramen, editors and electronic news-gathering staff were also trained. Vernon Palmer (later succeeded by Paul Seow) headed the Training School which saw it grow with the help of experts mainly from the BBC. It later evolved to become the Singapore Media Academy headed by Chua Foo Yong to train members of the public on media production.



A publicity photo featuring Zoe Tay after she emerged as the winner of *Star Search*.



The cats Ya Ya and Yo Yo in the popular Malay children's programme *Mat Yoyo*.





*The Perfect Match*, hosted by Huang Yiling (standing), was a Chinese variety programme to matchmake the many single men and women in Singapore. Each week, six contestants answered questions and participated in a series of games to determine their compatibility.

### Chinese variety shows

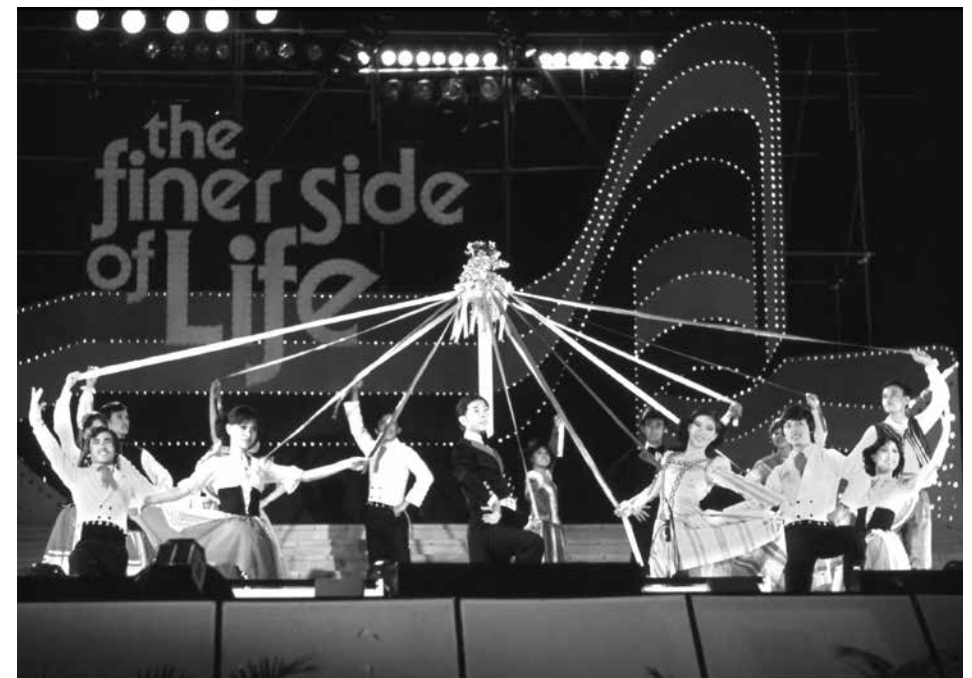
One of Maureen's fondest memories was to introduce Chinese variety shows. It started with one weekly show in Studio One that proved to be very popular among the viewers as well as advertisers. These variety shows were extended to three nights a week, and later every weekday night. At that time, the decision was made for the shows to go live, saving a lot of time, effort and money. Known as *Live from Studio One*, it was a huge income earner and it aired for many years.

Other television shows included big variety shows like *Hello 84* and *Reach Out* held in front of the Padang on the City Hall steps, in HDB heartlands and Chinatown.

Maureen said the success of all these projects were due to the support and hard work of a number of good producers – namely William Lee, Katherine Kan, Lee Beng Hoon and Kok Ying Poh.

### A memorable year

Singapore was chosen as the venue for the 1987 Miss Universe Pageant. SBC and the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board were to co-produce the event which would be televised via satellite to countries all over the world.



Mega outdoor variety shows such as *Hello 84* and *The Finer Side of Life* stretched the production teams. These shows were very popular and attracted huge crowds who came to watch the live shows.



