LIVING HISTORY
170 years of The Straits Times
JULY 15, 1845: THE FIRST ISSUE OF THE STRAITS TIMES
THE 8-PAGE INAUGURAL EDITION
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CREDITS
Looking back, it is perhaps hard for readers today to imagine The Straits Times as a newspaper that appeared just once a week, every Tuesday.

The 8-page newspaper, which carried business notices, market reports, general news and a lot of advertisements – was largely put together by its staff of one, the editor.

An English journalist, Robert Carr Woods, then just 29, arrived in Singapore in 1845 after a stint in Bombay, and talked his way into the job.

He convinced Catchik Moses, an Armenian businessman who had done a friend in financial distress a favour and purchased a printing press off him without a clear idea of what to do with it, that there was wisdom in starting a newspaper to serve the island’s growing business community.

So, the first edition of The Straits Times and the Singapore Journal of Commerce hit the streets on 15th July, 1845, with Woods as its first editor.

How’s that for an unlikely beginning?

The paper would continue to be produced in this way
from the newsroom in 7 Commercial Square – now known as Raffles Place – until 1858, when it became a morning daily, renamed the Singapore Daily Times. But in 1883, this was abandoned and the paper reverted to being called The Straits Times.

Now, fast forward through the years: from the introduction of home deliveries by boys on red bicycles in 1896, to the purchase of Morris Minor vans in a push to circulate in Malaya in 1931, to widen the paper’s reach. Then came the war years in the 1940s, when the paper’s facilities were taken over and used to produce the Shonan Times and the Syonan Shimbun by Japanese propagandists.

But just days after the war ended in 1945, The Straits Times was back on the newstands. By some stroke of good fortune, retreating Japanese officers handed the paper’s facilities, albeit in a sorry state, over to local journalists.

Confrontation with the incoming People’s Action Party leadership in 1959, would see the paper’s leadership taking
off to Kuala Lumpur, where they believed they would have more room to operate.

Later, Separation of Malaysia and Singapore would see a split in the newspaper’s operations in 1972, with The Straits Times in Singapore and the New Straits Times in Malaysia.

And by the 1980s, The Straits Times had come to reflect the rapidly developing city-state it served, reporting on the major economic and social changes taking place in the Republic, which was firmly plugged into the world economy.

The 1990s would see the paper continue to widen its reach among the English-speaking audience in Singapore, as well as expand its overseas network of correspondents, as it staked its claim to covering Asia more extensively than any other newspaper.

More recently, the newsroom has once again undergone a transformation, as it shifted decidedly away from its print-centred mode of operations to become a multimedia newsroom. This means working round the clock, and across platforms to deliver the news to readers, anytime, anywhere and any way they chose to read it.

Your familiar ST news is now available in print, on our website and apps, on smart phones and tablets, and also comes in the form of videos, email newsletters, social media feeds, and even on the radio. Instead of interacting with our readers once a day in the morning, we now have multiple points of contact with them through the day, constantly updating them on the news as it happens.

This process of adapting to change has been the leitmotif of the ST story. Through its 170 year history, the paper has survived major political upheavals that gave rise to changes of nationality, political regime and leadership, as well as war,
economic depression and foreign occupation, and rode wave upon wave of technological change – from the introduction of the telegraph, telephone, television and now the internet – by being ready to constantly evolve and innovate to stay in sync with the spirit of the times.

Most importantly, ST recognised the need to stay closely connected to the society it served, reflecting and respecting its values and social conventions, and always attune to the changing political and social landscape that it had to operate it. This is a critical role that all good newspapers seek to play, as every society needs a proper sense of place and self – where it has come from, what its challenges are, where it is going, and why.

Over the years, The Straits Times, it is fair to say, has been instrumental in helping to foster this Singapore soul, by giving voice to it, being a mirror to it, reflecting and sharing in its tragedies and triumphs.

This was a role that ST saw for itself right from the start. After all, the paper had declared in a front page editorial in its very first edition: “The arrangements made by the Proprietor will, it is confidently expected, ensure for The Straits Times a wide circulation, especially among the mercantile Community, whilst the principles on which the publication will be conducted are those which will ever identify The Straits Times with the general interests of the Settlement.”

Today, 170 years on, we remain as committed to those principles, ever aware that our fortunes are inextricably linked to that of Singapore.

And, we remain sanguine about our prospects for the future, despite the major disruptions taking place in the
media industry around the world. You might say we have seen as much before, and survived to tell the story.

Which is why, when we recently embarked on a major revamp of all our products to mark our 170th year, we did so with a simple promise to our readers: New look, new ideas, same Singapore soul.

This e-book aims to capture the dramatic moments in the Singapore story, as told in the pages and photos of The Straits Times over the years.

It is intended as a companion to the exhibition on the same subject, titled Singapore STories: Then. Now. Tomorrow, organised by The Straits Times and the ArtsScience Museum, which will run from July 17 to Oct 4, at the Marina Bay Sands.

I hope you will enjoy reading it, as well as viewing the exhibition, and will find these a fitting tribute in this special year of twin celebrations – Singapore’s Golden Jubilee of Independence and ST’s 170th anniversary.

Thank you for supporting The Straits Times, and please, keep on reading. ST
Journalists pore over first drafts of history at The Straits Times newsroom on December 7, 1955.

ST PHOTO: HAN HAI FONG
History, by definition, is remote, like a distant ship on the edge of a converging horizon. It condenses reality by painting it in very broad strokes, one eddy in the river of time.

If approached through the pages of a newspaper, however, history comes alive. The amorphous past takes firm shape to hover in the present, so real that you can almost touch it. An old newspaper can transport you back in time, the
journey triggered by a quaint phrase in a report about the Great Depression in the 1930s or the mere mention of a place-name, a favourite haunt long gone.

You can almost smell the sea breeze at Scandal Point, where well-to-do Europeans in top hats and tight corsets gathered to share gossip in the 1800s – if you can imagine a low embankment wall at the Padang that Sir Stamford Raffles ordered built to fortify the defences of the island.

The Straits Times office in Anson Road, in 1954. ST PHOTO: N J COTTERELL

The Straits Times can transmit the mundane reality of everyday existence in the 19th or early 20th century to us, the readers, effortlessly. It can do this because newspaper accounts do not just paint a “picture” of reality. They do better: they encase reality by dint of detail and sheer volume.

A few factors allow this to happen: First, newspapers do not set out to be historical, so they are untrammelled by the “burden of import”, nor do they adopt a narrative voice, both of which can distort the depiction of reality. They fulfil a straightforward human need for information. They report.
Second, a newspaper is deeply human and, by extension, readily approachable. It details human experience, momentous and mundane, with equal rigour. In 1901, The Straits Times reported that an unnamed hawker had been fined $2 for slapping a woman on the face. In 1952, it reported that the “Duke of Kent danced a quick-step with 18-year-old Mabel Lee Soo Bee at a school social”. Both stories were written in the same spare tone. In fact, the story on the royal visit took pains to set the context. “These socials are a regular part of school life in Singapore and last night’s dance was not specially put on for the Duke.”
Finally, as readers, we are moved by the same things as our ancestors 170 years ago. If, today, we like to read that American actress Dakota Johnson wore an Yves Saint Laurent dress, diamonds and a Bally to the Oscars, in 1895, readers of The Straits Times were treated to the Sultan’s Ball, held at the Singapore palace of the Johor royalty. A report went into the entrees served: Findon haddock mayonnaise, chicken and beetroot mayonnaise, Aspic pate de foie gras and pigeon and egg pie.

After all, technology has expanded the means to affect human experience, not its scope. In the 1920s, The Straits Times, which clearly saw the economic gloom coming, pushed for state spending, a version of the stimulus of 2008. Editor George Seabridge (left) did not lose his perspective even in the midst of the Great Depression. “To talk of Malaya going back to jungle and Singapore becoming a fishing village is ludicrous,” he wrote in 1932 in an editorial, Too Much Gloom. He pushed the colonial government to act, to seize an “opportunity for statesmanship”.

To me, the Maria Hertogh (right) story has special resonance. You may remember that 13-year-old girl, peeping
from behind her ‘mother’ in a black-and-white photograph in your secondary school history textbook. You probably also recall that the custody battle for Maria sparked riots in Singapore that led to 18 deaths 65 years ago. But you may not have heard of Madam Rokayah Yusof, from Kemaman kampung in Malaysia’s Terengganu state, who carefully files all the newspaper clippings she can get about Maria, whom she remembers by her Malay name, Aunty Nadra. Assisting reporters who knock at her door with questions is her way of making sense of the tragedy. “The story is not complete yet,” she told us in an interview. “There are still a lot of details that are missing.”

Newspapers have been called the first draft of history. I suppose they perform that function, but they are so much more. They are portable, foldable repositories of living history.
A headline brings on a smile at ST's production department in this picture taken on December 7, 1955.

ST PHOTO: HAN HAI FONG
In the middle of the 19th century, the office of The Straits Times editor resembled a war room, a primitive stock exchange and a bustling bazaar – all rolled into one. A stream of visitors from around the world, some fresh off ships, passed through it unhindered.

They carried a precious cargo: the latest news, spoken in a breathtaking array of unfamiliar accents. That made the office, at No. 7, Commercial Square, which later came
to be known as Raffles Place (above), the most happening place in town.

“It was a large room, 60 feet by 40 feet (18m by 12m), and contained more than 100 files of papers from all parts of the globe, for the room was really the newspaper file room of the editor of The Straits Times. It was also well supplied with prices current, maps, etc, and was the centre of the commercial part of the town.

“Officers of ships of war, commanders of merchant vessels and passengers who arrived by the many vessels constantly passing through the harbour, were admitted free of charge and from them the local inhabitants got much news, with the result that it was the most popular resort of the place.”

This account of The Straits Times newsroom was left behind by Roland St John Braddell, a prominent lawyer and co-editor of a historical publication, One Hundred Years Of Singapore.