Maureen Liew greets Mr Ee Peng Liang (Chairman, Community Chest of Singapore) and Mr Wee Kim Wee (Chairman, SBC) at *Heartstrings 1986* to raise funds for the Community Chest of Singapore.



*Heartstrings 1986* was organised in the format of a charity telethon and members of the public could call in and speak to a volunteer to make their donation to the Community Chest. This photo shows the volunteers – made up of SBC staff, military personnel and Singapore Airlines cabin crew, among others – manning the switchboard to receive calls.

A team of American organisers came to Singapore for several discussions. In addition a production team from SBC was sent to Albuquerque, USA, to familiarise themselves with the project. Eventually, the *1987 Miss Universe Pageant* was transmitted without a hitch from Singapore to more than 500 million viewers.

In 1988, Maureen Liew decided to retire after a rewarding and successful career in broadcasting. In her retirement message, she credited her success to all the good people she had worked with over the years.

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Meeting with former colleagues in 2012. From left to right: David Lowe, Maureen Liew, Poh Joo Tuang, Mun Chor Seng, David Ho Pan Chun, Ricky Wong and Lim Yew Hai.

Maureen said: “I have learned that discipline is the key to getting things done. To achieve anything, one must be disciplined. For example, punctuality. If one is not punctual, one is wasting the time of others and wasting resources. Secondly, when a staff member has a problem, he or she is advised not to solve it alone. Come to my office early in the morning – and I will suggest ways and means of solving the problem. It is quicker and more effective than groping around and not being able to find a solution.”

Today, Maureen lives happily in Perth, Western Australia, with her husband David Lowe. Friends who have visited them talk about her warm hospitality and great cooking skills. In fact, one of her unfulfilled dreams is to run a pub offering draft beer and pub food! She misses her many friends and family, and home is where her heart is – Singapore.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Maureen joined Radio Malaya in 1957 as a producer of the programme English by Radio for Schools. She was appointed English Programme Organiser for radio including work assignments for television. She was promoted to Director of Radio and later Director of Television. She retired after 30 years of service on the Hill and now resides in Perth with her husband.*

## CHAPTER 15

**BEHIND THE NEWS SCENE**

RECOLLECTIONS OF EE BOON LEE

IN 1963, EE BOON LEE joined Radio and Television Singapore (RTS) as a News Editor. Seven years later, in 1970, he became Chief Editor (Output), and was later promoted, first to Controller of News, then to Senior Controller of News.

Many of us in broadcasting know Boon Lee as a humble and rather quiet man who hardly spoke much. His conversation, if any, was a simple “Hi”. He had a mischievous sense of humour and would pull the legs of those close to him.

**String along**

His first job was a stringer at the *Singapore Tiger Standard*. As a freelance reporter, Boon Lee covered court proceedings and sports. Later, he was given a permanent post by Mr S Rajaratnam who was then at the *Singapore Tiger Standard* – a newspaper competing with *The Straits Times* (ST). Boon Lee worked there for three years.

An opportunity to widen his skills came when Mr Felix Abisheganaden from ST approached Boon Lee to join them, offering him better pay and conditions. Seizing the opportunity, Boon Lee went over as a reporter in 1956 and served until 1963.

**The move from ST to RTS**

Mr Kajapathy asked Boon Lee to join RTS. He vividly remembered Mr Kajapathy calling him up, saying: “*Hello, Boon Lee, we are starting television. Come over and do news editing for us*”. The terms were just right so Boon Lee took up the offer without any hesitation.

Mr Kajapathy was the Input News Editor. S C Lim was the Output News Editor. S T Keong was in charge of the news team, but the big boss was a Chinese national Li Vei-Chen. Li was brought-in from China, an expert in media and human psychology, a good and nice man. Boon Lee reported directly to S C Lim.

Boon Lee’s job was quite clear, to edit the news. There was the 7 pm news and the 11 pm news. He started doing radio news, then moved to television.



Ee Boon Lee.

Television news was more complex because of the film inserts which had to be flown in from overseas. A case in point: when a report of the Beirut bombings occurred, to present the news professionally, this film footage had to be shown along with the news report. Immediacy is vital in news telecast. However, by the time the film reached the newsroom, it was out of date. A quick solution had to be found. And so, they invented newsreel and the out-of-date material went on newsreel.

**They present the news**

The newsreaders included Vernon Palmer, Claude Doral and Steven Lee. Boon Lee had to constantly remind them: “Gentlemen, be careful how you read the words, be careful of this sentence, that it is to be read this way”.

Not only did the news team grapple with tight deadlines, they also managed numerous phone calls. Boon Lee recollected that the big boss was very concerned about hierarchy. One day, they were chided because they read Mr Lee Khoon Choy’s name first – instead of Haji Yaacob bin Mohammed’s who was at that time, the most senior Minister of State. The staff responsible for this error resigned but eventually became a successful businessman.

News coverage was often unpredictable, for one never knew what would happen after the news was put out. Would there be complaints if the authorities or the public were displeased with what was broadcast? That was what the news team faced every day of their working lives.

**Mind the news please, it has to be mistake-free!**

Sometimes Boon Lee had to second-guess the right words that were spoken and hope for the best. He recollected how one eventful day, James Fu, Lim Tiong Ann and himself took shorthand but could not figure out what Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew had said. It was either a French or Latin phrase. “We all listened to the tape in an attempt to make out what PM Lee had said, but still could not get it. In the end, collectively, we made an educated guess. After it went on air, no phone call came in. Gosh! What a relief!”

One day in an aircraft, PM Lee gave Boon Lee a written text and directed with a straight face: “This is a speech of mine that my wife corrected. You’ll send out the thing as corrected, but I want to deliver as I wrote it. That’s the only way people can understand. You can craft it nicely, but you say it, repeat certain words, this that and the other.”

Certainly, in his assignments with PM Lee, Boon Lee learnt the importance of effective communication. Boon Lee further added that one could be the most beautiful writer, but still not the best communicator.

### **The walkabouts to rally the people of Singapore**

Then, there were the walkabouts by PM Lee. They were launched just before the 1963 elections. These walkabouts took place after the People's Action Party (PAP) had already won the referendum and was about to go into Malaysia. So, there was a series of walkabouts to explain to the citizens why the government focused on policies such as labour and education but did not touch on issues related to foreign affairs and the police, as these were sensitive issues.

Back then, Singapore had problems with Indonesia, the Soviet Union and China. That was why PM Lee had to get the different races here – Chinese, Malay and Indian to work together as one people, one nation, one Singapore. Boon Lee said his team had to be very clear on the objectives and reported, without second-guessing. His job, strictly as broadcasters, never shied away from the fact that the whole news team was a “voice of the government”.



PM Lee Kuan Yew on a walkabout to Sembawang constituency to meet residents and explain government policies in 1963.

PAP won the 1963 elections quite decisively – one week after Malaysia Day. Boon Lee then journeyed with PM Lee on the Malaysian Mission to Africa in 1964. The trip was to explain Malaysia's position to 18 countries. Malaysia had just been formed and the country needed to get the Afro-Asia Group to support Malaysia. The bulk of the countries were in Africa: Egypt, Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Guinea, Tanzania, Kenya, Madagascar, Ghana and Zanzibar. Everywhere PM Lee went, he would repeat the same thing – that



PM Lee Kuan Yew speaking with journalists from Ghana during the Malaysian Mission to Africa, 1964. Ee Boon Lee (in jacket) is on the right of PM Lee

Malaysia posed no threat to anyone. PM Lee was so convincing and impressive that some leaders in the countries he visited mistakenly believed that he was the Prime Minister of Malaysia. The trip was successful. Boon Lee's job was to file reports every day from whenever he was, using the fax machine.