Braddell was writing about a period just three decades
after Sir Stamford Raffles founded Singapore in 1819. The new settlement drew droves of merchants, coolies and other fortune-seekers from around the world.

Soon, the first newspaper rolled off the press. No, not The Straits Times, but the Singapore Chronicle, a gazette started in 1824 by John Crawfurd, the Resident of Singapore who ruled the island on behalf of the British East India Company.

The Chronicle folded in 1837, wallop by the Singapore Free Press, a weekly set up in 1835 and backed by influential

ST EDITORS

In its 170 years, The Straits Times has been helmed by more than two dozen editors, some of whom are featured here. They set the direction and tone of news coverage and influenced public opinion. In doing so, they also left behind an imprint that lingers in newsroom traditions and even street names.

Robert Carr Woods
The Straits Times first editor arrived in Singapore from Bombay in 1845 at age 29. Known for his flamboyant manner, he was the force behind the public campaign for transferring control of the Straits Settlements from India to London. It was realised in 1867. An avid gardener, he promoted the planting of trees along roads and helped beautify sites like the grounds of St Andrew’s Cathedral. Woodsville Close is named after his former home.

Arnot Reid (right)
The first Fleet Street journalist in Singapore, he was only 25 when appointed editor in 1888. He believed a newspaper’s main function was to report the news rather than influence how the government should be run. Under him, The Straits Times reported in full the proceedings of legislative and municipal councils and became a newspaper of record.
ALEXANDER WILLIAM STILL
The Straits Times became known as the “Thunderer of the East” under Still, who fearlessly criticised big businesses to get them to improve conditions for workers in the rubber and plantation industries. His forthright commentaries involved The Straits Times in several commercial libel suits. But they also boosted circulation, advertising revenue and the newspaper’s reputation. His name lives on in Still Road, which connects Changi Road to East Coast Road.

GEORGE WILLIAM SEABRIDGE
He urged the colonial government to spend surpluses to help retain jobs and people’s purchasing power as the Great Depression of the 1930s gripped Singapore. To walk the talk, he expanded The Straits Times operations, built a new office and bought state-of-the-art printing machinery plus a fleet of Morris Minor vans to deliver the newspaper upcountry. He hired the first local journalists, including future editors Leslie Hoffman and T.S. Khoo.

LESLIE HOFFMAN
The Straits Times’ first Asian editor-in-chief, he was age 41 when appointed in 1956. He had a war of words with People’s Action Party leader Lee Kuan Yew over the coverage of the 1959 legislative assembly election. Under his leadership, The Straits Times’ headquarters was moved from Singapore to Malaya, where it stayed for 14 years.

LEE SIEW YEE
Appointed editor-in-chief in 1970 at age 51, he stayed on in Kuala Lumpur to head The New Straits Times when the paper split in 1972 into two separate papers for Singapore and Malaysia. The first reporter sent on an overseas assignment, he reported in exquisite prose the 1949 victory in London of the underdog Malayan team in the Thomas Cup badminton tournament.
**KHOO TENG SOON**
Better known as T.S. Khoo, he was one of Asia’s best designers of newspaper pages. He had a knack for picking the most interesting stories and turning text, design, headlines and pictures into a highly readable page in seconds. It earned him the title: The Fastest Pen In The East. Appointed group editor in 1972, he once said his decision to publish a photo of Maria Hertogh was a mistake. Racial riots had erupted in 1950 following the custody battle between Maria’s biological and adoptive parents.

**PETER LIM HENG LOONG**
He introduced the ‘What it should have been’ column, which publicly acknowledged and corrected errors in the newspaper. He is also credited with popularising the use of graphics in story-telling. Mr Lim, who became editor-in-chief in 1978 at age 40, introduced the annual performance appraisal system for staff as well as in-house and overseas training opportunities.

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**CHEONG YIP SENG**
He expanded the coverage of national politics, setting up a political desk in the early 1980s. His belief that “easy reading is damn hard writing” changed journalistic writing in the newspaper. Appointed editor in 1979, at age 35, he became editor-in-chief in 1987. He implemented an editorial policy that affirmed the need to foster national identity and a Singaporean point of view in reporting stories.

**LESLIE FONG**
Appointed editor in 1987 at age 37, he ended the practice of publishing anonymous letters from readers. He also banned smoking in the newsroom, making The Straits Times among the first newspapers in the world to do so. His term saw the launch of several initiatives like The Straits Times website and The Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund to help poor children with school expenses.
HAN FOOK KWANG
He was named The Straits Times’ editor in 2002 at age 49. A former senior public servant who joined the paper in 1989, he introduced its weekly Insight section of political features and commentary. He was also instrumental in strengthening the paper’s Forum Page. He is the co-author of two books: Lee Kuan Yew: The Man And His Ideas (1997) and Lee Kuan Yew: Hard Truths To Keep Singapore Going (2011).

PATRICK DANIEL
When Mr Daniel took charge as current editor-in-chief in 2007 at age 52, print media across the world were facing huge challenges from online media. Apart from leading The Straits Times’ multimedia strategies, he streamlined newsroom processes and restructured the newspaper division into a media group comprising both print and digital operations, as well as business adjacencies such as radio, book publishing and financial data. A former editor of The Business Times, he also oversees the group’s Malay and Tamil newspapers.

WARREN FERNANDEZ
Since becoming editor in 2012 at age 45, Mr Fernandez has turned The Straits Times’ newsroom into a 24/7, multimedia operation, ready for the digital age of smartphones, tablets and social media. To deepen the paper’s ties with the community, he organised forums on issues like education and foreign affairs, as well as concerts and the ST Run. He led the first ST redesign across print, website and mobile products.
men such as Singapore’s first lawyer William Napier. It was joined in 1842 by the short-lived Straits Messenger, which made a splash with what was then a novel offering: foreign news culled from British newspapers and oversea journals.

The Straits Times made its appearance in 1845, its parentage not nearly as illustrious as that of the formidable Singapore Free Press.

By most accounts, it was an accidental baby and there was no reason to suspect it would be the newspaper to outlast them all.

In the years to come, at least a dozen other newspapers would unfurl their banners. The Straits Times is the only paper to have published uninterrupted for 170 years – except during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore from 1942 to 1945.

FOUNDERS AND KEEPERS

The founders of The Straits Times have proved difficult to pin down. Not a lot is known about Marterus Thaddeus Apcar, the Armenian merchant who imported a printing press from England with the intention of...well, his intentions also remain unknown. Did he, as Charles Buckley suggests in his Anecdotal History Of Singapore, harbour ambitions to take on the well-entrenched Singapore Free Press? Or, more likely, was he going to carry on the Armenian tradition of printing books and journals to advocate the community’s cause?

Whatever his motive, Apcar went bankrupt before the press arrived. Catchick Moses (left), a fellow Armenian
merchant, supposedly bought over the equipment as a favour to Apcar.

Records show he hired Robert Carr Woods, a 29-year-old Englishman who arrived in Singapore in 1845 claiming to have worked as a journalist in Bombay. “Moses had a printing press needing a purpose, and Woods needed a job,” writes historian CM Turnbull in Dateline Singapore.

In sum, through a series of quirky incidents, an act of kindness, a big dose of salesmanship and possibly a bigger leap of faith was born The Straits Times and Singapore Journal of Commerce.

The Times of London was then already 60 years old, the Times of India was seven while the New York Times would be born six years later.

NUTMEG ON TANGLIN

Singapore’s population then was about 50,000 of which only about 300 read the English newspapers. Trade was the economy’s mainstay, as it is today. But unlike now, the wheels on which commerce turned spun slowly. Goods, people and news – in the form of overseas newspapers and journals, letters and chatter – arrived on ships that took several months to sail from Europe and weeks from India and China.

Life revolved around the Singapore River, with offices, shops...
and godowns clustered, bazaar-like, on its banks. Tigers stalked at the edge of town and gangs of thieves roamed the streets. Poverty was rife.

In its first issue on July 15, 1845, The Straits Times boldly said it was confident of wide circulation, especially among the merchants and traders. Its price was one Java rupee. The monthly subscription was four East India Company rupees or 1 ¾ Spanish dollars, the currencies of the time that would be later supplanted by the Straits dollar.

The issue pledged (left) to the reader that “the principles on which the publication will be conducted are those which will ever identify The Straits Times with the general interests of the Settlement”.

These were lofty ambitions for a newspaper rolling off a hand-operated press in a godown. It would sell fewer than 200 copies in its first 50 years.

But it did not hesitate to list subscription and advertisement agents in a dozen cities around the world – Hong Kong, Macau, Manila, Batavia (in Jakarta), Malacca, Penang, Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, Paris, London and Liverpool.

WHAT, NO HEADLINES?

The first issue with eight pages hardly resembles the present-day Straits Times. Its Page 1 had no news, just
advertisements and notices.

News reports ran on the inside pages, with no headlines. The stories began at the top of the first column, snaked all the way down to the bottom and then on to the top of the next column. There were no photographs. Although photography had been invented nearly two decades earlier, pictures were rarely used in newspapers until the 1920s.

The first news item, which appeared on Page 2, read more like a rushed aside: “We understand the Admiral is expected to arrive here today or tomorrow, as also that His Excellency intends to make Singapore the Head Quarters in future instead of Penang.”

For the first 13 years, the newspaper was published once or twice a week. It became an afternoon daily under the title of Singapore Daily Times (left) in 1858, before reverting to The Straits Times in 1883. It would become a morning paper after World War II.
Back at the steamy riverside godown, less than a year after its founding, Mr Moses had lost faith that The Straits Times would ever make money. After writing off his losses, he handed the reins to Mr Woods, who also found it hard to make ends meet.

The newspaper would pass on to a succession of owners/editors until 1900, when The Straits Times became a private limited company, with a paid-up capital of $100,000.

The Straits Times’ imprint in shaping the events of the day was unmistakable. In a 10-year campaign, it argued forcefully for the transfer of Singapore from British India to direct colonial rule from London.