### **News is no easy task, be prepared to get knocks**

In the 18 years on Caldecott Hill, Boon Lee said doing news was a really tough and taxing job that saw him being chided many times. And on certain occasions, he got scolded as the higher-ups had forgotten to inform him about policy changes. As a result of this weak communication, mistakes occurred and as Head of News, he was hauled-up to explain.

He was comforted to know that Mrs Wong-Lee Siok Tin, being an understanding and supportive boss on realising that errors were not caused by him would gently tease him in a most motherly way: “Boon Lee, it is not your fault – but I knock you anyway, okay?”

Boon Lee recalled that he worked with a number of bosses and generally they would not interfere with the news operation. Not even Cheng Tong Fatt, the Deputy Chairman who was very hands-on in other departments. However, from time to time, Mrs Wong-Lee did advise on how certain words should be read and emphasised.

Other than English, Boon Lee was only proficient in Standard One Malay. So when he got promoted, Cheng Tong Fatt asked him to study another language, Japanese. As Boon Lee was unable to do so, he was asked to learn Mandarin instead, and he was assigned a tutor. Boon Lee was appreciative and was grateful that he took up Mandarin as it proved to be very useful.

### New jobs, new directions

In 1981, Boon Lee decided to call it a day at RTS. Seah Chiang Nee had invited him to join the newspaper, *The Singapore Monitor*. He was then 47 and decided to take up the offer because the terms and conditions were attractive. Moreover, Boon Lee was not under the pension scheme. Sadly, after about four years, the *Singapore Monitor* collapsed.

After that, he joined NTUC to manage their newsletter, *NTUC News*, and the PAP publication, *Petir*. His office was at Trade Union House in Shenton Way. When Boon Lee reached 60 in 1994, he was offered an extension of service of three years, and another three years after that up to 2000.

### The write way

Upon retirement, Boon Lee was asked by NTUC to write four books. Besides working on them, he jogged regularly and swam forty minutes daily. Being a family



Mun Chor Seng, James Fu and Seah Chiang Nee on assignment in the United Kingdom; outside 10 Downing Street, office of the Prime Minister of Great Britain.



Left: Ee Boon Lee meets with PM Lee Hsien Loong at a Pioneer Generation tribute party, Feb 2014.  
Right: Choo Lian Liang with Ee Boon Lee at a Chinese New Year gathering, 4 February 2012.

man, Boon Lee took the time to ferry his granddaughter to and from school on school days.

He was inspired by PM Lee Kuan Yew and told PM Lee: “I read your story, you started learning computer at age 60. Yes, never stop learning even after retirement. I myself learned how to use the computer at the age of 70.”

Veteran journalist, former NTUC News Editor and Senior Controller of SBC News, Ee Boon Lee passed away in 2014 at the age of 79.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Ee Boon Lee was a veteran broadcast and print journalist. He worked as a reporter for The Straits Times and was News Editor of the Singapore Monitor. At the peak of his career, he was Senior Controller of News at RTS. Later, he edited the NTUC newspaper and Petir, the magazine of the People's Action Party. A highlight of his career was to accompany PM Lee Kuan Yew on the Malaysian Mission to Africa and Eastern Europe after Singapore's separation from Malaysia.*



## 8 DAYS: THE UNTOLD STORIES

BY MICHAEL CHIANG

I STILL REMEMBER WALKING INTO the Chairman's office that fateful day. This was in August 1990, about two months after I had been hired to rectify the unprofitability of the *Radio & TV Times* (English).

Dr Cheong Choong Kong, best known for his dynamic leadership of Singapore Airlines, was then Chairman of SBC. He could not understand why the English-language weekly had been making losses for 10 years, and why it could not share the same success of its counterpart, the equally unimaginatively-named *Radio & TV Times* (Chinese).

He tasked a headhunting agency to conduct a regional search for a Publishing Vice President, and I ended-up on the shortlist after two rounds of interviews. The final decision rested with Dr Cheong, who picked me after a casual chat in his large office.



Michael Chiang with past issues of 8 DAYS.

All photos this chapter from the collection of Michael Chiang

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The first thing I did was assemble a team to help me try to turn the magazine around. Then, I had to come up with a concept and a plan.

On that fateful August afternoon, I was back in Dr Cheong's oversized office to share what I had dreamt up. It was just the two of us seated at a big conference table.

"Michael, what do you have in mind?" He smiled benignly.

"First, I am going to propose that we close down *RTV Times*," I said, quickly adding, "but I will create a new magazine in its place."

"I see. So you think we shouldn't continue with *RTV Times*?"

I took a deep breath as I opened up my portable flip-board – one of those clumsy portfolio holders that art directors used to lug around proudly before iPads repurposed the design world.

I told the Chairman what I was going to name the new magazine, then showed him mock-ups of the cover as well as the inside pages. He listened intently, but did not ask a single question.

Bravely, I continued: "I also think the magazine should include the listings of RTM and TV3, and not just focus on our own channels."

RTM (Radio Televisyen Malaysia) and TV3 were the rival channels whose names were unmentionable on Caldecott Hill back then. They were deemed "evil" entities that threatened the chastity of SBC's innocent viewers. They were the Dark Side.

"If we want to publish a TV guide, then it has to be comprehensive," I explained. "Otherwise, the reader will be forced to turn to other sources, like newspapers, for complete programming info. And we don't want that."

He nodded and got up. "Okay, Michael, proceed."

And that was it. A simple 20-minute presentation with an old-fashioned flip-board was what it took for the Chairman to let me launch 8 DAYS.

Maybe the stars were in alignment, maybe my Jupiter was in the right house, or maybe he was just in an exceptionally-receptive mood. I'll never know but will forever be thankful.

So was the magazine name inspired by The Beatles' song, *Eight Days a Week*? Actually, no.

It started with me looking at *Time Out*, the listings guide for shows and events in London and New York. It listed plays, movies, concerts and TV shows for the week, coming out on a Wednesday, but providing listings until the following Wednesday.

I liked their approach of having an overlapping day for every issue – covering eight days' worth of events. Maybe I could skew it differently: 'Buy seven days

and I give you one free!’ Of course, it didn’t escape me that ‘8’ was a fortuitous number for the Chinese as well.

By the time I linked it to The Beatles hit, I knew it had to be called *8 DAYS*.

I called up my friend Babes Conde, a veteran composer and producer, and asked if she would compose a jingle for me.

“Take your inspiration from The Beatles, except I need the line ‘8 days every week’ instead of ‘8 days a week’,” I told her.

Babes asked how much money I had. I told her not very much (true), but she obliged, and ended up composing, producing and singing the jingle. “You have no money, so I have to do everything myself what!” she said, rolling her eyes.

More than two decades later, people can still sing the jingle back to me. If there were royalties, Babes could be very rich.

But then, life isn’t always about the money, money, money.

We had a concept, a supporter in the Chairman, and a jingle. What else did we need? As it turned out, more than I bargained for.

The immediate task was to find a way to segue gently from *RTV Times* into *8 DAYS*. It seemed quite simple, but I clearly had no idea what lurked ahead.

There was one main advertiser contracted to taking the back-page ads for all 52 issues of both weeklies. This was Kao, the Japanese company behind a slew of household brands, from soaps and shampoos to cleansers and detergents.

Seeing how the new magazine would now be more like a Singapore amalgam of *Time Out*, *TV Guide* and *People* magazines, providing heaps more content, I decided we needed to revise advertising rates upwards. I was going to double them.

And because Kao was our main advertiser, I felt I needed to forewarn them, letting them know that there would be an imminent increase in ad spend the following year. (I would still honour rates for the existing contract, of course.)