When Singapore became a crown colony in 1867, the newspaper took some credit for it.

An event of even greater significance would follow shortly: the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. The island’s importance as a trade hub grew, unleashing a wave of prosperity. The newspaper benefited also from the laying of the telegraph cable from London to Bombay and on to Madras and Singapore. With the cable, it was possible to subscribe to Reuters news agency and it allowed the newspaper to serve fresh world news instead of months-old fare. The world drew a lot closer to Singapore.

The Straits Times noted the glow that surrounded Singapore and wrote in 1874: “It is very hard to be without a grievance, and we confess we are somewhat in this condition here at the present time.”
In the early 20th century, as Singapore was transformed from a makeshift settlement with an uncertain future into a bustling cosmopolitan city where East and West could profitably tryst, The Straits Times found its own sweet spot.

The newspaper had come to regard itself as Singapore’s paper of record and hungered to become the leading newspaper of the region. At first, the answer seemed to lie in becoming the “Thunderer of the East”, in the way The Times of London, with its imperious editorials, was the original “Thunderer”.

The Straits Times earned that nickname under the passionate editorship of Alexander William Still, an experienced British editor hired in 1908. Malaya was then at the height of the rubber boom and Still took great pains to study the economics of the region’s most valuable commodity.

His fears that a bust was round the corner proved right and he pushed the government and the industry to rally around policies that would combat the slump. When World War I broke out in 1914, he led The Straits Times in efforts to raise money and recruit volunteers for forces overseas.

Still’s opinion came to be valued, and The Straits Times sold on the strength of his name. Billboards posted around town advertised his editorials which were hotly debated in clubs and over dinner tables. Sometimes, his outspoken comments tangled The Straits Times in commercial libel suits which the newspaper either lost or settled out of court.

One estimate was that these suits cost the newspaper about $30,000. But they also boosted circulation, advertising
revenue and the paper’s reputation for forthright comment.

When the Great Depression of 1930s brought the rubber-and-tin exporting economy to a near-standstill, The Straits Times kept its head while others were losing theirs, further cementing its credibility.

It urged companies to fight defeatism – to extend, not shrink, their activities. It called on the government to spend its surpluses, resist cutting public expenditure and avoid retrenchments to speed up recovery.

To set an example, editor George Seabridge expanded and modernised the office and the printing press and bought a fleet of Morris Minor vans to deliver the paper upcountry. The move kept morale high and the investment in modernisation paid off handsomely for years to come.

By 1933, The Straits Times had worn down and absorbed its longtime rival, Singapore Free Press. Only one competitor was left – the Malaya Tribune, which billed itself the “son of
the soil” and newspaper of Singapore’s Asian communities. But in 1938, The Straits Times soared ahead of the Tribune with one masterstroke – it halved the paper’s price to 5 cents. Its circulation almost doubled to 15,000 in a year, 2,000 more than the Tribune’s.

WORLD WAR II

Luck was clearly with The Straits Times during the war. For one, it was not bombed. Its closest rival Malaya Tribune was – its premises were left smoking from a direct hit from a Japanese warplane in February 1942, a blow from which it could never really recover. The Straits Times continued to print right until the day the British surrendered Singapore to the Japanese army on February 15, 1942. Within a few days, the Japanese brought out their own English-language newspaper, the Shonan...
LIVING HISTORY

THE STRAITS TIMES STORY

Times (left), and later the Syonan Shinbun (right), from the premises of The Straits Times.

The second stroke of good fortune occurred after the war came to an abrupt halt following the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Two Japanese war correspondents from Domei News Agency turned up at the Changi camp, asking to meet The Straits Times editors interned there. They had come to hand over press equipment and access to the Reuters news service so The Straits Times could resume printing.

Arson and rioting was taking place all over Singapore. But The Straits Times’ Cecil Street premises emerged unscathed, thanks to staffers who put themselves in peril. War-hardened journalists, technicians and mechanics
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overcame many challenges – the rotary press was damaged, no gas was available to work the linotype machines – to get the press rolling.

The third lucky stroke was when Lord Louis Mountbatten, the Supreme Allied Commander of South East Asia, praised the first post-war issue of The Straits Times and told its journalists to carry on the good work. His words shielded the paper from the British Military Administration’s tight control of newsprint. As a result, The Straits Times was able to appear on September 7, 1945, just five days after the British re-occupied Singapore.

AFTER THE WAR

The Straits Times emerged from the war with a larger sense of itself, proclaiming a new identity on its masthead: “Malaya’s Leading Newspaper”. The front page no longer carried just advertisements but major news items. Partly,
because the authorities had banned advertisements at a time when newsprint was scarce but also because there was little for business to advertise in the war-shattered economy. And, beginning the tradition that continues today, it began to be published in the morning instead of the afternoon.

At the same time, there was a deep hunger for news as nationalism grew in Asia and European imperialism dwindled in power.

The politically-charged times drove the hunger for news as never before. ST’s coverage reflected the rise of Asian nationalism and the clock ticking on European imperialism. Circulation, advertising revenues and profits boomed. The Straits Times was once again on the top of things but the ground was shifting.

SELF-RULE

The shift came in 1959, literally and figuratively. The Straits Times moved its headquarters from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur, partly because it saw itself as a pan-Malayan newspaper and Kuala Lumpur, the Federation’s capital, was a logical choice. A more immediate reason was an open clash between its editor-in-chief Leslie Hoffman (top, left) and the leader of the People’s Action Party (PAP), Mr Lee Kuan Yew (left). The Straits Times had begun to peel off its pro-British identity. Its front-page headline after the
Japanese surrendered declared: “Singapore is British again!”. Not for long, editor George Peet foresaw.

The newspaper’s changing mindset became evident in 1947 when the Government proposed a controversial move: the introduction of income tax. The Straits Times, an ally of business since its founding days, did not oppose the tax, which it believed was necessary for post-war reconstruction.

Another defining moment was the Suez crisis. The local British community accused The Straits Times of betrayal when it broke ranks with the colonial establishment and opposed Britain’s invasion of Egypt in 1956.

In local politics, The Straits Times viewed the PAP as dangerously left-leaning, while Mr Lee thought the newspaper lacked political judgment.

He found fault with its coverage of the 1959 Legislative Assembly general election, especially a report that addressed the sensitive issue of merger between Singapore and Malaya. Mr Lee warned: “Any newspaper that tries to sour up or strain relations between the Federation and Singapore will go in for subversion.”

Mr Hoffman saw this as a serious threat to press freedom in Singapore and took the case to the International Press Institute. Its representative visited Singapore and concluded that the incident had been overblown by both sides.

By 1961, The Straits Times (left)
found much to admire about Mr Lee’s economic development policies and his ability to handle the communists in his own party. It gave support to his government.

The paper also backed the PAP’s goal of a merger between Singapore and Malaya. A merger would pave the way for it to realise its dream of becoming the national newspaper of a unified, independent nation.

The merger in 1963, however, unravelled as racial tensions and political differences rocked Malaysia. The Straits Times made many pleas for level-headedness. On Aug 8, 1965, it warned: “What is at stake is the survival of Malaysia itself as a nation, an interest of vital concern to every citizen of this country. A frightful miscalculation can bring ruin to all.”

The next day, Singapore’s exit from Malaysia was announced (left).

**A PAPER FOR TWO**

For The Straits Times, as for almost all of Singapore, the split was a shock and a matter of sorrow. The Straits Times was a Malaysian-registered company headquartered in Kuala Lumpur. But its financial base was in Singapore. The situation was especially troubling to the Singapore staff who had no say in decisions taken in Kuala Lumpur. It endured until 1972, when the Malaysian government forced the company to split its operations and form the New Straits Times to serve Malaysia. The Straits Times returned home to Singapore, after a 14-year stay in Kuala Lumpur.
Every newly independent nation grapples with nation building. The curve for newly-independent Singapore was steeper – a Singaporean identity had to be conceived and constructed from scratch. The journey proved an arduous climb for The Straits Times too.

In 1977, The Straits Times drew up an editorial policy that would explicitly promote national development, a move prompted by government expectations that the national newspaper should influence its readers to good effect, to contribute to raising living standards and be a quality paper that can expertly analyse the world for Singaporeans. The newspaper set itself four objectives: “to inform, to educate, to activate and to entertain”. To activate, a new concept for The Straits Times, meant “explaining, questioning and, where necessary, criticising government policies and other developments of public interest”.

But relations with the Government continued to be rocky, hitting a low in 1981 when Mr J.B. Jeyaretnam, leader of the opposition Workers’ Party, won the Anson constituency in a by-election. He became the first opposition member in Parliament in 13 years. The Government blamed The Straits Times’ election coverage for the loss, particularly a report of an impending hike in bus fares.

Anticipating a government intervention in its operations, The Straits Times management sought a meeting with Mr Lee. It led to both sides agreeing that a government nominee, approved by the company, would become executive chairman of The Straits Times Press board.
Nathan, I am giving you The Straits Times. It has 140 years of history. It's like a bowl of china. You break it, I can piece it together, but it will never be the same. Try not to.

The post was held by Mr S R Nathan (left), a top civil servant who would later become the President of Singapore. The day before he took the job, Mr Lee had a message for him: Mr Nathan’s entry into The Straits Times in 1982 was met with suspicion. He was seen as the censor-in-chief. But he cast himself as a bridge-builder who would not wade into the newspaper’s day-to-day operations but stay focussed on his task, which was to help the editors understand what the Government was trying to do. No china was broken.

INTERNET AGE

The Straits Times took its first step in cyberspace in 1995, the year it celebrated its 150th anniversary. The move was one year ahead of the New York Times and at least four years before The Times of London.

As social media became popular, the paper harnessed it to give news quickly and extensively.

When Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 disappeared mid-flight in 2014, for example, The Straits Times deployed nearly 40 reporters in 12 cities to provide live news updates across all platforms, including interviews with aviation officials, experts and distraught kin. By March 9, 2015, a year later,
the paper had published almost 600 reports on the missing plane.

With technology and reading habits ever-changing, The Straits Times began a series of projects to meet its readers wherever they chose to tune in. Stomp (Straits Times Online Mobile Print), an interactive portal for readers to share views and stories, was launched in 2006. The Straits Times’ online video news channel, RazorTV, was launched in 2008. In the following year, its iPhone application was released. And in 2013, The Straits Times news began to be heard on SPH radio stations. This year, it will be available on smart watches.

The Straits Times website (left) and mobile apps have about eight million unique visitors and 100 million page views a month. On Facebook, The Straits Times has more than 550,000 “likes” and on Twitter, more than 471,000 followers.

Today, the editor’s glass-walled cabin commands a view of the news hub, where The Straits Times’ multimedia operations are anchored, but the mission is ever closer to the spirit of its pioneering day in the 1850s, when the newspaper was all things to all people.
It all began in a riverside godown...

The Straits Times is published and distributed from the office of Singapore’s pioneering businessman Aristarkies Sarkies at No.7 Commercial Square, now Raffles Place. Mr Sarkies was the uncle of The Straits Times founder Catchick Moses.
1895

The paper moves to spacious rented offices in Finlayson Green.

1901

After it is incorporated as a limited company, The Straits Times buys custom-built premises in Cecil Street at an auction, paying $3 per square foot. The office and printing plant are moved to the new place in August 1903.
1930

The Straits Times acquires regional presence, opening an office in Kuala Lumpur.

1931

Work begins on constructing new premises in Cecil Street. The new building, completed in 1933, was a state-of-the-art, steel-framed, four-storey building.
The headquarters of The Straits Times is moved from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur in 1959 because the working environment is seen as more stable in Malaysia than Singapore, which is swaying to the left politically. The headquarters is in Robson House in Pudu Road.
1973

The Straits Times returns to Singapore after the paper splits, with New Straits Times started for Malaysia in 1972.

1986

New SPH headquarters at News Centre in Genting Lane is opened.
1998

SPH pays $40 million for a property at 1000 Toa Payoh North to house all non-printing operations. In February 2002, The Straits Times staff moves in. Times House is sold in 2004. It is demolished and The Cosmopolitan condominium built on the site in 2008.
THE STRAITS TIMES launched its first issue on July 15, 1845, with no news articles on its front page – only advertisements and shipping notices. That trend, also seen in other newspapers of the day, continued throughout the 19th century.
The riverside was a place for new immigrants to get the latest news and stories about their hometown. At a price of five cents in 1949, then 10 to 20 cents in the 1953, storytellers entertained the illiterate masses with intriguing tales and famous legends. However, falling attendance and river redevelopment in the 1970s displaced the storytellers. Pubs and restaurants took their place in providing recreation for a new generation of educated executives and tourists. **Photo: National Archives of Singapore**

The river of life. From gossip to adventure, its waters have nourished life on the island. Warehouse, squatters and hawkers were once common sights, a far cry from the clean streets, shopping malls, and high-end dining areas of today.
The Singapore River hosted activities of all sorts. Warehouses, squatters and unlicensed hawkers were common sights. An electric telegraph building of “ornamental character” came up in 1859; a market that was meant to be “one of the cleanest markets in the world” opened in 1861; and the first two Chinese schools in Singapore, Cui Ying School and Chong Wen Ge, were at the mouth of the river before the area was reclaimed. Editorials in The Straits Times frequently called attention to the crowded banks and overwhelmed waterways, as seen in this October 1953 view of Boat Quay. ST PHOTO: CHEW BOON CHIN
In 1971, The Straits Times ran a story about a bunch of street urchins who would dive more than 9m off the top of Anderson and Cavenagh Bridges into the river, “missing sometimes by inches a fleet of bumboats in the murky waters”. Calling themselves the Riverside Mates, these boys risked their lives not for tips from tourists, but for the sheer thrill of it. When the Marine Police officers patrolled, they hid – only to return minutes later to resume diving and splashing. ST PHOTO: MAK KIAN SENG
Singapore River, 1972

The mythical Merlion sprang to life at the mouth of the river in 1972. But it was soon overshadowed by its new neighbour, the Esplanade Bridge. On its 30th birthday, it moved to its current home next to the waterfront development One Fullerton. ST PHOTO: JUNID JUANI
The calm of a sunny afternoon seemed to reflect then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s mood as he and Mrs Lee went on a 25-minute boat ride with Environment Minister Dr Ahmad Mattar, his wife and officials around the Singapore River. The once polluted river including Kallang Basin and Marina Bay had undergone a clean-up project undertaken by 11 ministries and statutory boards.

ST PHOTO: WONG KWAI CHOW

Photograph taken of North Boat Quay in the 1980s when the place was vacated and awaiting redevelopment. After it was redeveloped, it became known as Clarke Quay. ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI
The river continues to be the focus of flagship projects. In the early 2000s, The Straits Times hosted its million dollar duck races at the waterfront to raise funds for local charities. Benefactors donated funds by sponsoring a rubber duck, which took part in a race down the river. In 2001, the first duck that floated past the finishing line won $10,000 for its sponsor. ST PHOTO: HOW HWEE YOUNG
Early traders called the river the "belly of the carp" because of its shape and because the carp symbolises prosperity. The Singapore River lit up for a weekend in April 2015 with a display of its history, as part of the National Heritage Board’s Singapore HeritageFest. ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN
News commentary reflects the panic when the Wall Street was roiled by the 2008 recession.
Coolies unloading goods from barges at Boat Quay on August 1, 1956.
ST PHOTO: HAN HAI FONG
We do not know their names or ages, what they looked like or what paths their lives took to reach that point. Just the bare details of their hardship were sketched out in advertisements that began appearing in The Straits Times as the Great Depression smothered the world in its dark embrace in the 1930s.

As the Western economies came to a standstill, demand dried up for Malaya's bestsellers – rubber and tin – which were shipped out of Singapore’s port, the seventh-largest in
the world then. As plantations, traders and shipping firms went bankrupt, managers and workers were laid off in the thousands. Optimism became the scarcest commodity of all.

Beginning in July 1930, The Straits Times set aside free space for blue-collar and white-collar workers to advertise their skills. Listed in a column, according to their race, these advertisements appeared daily for almost a year.

“European planter. Fourteen years’ experience, last three years as manager. Fluent Tamil and Malay. Willing to take up any job. Excellent references.


The idea of publishing such advertisements was sparked by one man’s cry of despair in a letter to The Straits Times.

“It is difficult to know how to assist these particularly helpless victims of the slump,” The Straits Times said in a column called Notes Of The Day on July 8, 1930. The column, which ran from Monday to Saturday from 1928 until World War II broke out in 1939, featured musings on local happenings.

The column noted: “Vacancies are few indeed, but in order that no chance shall be missed, we are willing to place a certain amount of space daily at the disposal of men, European or Asiatic, who have been thrown out of work in consequence of the general depression.”

The move was in keeping with the sentiment with which The Straits Times was founded in 1845. On Page 1 of its very
first issue, it promised readers that “the principles on which the publication will be conducted are those which will ever identify The Straits Times with the general interests of the Settlement.” Singapore was then part of the British-ruled Straits Settlements, which included Penang and Malacca.

Five “victims of the slump” stepped forward and were featured in the first burst of advertisements. Eleven months later, the advertisements took up nearly a whole page. Almost 100 men were listed on May 6, 1931, after which the column was discontinued because the newspaper thought employers were not making full use of it.

It is hard to tell how effective the campaign was, though there is evidence of at least some impact. In May 1931, The Straits Times said 250 men had taken up its offer of free ads. The dossiers of 100 men were still at the newspaper’s office, having not attracted any employers. Perhaps some of the 150 others did find jobs.

The 1930s were times of acute distress, to a degree unseen till then or since. The Straits Times interspersed its reports on the bleak economic scene with personal stories of loss and hardship.

“Malaya has suffered a serious setback in the prices of its chief commodities, and though no one likes the word ‘slump’, it has to be admitted we are in the midst of acute trade depression,” The Straits Times wrote on Oct 1, 1927, warning of rude shocks ahead.

Six years later, the crash was a reality no one could ignore.

On June 6, 1930, The Straits Times tore off the blinkers: “From time to time, we are warned that if the slump continues, thousands of coolies will be faced with starvation, but always hitherto we have been left with the impression
that the trouble is not yet; it is merely something that may develop and we would be wise to prepare in advance to meet a possible crisis. Actually, there is ample and tragic evidence available of the terrible consequences of existing unemployment among the coolie class.”

The reference to the “coolie class” sounds insulting today. The Straits Times was, after all, part of the colonial structure. Yet, in a notable way, the newspaper was ahead of the government, taking a humanitarian, not simply colonial, view of affairs.

The defeatist attitudes which were delaying recovery were criticised in an editorial titled Too Much Gloom on Nov 21, 1932. “To ignore the very real difficulties that have arisen in the past two years would be to invite disaster; to go to the other extreme, however – to talk of Malaya going back to jungle and Singapore becoming a fishing village – is ludicrous. Yet that extreme view does exist and it is a view
which should be fought vigorously because the dissemination of it tends to discourage enterprise.”

The Straits Times, instead, consistently advocated a policy – seen most recently in the global financial crisis of 2008 – that urged the economic pump be primed with more spending.

It walked the talk. In an advertisement sub-titled Advancing Through The Slump, the newspaper announced its new office building and state-of-the-art rotary press on Oct 10, 1933.

It added: “Because times are bad, there is no reason for loss of confidence in the country’s future, and gloom and fear will get one nowhere.”

As other companies cut cost, The Straits Times bought a fleet of Morris Minor delivery vans (below) to deliver copies
upcountry and launched the first Sunday paper in Malaya to great success.

For Singapore, the Great Depression was not just an economic event. It led for the first time to immigration controls, supported by The Straits Times, which clamped down on the inflow of men from China but let in women and children.