Off I headed to the Kao office. I went alone, and found myself confronted by over a dozen of their staff, led by a very vocal (and clearly unhappy) marketing head, Mr Ang.

He asked why I showed so little respect for a loyal client who had supported both magazines for years. Did I not realise they could advertise somewhere else?

I quietly assured him that they needed to see the change that was in store, and how I felt the current rates were not reflective of the magazine’s reach.

Luckily, there was a spot of calm in the room. The Managing Director, Mr Lim, told the team that perhaps they should not pass judgment until *8 DAYS* was out.

I agreed that it was a fair call, and thanked them for their long-time support of the two TV weeklies, attempting my sincerest smile as I left, a little shaken.

It was apparent that I would need to convince other advertisers as well, and that I needed more than boyish charm to make them buy into this fresh but unknown gamble.

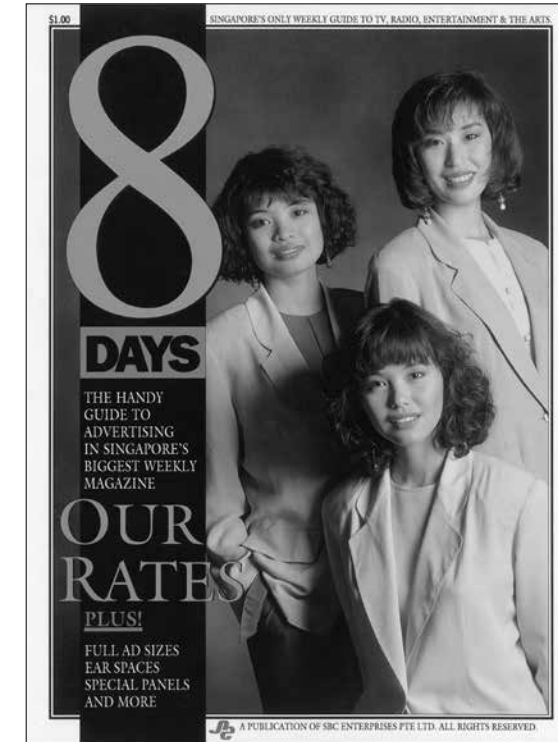
I had established a certain reputation for myself as the ‘magazine revamp expert’, but could I pull off this gargantuan turnaround? The machinery was already in motion, there was no turning back.

I had already assembled a strong editorial team and was pretty confident that we could create good content. We planned a party for advertisers, sending out a cheeky invite that hinted at the title of the new magazine.

Response was tremendous, making me even more nervous. Seeing the Kao brigade show up in full force at the party did not help. Mr Ang was a lot warmer, and, for the record, eventually became a good friend.

The editorial team was introduced in an informal video, we unveiled the new name, then handed out glossy rate-cards with actress Zoe Tay, newsreader Linette Tye and current affairs producer Angelina Fernandez on the cover.

The mood was friendly, and the advertisers seemed open. Many were intrigued and prepared to give us a chance. By the time we launched *8 DAYS* on 13 October 1990, there was enough positive buzz among advertisers.



The *8 DAYS* advertising rate card was designed to look like the cover of the magazine.

We opted for a radical black-and-white portrait of Channel 8 stars for the launch cover, followed by a carefully planned sequence of covers that covered all bases – The Flash (Channel 5), Whitney Houston (pop), etc.

Thankfully, the new format caught on and the magazines flew off the shelves. We were profitable within the first year.