The result was manifest within years. Singapore transformed from a migrant society into a truly immigrant one. It led to another profound change – the emergence of a truly resident society for the first time. The male labourer who could be housed dormitory-style in Chinatown could no longer be the way forward. In time, policies were pursued to stop the growth of slums and drive investments into housing.

2008 RECESSION

When the sub-prime crisis in the United States triggered a global financial meltdown in 2008, trade-oriented Singapore was the first East Asian economy to slip into a recession.
“I wake up each morning to more bad news in the United States and go to work amid a furious sell-down in Singapore and the rest of Asia,” wrote The Straits Times business editor on Oct 11, 2008.

“Everything I learnt in school and since I started work is being turned on its head. What is clear to me is that we will emerge from the crisis with many paradigms shifted.

“Heavy-handed regulation will come back into fashion. Even the time-cherished merits of globalisation will be called into question.”

As it did during the Great Depression in the 1930s, The Straits Times kept its focus on the road to recovery. It urged companies to rethink laying off workers, arguing that preparing for the post-recession demand would place businesses in a better position for the future.

“The crisis will not be short-lived, but it will in time subside,” said The Straits Times editorial on Oct 11, 2008. “So while cost-cutting is going to be necessary, companies need
to appreciate that any over-reaction might well handicap them when the demand picks up again.”

The newspaper also supported tapping into Singapore’s reserves to temporarily finance government programmes to minimise layoffs. In a Jan 23, 2009 editorial, The Straits Times praised the 2009 Budget, particularly for its “strong element of social responsibility” as the “key to navigating the recession safely is that paid employment does not collapse”.

The wider anxieties thrown up by the recession also made headlines. Losses made by Singapore’s investment company Temasek Holdings sparked a public
outcry and a call for them to be more open about their major investment decisions.

In an analysis published on Nov 1, 2008, The Straits Times observed that the worst financial crisis in living memory had precipitated new political implications: increased citizen activism, shaken trust in established institutions and calls for stronger employment and social safety nets.

There was also heightened doubt about the risks involved in high-profile and capital-intensive projects such as the integrated resorts, which were prone to global volatility and regional competition while being dependent on foreign capital and skills. Against these downsides, there was also a renewed appreciation for the Government's prudent and conservative yet compassionate fiscal
policies, like safeguards preventing excessive speculation in financial and property markets and jobs schemes designed to encourage employers to retain their workers. By mid-2009, another scary economic episode in Singapore’s history had been successfully navigated.

If there are any lasting lessons to draw from grappling with a downturn as steep as the 2008 recession or as deep as the 1930s Great Depression, the most useful one is probably that there is no inoculation available.

Economists and governments continue to chase their version of the holy grail – how to create solid, steady growth, with no booms and no busts. It remains elusive. The Straits Times, meanwhile, will continue to do what it has been doing: spotting trends, cultivating broad economic literacy among readers, always urging and acting with the continued success of Singapore and its people at heart.
THE WAR YEARS
This photo taken in 1942 shows a thatched house on fire after a Japanese air raid. PHOTO: ARGUS NEWSPAPER COLLECTION OF PHOTOGRAPHS, STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA; http://handle.slv.vic.gov.au/10381/68777
Friday, Jan 30, 1942: Greta Garbo’s Mata Hari was showing at Singapore’s first air-conditioned cinema, the Alhambra in Beach Road. At the Raffles Hotel, there was a dinner and dance, lasting till midnight.

The advice for those intending to drive on that day cut to the chase: “Keep windows open to reduce flying glass. By day, keep moving until you see pedestrians,
police disappearing from the streets. That is cue for the ‘Alarm’. Pull well into the side, stop car and engine and take shelter. Remove ignition key. “By night, on ‘Alert’, all headlights must be switched off.”

The instructions appeared on the back page of The Straits Times, under the heading An Air Raid Alphabet (below). Cut it out and keep it for reference, readers were told.

World War II had broken out in the Pacific and Britain’s Prime Minister Winston Churchill had declared that Singapore must be held at all costs. Kuala Lumpur had fallen into Japanese hands and Lieutenant-General Tomoyuki Yamashita took up a perch at the Sultan’s palace in Johor Baru, the venue chosen for its commanding view of the Strait of Johor. His guns were trained on the Sembawang naval base. The endgame had begun.

Very little of the ominous signs of disaster, however, showed on Page 1
of Malaya’s largest-selling newspaper. The Straits Times splashed not the latest battlefront news, but advertisements. This had been the newspaper’s standard practice for nearly 100 years, since its founding in 1845.

Excusable or not, that Friday, the advertisements (left) were for Whitbread Light Beer, Robinson’s department store and Goodwood Park Hotel.

The sole reminder of war on Page 1 was a short notice addressing workers: “Don’t let sirens stop your work. The enemy bombers may be miles away.”

If you turned the page, the Alhambra and Raffles advertisements would catch your eye.

A war-boosted economy could underwrite such promises of gaiety without much difficulty. But the incongruity could not be carried far. But the merry advertisements sat oddly
The rear guard of the defending British forces in Malaya withdrew to Singapore and the Causeway was blown up on January 31, 1942.

The rear guard of the defending British forces in Malaya withdrew to Singapore and the Causeway was blown up on January 31, 1942. PHOTO: AUSTRALIAN WAR MEMORIAL

next to an appeal for men and women between the ages of 17 and 55 to go to the Medical College to “Give Your Blood to Save an Air Raid Victim”.

Only on Page 4 – in the eighth paragraph of a report headlined BATTLE OF JOHORE, did readers learn that an air raid two days earlier had killed 105 people and injured 243 in Singapore. Although a curfew had been imposed across the island on this day, the news was delivered only on Page 6, next to a short item that cautioned against believing in rumours of riots between the Malays and Chinese in Johor Baru.

A far longer report highlighted the remarkable record of a Royal Air Force Hurricane fighter pilot who in a week had shot down a Japanese bomber over Singapore skies, destroyed two enemy aircraft, tackled three other bombers and silenced three rear-gunners.

It was the 880th day of the war, The Straits Times kept count and displayed it in a line above its editorial.

A day later, on Jan 31, 1942, the Causeway was blown up. Singapore came under siege.
About a week later, Japanese soldiers would swim ashore. And in a fortnight, Britain’s Lieutenant-General Arthur Percival (left), helming the Malaya Command, would wave the white flag and surrender Singapore to Japan.

The many battles lost, the widespread destruction and the steadily mounting casualties were deliberately muted in The Straits Times to keep panic low and morale high as the situation grew increasingly desperate. Wartime newspapers everywhere followed that policy.

The first Japanese air strikes on Singapore in the early hours of Dec 8, 1941, for instance, saw bombs falling on Chinatown, Raffles Place and the Seletar and Tengah airfields, killing 61 people and injuring 133. The Straits Times, in its edition that very afternoon (it would become a morning newspaper after the War) saw it as a duty to quote
Japanese Imperial army soldiers cycle from Malaya to Singapore during their invasion of the country during World War II. PHOTO: IMPERIAL WAR MUSEUM

A photograph of soldiers from the Malay Regiment who fought against the invading Japanese forces. PHOTO: NATIONAL ARCHIVES OF SINGAPURE

official reports and said: “Slight damage was done and there were a few casualties”. The “excellent work” of the volunteers who cleared debris and sent the casualties to hospital was applauded.

The newspaper kept morale up in other ways too. It regularly asked readers to help with civil defence duties and its staff took on those roles too. It also raised $6 million through a war fund which, among others, helped buy bombers that were used against the Nazis. The triumphs of these “war fund aircraft” were told in dispatches from Europe.

On Feb 13, the day Yamashita moved his headquarters to the Ford Motor Factory in Bukit Timah, The Straits Times reported that the Japanese “have suffered huge casualties in Singapore”. The newspaper had by then been reduced to a single news-sheet. Some staffers had been mobilised for active duty in the war and others juggled their jobs with civil
defence duties. Still, the paper appeared each day, thin and grim as any wartime survivor.

On Feb 15, the day a bomb attack on Collyer Quay caused chaos and left trails of burning cars, The Straits Times put out its last pre-war issue with the headline: “Strong Jap pressure (left); defence strongly maintained”. The Japanese Occupation of Singapore had begun. At least seven Straits Times staffers died during the War, among them chief reporter Ivan Palmer who was killed while serving with the Australian air-force in the Middle East.

Five days later, the Japanese were putting out their own English-language newspaper from The Straits Times premises, employing several of its former technicians and recruiting some local journalists. Deriving its title
from the name the Japanese gave to Singapore, Syonan or Light of the South, it was called The Shonan Times (left), later replaced by The Syonan Shimbun (below).

When the war ended, many journalists dashed to the newspaper's office in Cecil Street to fend off looters. And after repairing the badly
damaged printing press, they brought out the first post war edition of the newspaper on Sept 7, 1945, (next page, left) just two days after allied troops landed in Singapore.

The Straits Times was back in business (next page, right). But it was a different newspaper. Most noticeably, Page 1 no longer carried just advertisements, but major news. Newsprint was scarce, for one thing, so advertisements were banned. In any case, there was little to advertise in the ravaged economy. In another break from tradition, The Straits Times began to be published in the morning.

The biggest transformation, however, was in its outlook. The age of the empires had ended and The Straits Times
offered glimpses of Asia’s comeback. In the newsroom, the evolving power balance was reflected in the paper’s Malayanisation policy – doors were opened for Asians, not just the Europeans, to enter senior editorial positions. It mirrored the larger shifts taking place in Singapore society, as the levers of power and commerce changed hands after WW II. The Alhambra cinema, where Greta Garbo’s Mata Hari played before Singapore fell to the Japanese, was acquired by the ambitious Shaw Brothers in the 1950s. It was eventually demolished to make way for the Shaw Towers in 1974.
News was scarce during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore, from 1942 to 1945. Families who tuned in to the radio for news from the BBC risked being tortured or killed if found out by the Japanese.

War survivor Chew Chin Hin (left) recalls his father and six friends taking the chance – but not without precautions.

At least two of the group members would stand watch outside the Akyab Road home of their friend, while the rest huddled round the radio.

The strategy kept them safe because, unknown to them, the Japanese were watching their every move, recalled Dr Chew, 84, emeritus consultant at Tan Tock Seng Hospital. He was then 11.

“One day, the men standing guard spotted a man climbing a coconut tree with a pair of binoculars to see what was going on inside the house. One of those on guard quietly went inside and told the rest to conceal the radio.”

His father Benjamin Chew, also a physician, was a good pianist. “He started playing the piano and the others gathered round and sang,” recounted Dr Chew, whose family lived in a bungalow in Jalan Tan Tock Seng during the Occupation. Following the scare, the men stopped listening to the radio for a few weeks. “If they had been caught, that would mean the torture chamber at the YMCA,” Dr Chew said. The much-feared Kempeitai, or Japanese military police, were headquartered at the YMCA in Orchard Road, where interrogations and torture were carried out.

For families without a radio, information came by way of chatter at markets or from friends, neighbours and even strangers.

“Even when meeting someone you knew slightly, you would ask what’s going on.

And when a stranger talked, you’d listen,” recalled Mr Wong Hiong Boon (left), 86, a retired art teacher who lives in a Housing Board flat in Ang Mo Kio. A 13-year-old boy then, he and his family lived in his aunt’s attap house on stilts in Lowland Road, where Kovan MRT
Most people did not read the Japanese newspapers, including The Syonan Shimbun, as the reports were viewed as propaganda. Ms Pearlyn Verge’s family, however, found them a useful ploy for showing their allegiance to Japan. “We bought the paper and put it on the table, making it look like we were reading it,” says Ms Verge, 85, who lived in a Telok Kurau bungalow during the war years.

Newspapers returned to being a reliable source of information after the Japanese surrendered in 1945, but many families could not afford them. Retired army major Foong Fook Kay (left), 81, said that as a young boy, he got the news from a co-tenant who occasionally bought a daily newspaper. Their families lived in makeshift rooms in a Neil Road flat.

Like everyone, his education was interrupted by the war and it was only at age 17, when he returned to school, that he picked up his first newspaper.

For Ms Verge, the habit of reading The Straits Times began at age 16: “Until today, I swear by its news.”
Thousands took part in the National Day Parade in front of the City Hall on August 9, 1966. The parade marched along St Andrew’s Road and then proceeded along a route which included North Bridge, South Bridge and Tanjong Pagar Roads. A week of celebrations marked the first anniversary of Singapore’s independence. ST FILE PHOTO
I t came like a thunderclap in the very first hour of trading, when jittery traders on a hair trigger are looking for direction – when no news is good news. The sudden, dramatic announcement of Singapore’s exit from Malaysia set off a bout of nervous selling at the Singapore stock exchange.

That much was no surprise.

The surprise lay in the speed of the turnaround: By afternoon, the market was already “mildly optimistic” and significant buying was seen. By evening, hundreds of
thousands of shares had changed hands. “It was the most active day on the exchange this year,” The Straits Times reported on Aug 10, 1965. “By the end of the day, the trading rooms had recorded 646,900 shares traded. That was well over twice the total recorded on the most active days of the previous week.”

That report appeared on Page 15. Page 1 (left), however, was almost entirely consumed by the political event. “Singapore is out,” cried the main headline. It sounded almost forlorn, like a dismissal, the phraseological equivalent of a door slammed shut.

It was a different world a few pages later. The economics writers might as well have been reporting on a different country. A new wave of confidence had deposited the priceless gem of optimism on the
exchange. They coined a name for it: the independence boom. And it was building.

By Day 2, the “buying wave” had made it to Page 1.

“Twice during the day, it was necessary for officials to suspend trading to allow brokers’ clerks to clear the avalanche of contracts,” said the report headlined “Exchange booms on Singapore’s independence”.

The rally was something of a spectacle, riveting because of the contrast thrown up by other dramatic events in the public eye like Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew’s press conference, which was called three hours after the separation became a reality. Mr Lee showed steely resignation as the cherished merger with Malaysia came undone, Yet, he could not stop the tears when he declared: “What has happened has happened. But be firm and calm.”

The stock exchange, set up in 1930, held not only firm and calm, but also displayed signs of exuberance. In the days that followed, it effectively became the first Singaporean institution to embrace the new fledgling state and declare its economic viability. It did that in the most resounding way possible: through the interplay of free market forces.

“A larger crowd than has been seen for a very long time packed the Singapore public gallery to watch exchange clerks desperately trying to keep bids, offers and business
done up to date on the board,” reported The Straits Times on Aug 11, 1965.

“Brokers’ clerks shouted themselves hoarse and, at about 11am, several brokers’ representatives in the trading room found it necessary to call on their offices for reinforcements.

“Turnover reached a level not experienced since the boom days of 1963.”

One obvious reason was Mr Lee’s unambiguous statement, during his press conference, that Singapore will trade with anyone, capitalist or communist, friend or foe. “We are prepared to trade with anybody. Including Russia, China and even Indonesia. If they want to trade with us – just trade,” he was reported as saying.

Indonesia’s violent Konfrontasi policy against Malaysia had brought bilateral trade with Singapore to a standstill.

Survival was the core theme of Mr Lee’s press conference as everything about independent Singapore was open to doubt.

Would the newborn nation hold up against far larger, more powerful neighbours whose intentions were guardedly indifferent at best and hostile at worst? Was a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural nation viable when communal riots had only recently receded from the headlines? And, most importantly, what kind of future could a resource-poor island, without drinking water of its own and cut loose from a hinterland it
the question was addressed plainly by Mr Lee. Malaysia, he said, had assured him that economic cooperation would continue. He also did not let the raw emotion of the separation divert him from policy, focusing on details to a degree that could only have encouraged the markets.

He abolished Malaysia’s “turnover tax” and declared that the Bank of China, which played an important role in Singapore’s trade with China, could continue to operate. The bank had been ordered closed by Malaysia. He also wanted restrictions on the sale of Singapore-made tyres in Malaysia to be lifted. “I don’t want to rush these things... but there must be a quid pro quo,” he said.

It also helped that the market knew Mr Lee, who became Singapore’s first prime minister in 1959, as a pragmatist. It had no doubt that he meant business.

But perhaps the most important reason for the optimism was the promise of stability that the finality of separation offered. The political uncertainty of the preceding months had come to an end.

Outside the bourse, there was a national sense of a fait accompli. An Aug 11 editorial noted that the dominant mood in the two countries was of “grief and regret, merging into an awareness that... there exists no practical alternative”. In tacit acknowledgement of the politically volatile situation, owing to the presence of opposition groups such as the Barisan Socialis, the paper lashed out at groups that expressed elation over the failure of merger for their “thoroughly short-sighted reasons”.

Such groups included pro-communist parties as well as “minor opposition parties” which were accused of spewing
“a lot of alarmist nonsense”. Those who expressed jubilation at the news, the editorial maintained, are enemies of Malaysia and Singapore.

The new reality was perhaps best exemplified by Ms Linda Lim, who was competing in the Miss International pageant in Long Beach, California. The 18-year-old, a Penang-born Singapore resident, asked a plaintive question quoted by The Straits Times on Aug 11.

“Now, what am I?”
SURVIVAL TO PROSPERITY

At Singapore’s first National Day in 1966, Mr Lee warned Singaporeans not to take what they had for granted, stressing the need for the country to remain a “robust and rugged society” even as he predicted an “easier year ahead”.

On the second anniversary, the same mood of vigilance and wariness amid affirmation of national progress and unity pervaded the National Day celebrations. But stirrings of national identity began to emerge. While decorations illustrated Singapore’s vision of a “rugged society”, greater emphasis was placed on local identity.

By 1970, Singapore seemed to have turned a corner as emphasis was placed on economic progress rather than mere survival.

Mr Lee, at a National Day dinner, observed that in 1965 the problem was one of survival. “Now, it is the problem of continued prosperity which requires greater security.”
At Singapore’s 10th anniversary in 1975, he hailed the decade as “probably the most spectacular” since Singapore came under British colonial rule.

The country’s gross domestic product had risen threefold. The city looked transformed, with new buildings, roads, flyovers, homes and factories.

But the Government warned citizens against being lulled into a sense of complacency. In his characteristically blunt manner, Mr Lee expressed concern over the indifference of the younger generation in mastering a job.

“If you want to do your children good, make sure they don’t lose the work ethic.”
AWN broke at 6.35 am on August 9, 1965. In a rented room on the first floor of an old shophouse in Cambridge Road, radio and television producer Foong Choon Hon was tossing and turning in his sleep, which had not come easily. It had been like that for weeks. Like most other politically attuned Singaporeans, he had followed with increasing trepidation the very public and very bitter quarrel between Singapore and Malaysian leaders over the kind of Malaysia they wanted. Singapore was fighting for a Malaysia for all races; Umno, the senior partner in the Alliance government, perceived that as a threat to Malay dominance. Such had been the ceremony that some Malaysian politicians were calling openly for the arrest of all the Singapore leaders. With memories of the communal riots in 1963 and 1964 still fresh, the question that had gnawed at Mr Foong and so many others was: Where was it going to lead Singapore?

The answer came in a way he could not have imagined even in his wildest dream. Suddenly, the bedside telephone rang at 7.45. The voice at the other end identified himself as Teo, personal assistant to the Prime Minister. Mr Foong was to present himself at the PMO in City Hall by 8 am. Being so summoned was not exactly new to the broadcaster, whose deep, mellifluous voice and impeccable pronunciation of Mandarin had, by that time, made him a household name with Chinese listeners. He had been dubbing as translator for Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Still, he thought to himself, it was a little early to be called.

As he hurried onto the streets, he noted the overcast sky and paused, wondering if he should go back for an umbrella. Deciding against that, he hailed a taxi, his only means of transport to this day as he has never learnt to drive. The fare was $1.80. Considering that he was to have a ringside seat at the making of history, it was cheap.