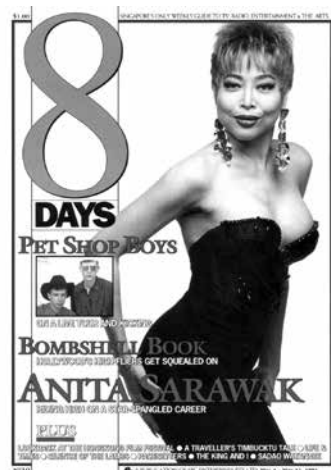
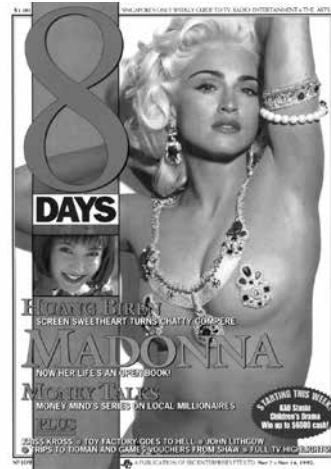
We successfully placed *8 DAYS* on the map, injecting a much-needed buzz into the entertainment scene. We built a reputation with slick cover shoots of local stars like Zoe Tay, Fandi Ahmad, Fann Wong and Anita Sarawak, then raised the bar shooting visiting celebs like Chris Isaak, the late Brandon Lee (son of Bruce Lee), Shu Qi, Tony Leung and Gong Li.

I remember meeting acclaimed Hong Kong film director Peter Chan at the 1998 Fame Awards Finals, where we were both judges, and introducing myself. “Of course, I know *8 DAYS*. How I wish there was a magazine like that in Hong Kong!”

We wowed readers, we wooed advertisers, but the journey wasn’t always smooth. There were also bumps and potholes along the way.

In publishing, you are often at the mercy of the distributor. They determine how many copies of your magazine to take, they decide how many outlets sell the magazine and they dictate the commission they want. New titles, especially, have it rough. As there is no shred of evidence that it will sell, the distributor will brush you off and tell you their vendors have no space for an untested magazine. Unless you offer higher margins.

The covers of *8 DAYS* featured both local and international stars. Many issues became collector’s items as fans rushed to get copies of their favourite actors and singers.



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Over the years *8 DAYS* would change the design of its masthead several times. Keeping in touch with the latest trends, even its size evolved to a more compact and cost effective format. This issue featured actress Gong Li on the cover.

Luckily, we had a cash cow in *RTV Times* (Chinese), a money-spinner for vendors and chain stores alike. Thus we used it as leverage to get vendors to take as many copies of *8 DAYS* as possible, with the understanding that if it didn’t sell, they could cut back orders.

We were then working with SPH Distributors, which had the biggest network of vendors in the country on account of their newspapers.

As the circulation of *8 DAYS* grew, I wondered if there was a chance we could do the distribution ourselves. After pitching the idea to management, we decided to give it a shot.

First, we poached a few key people from SPH, then set up our distribution centre on the same street as them, Genting Lane. It seemed reasonable that the vendors would want to continue taking the two bestselling weeklies, regardless of who the distributor was, right?

We did not expect the incumbent to take umbrage. Viewing us as upstarts trying to upturn their rosy apple cart, they turned on us like angry birds. Stationing surly-faced staff at the entrance to our warehouse, they stopped vendors to ask for their particulars, demanding to know how many magazines they planned to take. A handful were cowed, and turned away. The majority shrugged it off and defiantly collected the weeklies from us.

SPH’s over-dramatic performance ran for less than a fortnight, and did not serve them well at the box-office. They had to accept that these vendors were not bound to any exclusive agreement with them.

By setting up our own distributorship, we were able to offer the service to other publishers as well, and at more competitive terms.

Thanks to *8 DAYS*’ success, the publishing operation grew from strength to strength. At our peak, we notched up a profit of over \$2 million from an annual publishing revenue of about \$6 million.



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This gave us the confidence to launch new titles.

The first was *Lime*, a pop magazine for youths. The launch issue created buzz for having the world's first-ever 'scratch and sniff' masthead. I had the crazy idea of adding a lime scent to the lime-green masthead, and thankfully, the printer managed to find a supplier who could do it.

In the years to follow, we rebranded RTV Times (Chinese) into *I-Weekly*, launched *Manja*, *Family*, *Kids Company*, *Style*, *Style:Weddings*, *Vanilla*, and also took on the franchises for international titles like *Elle*, *FHM*, *Mother & Baby* and *Arena*.