On arrival, he was handed a document to translate into Chinese. It was a proclamation, signed by Mr Lee as Prime Minister, that Singapore would become “forever a sovereign democratic and independent nation, founded upon the principles of liberty and justice and ever seeking the welfare and happiness of her people in a more just and equal society.” Mr Foong was dumbfounded. Though everyone knew that tension between Kuala Lumpur and Singapore had been rising, no one had thought a separation possible. It was so...so...unexpected! Though he had, as a current affairs producer, handled some big stories before, he knew for sure that this would be the most dramatic ever to come his way, the biggest to end all bignesses.

Yet on catching his breath, the 37-year-old bachelor’s first thought was to ring his brother, with whom...
he was sharing the room, to say he was not likely to be home in time for dinner — such was the well-documented propensity of most people for thinking the most seemingly mundane things even at the height of a crisis. "But all telephone lines were disconnected, and all doors locked," he recalls. "So I just got down to work." He was held incommunicado so there could be no leaking of this shattering piece of news before 10 am, when it would be broadcast to the world.

Mr Lee has since retired from government service and is now a senior journalist with Shin Min Daily News, was not the only one to have found himself in that strange position at the time. Some 20 Government Printing Office employees had been locked in from the night before to produce thousands of copies of the Gazette notice containing the proclamation. Absolute secrecy was absolutely necessary, and absolute secrecy was indeed maintained — right till the end. Only those who needed to know were told beforehand, and these were kept to the barest minimum.

Thus even Mr George Bogaars, at the time 38 and Director of Special Branch, did not know until virtually the 11th hour. He had had an inkling that something was in the air ever since Mr Lee had asked him a few days before what Singapore would require if it had to be responsible for its own internal security and defence. But it was just a hunch, no more. Mr Lee had spoken to him in general terms. "It was a very tightly kept secret," says Mr Bogaars in his taped recollections for the Oral History Department. "I didn't even get the impression that it was going to be a separation or a split. I just got the impression that a higher degree of autonomy would be given to us on the internal security side."

So it was with much heightened expectation that he and some 20 other very senior officials, mostly permanent secretaries, gathered at the Government Guest House in the Istana grounds that Aug 9 morning. They had been summoned by Cabinet Secretary Wong Choong Sen to an important briefing by the Prime Minister. But he said all they were told, recalls Mr Bogaars, adding that while he could, at best, guess that something drastic was going to be announced, he got the distinct impression even then that Mr Stanley Stewart, Head of the Singapore Civil Service, who arrived early, the officials had some time to kill.

So they found themselves engaging in desultory conversation as anxiety slowly gripped them, much like an invisible hand at the throat. Presently, the Prime Minister came and told them. He stayed only long enough to give them a broad outline of what was going to happen. And then off he went.

Mr Bogaars recalls: "It was like a cocktail reception, we were standing around. My first reaction was, thank God, it's over. I no longer have two bosses, I could report directly to the PM, no more the Tunku."

In Kuala Lumpur, Mr Sim Kee Boon, Singapore's representative and one of three deputy chairmen in the Tariff Advisory Commission, learnt of his country's independence only from his secretary, who had heard it on the news. He was then a month short of 36 and into his second year in the commission chasing after that elusive common market for all Malaysian states.

What he later found rather ironic, he now recalls, was this. One day, he was busy harmonising tariffs among all Malaysia's territories. And the next, he was out, recalled to Singapore as Permanent Secretary of the Finance Ministry — only to return to KL within a week to negotiate, from the other side of the table, the tariffs Singapore was obliged to levy on certain Malaysian goods. But this was only one of the many, many adjustments, in outlook and behaviour, Singapore and Singaporeans had to make as a result of independence.

THE FIRST SIGNS OF TROUBLE

When separation as just a seed of an idea was first sown in the mind of the then Malaysian Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, is something historians will doubtless argue about. He himself thinks it had come to him when he was in a plane on the way to Sabah and Sarawak but cannot recall the date. Singapore's former Law Minister, Mr Eddie Barker, now 69 and chairman of the Singapore Stock Exchange as well as the Bukit Turf Club, thinks the turning point was the debate on the Malaysian King's Address in the Federal Parliament on May 27 that year.

Mr Lee was on his feet, speaking in Malay on what Malaysia meant to him and his PAP colleagues and on Malay rights. "He spoke for about half an hour," recalls Mr Barker, who was also in the House as one of 12 Singapore MPs. "There must have been about 500 or so in the House and in the gallery, but you could hear a pin drop. I think if they could have cheered, they would have." Looking back, he thinks that was the moment when the Tunku, and his colleagues, felt it was better to have Singapore and Mr Lee out.

There followed a flurry of decisions and meetings in June and July, all noted in official records as well as Struggle for Success. Mr John D’Almeida’s book on Singapore in the 1950s and 60s. In gist, the key developments were: first, the Tunku decided, when recuperating from shingles in a London hospital after attending the Commonwealth Prime Ministers’ Conference there in June, that a parting of ways was the only course. He had, as he said later, weighed the pros and cons of evicting Singapore. He had thought from A to Z and then from Z to A, he said. His “balance sheet” ran into several foolscap pages.
LIVING HISTORY

INDEPENDENCE DAY

Tunku Abdul Rahman first told Dr Goh Keng Swee of his decision to kick Singapore out of Malaysia at a golf course.

Second, having so decided, he instructed his 43-year-old deputy, Tun Abdul Razak, to sound out other senior Malaysian ministers as well as lay the necessary groundwork.

Third, Tun Razak’s parallel talks with Singapore leaders to seek an accommodation, even as preparations for a split were being made, came to naught. This, in effect, meant that Singapore’s fate was sealed. By the first week of August, the die was cast.

The Tunku returned from London on Aug 5, three days before his 62nd birthday, and after conferring with Tun Razak and a small group of Malaysian ministers, decided to proceed. Tan Sri Khir Johari, at that time head of Umno in Singapore, says the decision — “the best-kept secret ever!” — was known to only four persons: the Tunku, Tun Razak, Home Affairs Minister Dato (Dr) Ismail bin Dato Abdul Rahman and himself. “Tun Tunku Seri, Finance Minister at the time, came into the picture only later. We had to confide it to a very, very few,” he adds.

“IT was for the good of Singapore and for the good of our country. We meant no evil towards anybody.”

Tan Sri Khir, 67, now a businessman, thinks the Tunku had more or less made up his mind even before he went to Britain. “We used to have informal discussions with the Tunku in his house, and he did sound out the three of us.”

Though both the 1965 Singapore Yearbook and Struggle for Survival have Aug 6 down as the day Dr Goh Keng Swee, then 46 and Singapore’s Finance Minister, was officially told that Singapore must leave Malaysia, Tun Razak, in his earlier talks with Messrs Goh and Lee, must have let on enough for them not to be taken totally by surprise. Thus Mr Barker remembers being asked by Mr Lee at the end of July to draft a separation agreement.

The two had agreed that to prevent any leakage, the then Law Minister had best do it himself, involving no official, not even a stenographer. The only person he could call on for secretarial help was the Cabinet Secretary, Mr Wong, whose office was just next to Mr Barker’s in City Hall.

And so Mr Barker went to work, preparing not only the draft agreement but also other legal documents dealing with matters consequent on a formal separation, such as the division of assets. He told no one, not even his wife. “When you work on a matter like this, you don’t tell anybody,” he says.

AN ULTIMATUM IS DELIVERED

According to the Tunku, he broke the news to Dr Goh on the golf course. He cannot now remember when they spoke but believes it was in the afternoon. But this he does remember: “He respected my decision.” Mr Barker’s recollection is that he, Dr Goh and Mr Lee were scheduled to meet in KL that day. He had flown to the Malaysian capital that morning, while Dr Goh had taken the night train from Singapore on Aug 5 evening. Mr Lee was in the Cameron Highlands at the time.

Once the Tunku and his senior colleagues had made it clear they intended to go through with the split, there was much work to be done, the most important of which was to settle the terms of the separation. Dr Goh and Mr Barker represented Singapore in the negotiations. On the Malaysian side were Tun Razak, Dr Ismail and Attorney General Kaikir Yussuf. They first met in the late afternoon before adjourning to Sri Taman, Tun Razak’s Lake Gardens home. Mr Barker had brought along his draft agreement, which Tun Razak and his colleagues read carefully, seeking clarification here and there. The two sides kept at it until Dr Goh said he wanted a break to return to Singapore House, a two-storey bungalow in the heart of KL which served as official residence for Singapore ministers when they were there. He was hungry. But Tun Razak told him not to bother.

“IF I give you dinner,” he said. In fact, as Mr Barker recalls, Tun Razak added in jest: “I’ve told the policemen outside not to let you and Eddie go until 1 give permission.” After dinner, they were joined by Tun Tan, the Finance Minister, and Mr V.T. Santhanathan, Minister for Works. 

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Posts and Telecommunications, who represented respectively, the Malaysian Chinese Association and the Malaysian Indian Congress. Umno's partners in the Alliance government.

The negotiations went smoothly. Only a few amendments and insertions were made. The six of them — Dr. Goh and Mr. Barker for Singapore and Tun Razak, Dr. Ismail, Tun Tan and Mr. Sambanthan for Malaysia — signed the agreement just after midnight.

A MIDNIGHT TYPIST IS SUMMONED

The final version, on Deputy Prime Minister's Office letterhead, but with the word Deputy crossed out, was typed by Mr. Tao Ban Hock, personal assistant to Mr. Lee. He had to be summoned late in the night from Singapore House, to which he had returned from the Cameron Highlands together with the Prime Minister. A typist who had earlier been assigned the task had become so nervous he was making errors after error.

Says Mr. Barker: "To Ban Hock's credit, he did it in one go without making a single mistake." Mr. Tao, 59, who retired from government service in November 1965 and is now a tennis coach, says he knew then that it was a very important occasion. But amid the excitement, the full import of those documents he was asked to type did not sink in. "I just typed away! I was more concerned with getting it right. I knew I couldn't afford to be nervous. I had to do it well."