We moved into custom publishing, starting out with the cable guide *Telescope* for Singapore Cable Vision (now StarHub), before taking on titles for Public Utilities Board, Ministry of Education, BMW, National Healthcare Group, SC Global and Northeast Community Development Council, which all boosted revenue.

As our print costs increased, I was asked several times by management to consider printing our own magazines. I steadfastly fought this, as I believed it was a totally different business altogether. Once you owned printing presses, the main job would be to keep them running at full capacity and not lay idle.

In 1990, when I took over publishing, only two companies had the production capacity to handle our weekly volume – Times Printers and Singapore National Printers (SNP).



Covers of some of the magazines published by Mediacorp Publishing.

Every year, a tender was conducted, and it was little more than a rotation exercise with the two printers taking turns to print the English and Chinese publications.

Seeing how the major chunk of our expenses went towards printing, I met up with both companies. "If I let you print both weeklies instead of just one, what rates will you offer?"

The gauntlet was thrown.

Times Printers offered a massive reduction and clinched the contract, leaving SNP out in the cold. The latter is no longer around and I sometimes wonder if the ballsy bargaining led to their eventual demise.

Publishing in Singapore comes with its set of constraints. Few realise that every magazine needs a publishing licence, which has to be renewed every year. It essentially means that publishers need to be on their best behaviour if they don't want their licence revoked. To me, the Media Development Authority (MDA) was generally a passive observer. But, all it took was one (yes, just one) complaint from a member of the public to set off a chain of actions. When a complaint was made against the publication, MDA had to act, and I would be summoned for a meeting at their office.

These meetings were always very civil, but I began to notice with some alarm how my 'complaint files' were slowly piling up on the table. I was made to feel like a disobedient child who got caught out one time too many – and would soon be expelled from school.

We got hauled up for a whole list of misdemeanours – from risqué covers (Madonna showing too much skin) to objectionable ads (male model revealing body hair in inappropriate areas).

Then, there were the Malaysian censors. As our television shows and stars had a huge following across the Causeway, our magazines were in demand as well. As such, we needed a distribution permit for Malaysia. I remember sitting in the Malaysian permits office acting contrite for our 'objectionable content' – usually involving immodestly-attired actresses. We soon learnt to produce more sanitised versions (sans cleavage) just for Malaysia.

In the end, the publishing journey was all about learning.



Mr Kua Hong Pak, CEO of Times Publishing (parent company of Times Printers), with Michael Chiang.



In September 2018, Michael Chiang hosted a farewell party at the Pod at the National Library and invited everyone who had contributed to the success of 8 DAYS over the 28 years that it was published.

Learning how to turn sceptics into supporters, learning how to take risks without being reckless and learning how to navigate minefields without losing direction.

Overseeing a multi-million dollar business taught me to pay attention to detail, managing 165 staff taught me to take care of people. I realised that as long as we kept the door open and were willing to listen, we could build and grow a cohesive team, regardless of how big the egos or how diverse the company.

I look back on that era with pride and wonder, marvelling at how we survived the hiccups and hysterics. And how someone like me, armed with only editorial experience and wide-eyed enthusiasm, was fortunate enough to be in the right place at the right time.

8 DAYS was a bold gamble. That it lasted 28 years still astounds me, and I remain eternally grateful for the angels who watched over us as the dream took flight.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Michael Chiang served as CEO of Caldecott Publishing for 11 years before opting to become Editorial Director at Mediacorp Publishing. He left the organisation after 19 years to start his own consultancy, A Little Imagination Pte Ltd, in 2009. In 2018, he launched a non-profit company, Michael Chiang Playthings Ltd, to produce theatre shows.*

*The last print issue of 8 DAYS was published in September 2018.*

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The last print issue of 8 DAYS. Fortunately, the magazine lives on in an electronic format.