When it came to signing, Tun Razak and his Malaysian colleagues were very well about it. Mr. Barker remembers: "When it came to my turn, I wanted to read the document again. Razak turned to me and said: 'Eddie, it's your draft, it's your chap who typed the final document, so what are you reading it for?' So I signed."

THROUGH A MIST, DARKLY

In the meantime, Mr. Lee, he then in KL, telephoned Deputy Prime Minister Toh Chin Chye and Culture Minister S. Rajaratnam in Singapore separately and asked them to arrive at once.

Struggle for Success quotes Dr. Toh as having ducked later that in that conversation, Mr. Lee told him that an ultimatum had been given to Singapore — either it withdrew or the situation might run out of control. But in his interview with The Straits Times, Dr. Toh, who has since retired from politics and is now adviser to Steamers Maritime Holdings, cannot recall the Prime Minister being so explicit, just that he was to get to KL urgently. At that time, he was in a government bungalow in Goodwood Hill. So he telephoned for a car. By the time he, his driver and a bodyguard crossed the Causeway, it was already well past midnight. They drove through a thick mist.

Dr. Toh recalls: "My driver nearly ended up in a ditch because the car did not have any yellow fog light. So we had to go very slowly... Still, we arrived at Singapore House quite early, half past six, maybe." The moment he stepped into the bungalow, he was met by Mr. Lee and told the news. Dr. Toh remembers being shocked — it had not crossed his mind even then that the Tunku and his senior colleagues would resort to such "drastic surgery".

The next thing he knew, he was seated in the living room, jotting down the many thoughts and questions crossing his mind. Upperson was the thought that a Singapore out of Malaysia would mean letting down all those who had supported the PAP's cause. Mr. Rajaratnam's recollection is that all Mr. Lee told him was that there was something very important they needed to discuss face to face. He, in turn, telephoned Social Affairs Minister Othman Wok, telling him they needed to dash up to KL. Mr. Othman says Mr. Rajaratnam told him then that he could not elaborate on the telephone, which got him worrying whether something had happened to Mr. Lee. It was a terrifying thought.

He recalls: "I became very apprehensive. I kept wondering: What's happening? What's happening? I asked Raja: 'We go by train or what?' Raja..."
Where were you that fateful day?

Shelly Tiw Sing Kim, 52
Midwife
Mount Elizabeth Hospital

I was in Kandang Kerbau Hospital then and heard the news from my fellow midwives in the delivery room. Some of the nurses were crying. But I wasn’t. I told said and a bit nervous, whether I had made the right choice to be a Singaporean. When I got home that night, my husband, Dawson, told me he had heard the news on the radio. We talked about it but decided not to do anything. Thinking back, I’m glad I made the right decision.

Muhammad Ariff Ahmad, 65
Novelist

My first reaction was sheer disbelief. I was a lecturer with the Teachers’ College then. What still lingers in my mind to this day is a scene at a Malay gathering some months before the separation. The late Haji Yaacob Mohamed, a PAP leader, was reassuring us even then that there was nothing in the Malaysian Constitution that said we could opt out and, therefore, being a part of Malaysia was a permanent arrangement, no matter how troublesome relations were. When the news came, my family and two other families were planning to travel in three cars to Malaysia to meet old friends. We went ahead because I still did not believe separation was possible. It was only when I reached Kota Baru, where I met some former classmates discussing the topic animatedly, that it all sank in. I felt a sense of loss and sadness because people working in the same cause for Malay literature suddenly found themselves separated by a political divide. Looking back, I feel more comfortable now as a Singaporean and glad we had chosen to stay here despite requests from friends and relatives to move to Malaysia.

G. Kandasamy, 69
General secretary
Amalgamated Union of Public Employees

I was working at AEPE’s headquarters near Towner Road. When my colleagues and I heard the news, we were shocked. All of us were worried about the politics that would ensue and also whether there would be any violence. I had canvassed actively for Singapore’s integration with Malaysia, so for me, the news was particularly shocking. I knew there was tension at the time with Malaysian leaders, but that it would lead to separation was something I could not imagine at all. One major fear I had was whether Singapore, being a mainly Chinese-populated place caught between a Malay-dominated Indonesia and Malaysia, would be allowed to be a truly independent country. A related fear was over racial cohesion — whether the pressures that might come about from the separation will affect the minority Malays and spark off racial riots.

Fatty Wong, 69
Retired chef
Restaurateur

It was business as usual on that day. I knew about the separation from my family members who had heard it on the afternoon news. Many of my customers were discussing the split. Generally, they seemed to agree that it was better for Singapore to be independent. I did not take part in the discussion. I was a businessman. I never liked to talk about politics. But personally, I thought Singapore could survive on its own because we had a good prime minister.

Wee Cho Yaw, 61
Chairman
United Overseas Bank

I was managing director then. When the news broke, my immediate reaction was sadness and concern. I felt sad because we had worked so hard for Malaysia and had tried so hard to make it work. To me, separation was admission of our failure. Overtaking this sadness was concern for the future of Singapore. Our island state had no natural resources and had the further disadvantage of having a small population and, therefore, a small market. I must confess I was very pessimistic about Singapore’s economic survival. Now, I am delighted that my initial fear has proven unfounded. Indeed we have prospered.

Maurice de Vaz, 49
Pilot
Singapore Airlines

I was on a return flight from KL to Singapore (as a first officer with SIA) in the late morning when news came. I remember discussing it with Captain Tommy Soong, now retired. Obviously the first thoughts were what would happen to the airline. We talked and talked, but, of course, we didn’t have answers.

"I don’t think this way is the only possible way out.”

Given the strong hint that the situation would get out of control, resulting in bloodshed, Dr Toh and Mr Rajaratnam agreed reluctantly to put their signatures to the agreement. Expects Mr Rajaratnam, who was 50 at that time: “That was a very compelling argument because there had been bloodshed before. In the light of this, Dr Toh and I talked about it, and we realised we could be responsible for loss of lives and worse.”

Dr Toh, then 43, responded to the Tunku in writing the next day, describing the decision as sad and a blow to him and his colleagues, who had rejoiced at the reunification of Singapore with Malaya in 1963.

But, he added in his letter, which was later made public, if expulsion was the price for peace, “then we must accept it, however agonising our inner feelings may be.”

Agonising it indeed was for all who had believed in Malaysia, not least those PAP leaders who were born there. For instance, Mr Ong Pang Boon, then 36 and Singapore’s Education Minister, was struck speechless for quite a while when a gem Dr Toh broke the news to him in Singapore House that afternoon. He had been in Kuala Lumpur that week helping to set up PAP branches. When he recovered his voice, his first question was: “Is this the only way?” Dr Toh told him the alternative was bloodshed. Mr Ong, who has since retired from politics and is now an adviser to the Hong Leong group of companies, recalls: “It did take me some time to accept that it was better this way. The rational part of me accepted it but the emotional part took some time.”

But he too signed. Mr Othman reacted differently. When he was shown the Tunku’s letter, he held it in his hand and looked at it for a long time. He recalls that his feeling then was more of relief — that the bickering was going to stop — than grief. But Mr Lee, he says, thought that as a
What will happen to 1 SIR?

Lieutenant-General Winston Choo, Chief of Defence Force, remembers being taken aback by news of the separation even though he and other Singaporean officers then serving in the merged Malayan Armed Forces had been aware of the strained political ties between Singapore and the Central Government. He was then a signals captain in the First Battalion, Singapore Infantry Regiment (1 SIR) which, though commanded by a Malaysian, had largely Singaporean officers and men.

It was a British company commander on secondment to 1 SIR who broke the news to them in their Ulu Pandan camp. "At that moment, the full implications did not strike us. We were too engrossed in our duties," he recalls. "It was only later when we heard and saw the Prime Minister's declaration of separation that its full significance sank in." "Frankly, my immediate concern was what was going to happen to 1 SIR and what our position would be. I would say that this sentiment was shared by the Singaporean officers as well as the soldiers who were all regulars. Our immediate concerns were whether an emergency and civil unrest would arise, requiring military intervention, as had happened in the racial riots of 1963 and 1964. However, there was general calm in the unit. There was no tension between Malaysians and Singaporeans in the unit."

It was only later that the Singaporean officers pondered the question of whether Singapore could survive as a nation on its own, their subsequent resolve very much influenced by what Singapore's political leaders said. Says General Choo: "I, for one, took the line that this must go on and that I would remain in Singapore and work towards its survival, security and success."

As a 24-year-old who had spent all my working life up till then in the military, and being not particularly imbued with tremendous nationalist ideals, that was the extent of my feelings regarding the future of Singapore. But it did not take long for nationalist fervour to be rekindled in me when it became plain that the survival and well-being of our nation was at stake.

I told Tunku to lay off

Mr Harold Wilson, British Prime Minister at the time, remembers well the August weekend when news of the separation came. There was, he recalls, great anxiety in Whitehall and urgent meetings were held with the Foreign and Commonwealth Secretary, Mr Michael Stewart, and the Defence Secretary, Mr Denis Healey.

"We took the necessary decisions and made the dispositions that had to be made, sending very strong messages to both leaders to avoid any action that could lead to an outbreak of hostilities or, indeed, of internal subversion," he says. "We authorized talks to take place to review the Anglo-Malayan defence agreement on a basis fair to all the parties concerned."

Lord Wilson of Rievaulx, 74, as he is now known after receiving a life peerage in 1983, further recalls how Mr Lee Kuan Yew later told him that the action taken by the British leader both before and after the separation had saved his life. This was in April 1965 and they were at Chequers, the British Prime Minister's official country retreat. "With all that we were hearing in the summer of 1965, I believe this was no exaggeration," says Lord Wilson, who adds that they are friends to this day.

The former British Prime Minister first made public what Mr Lee told him when he disclosed in 1971 memoirs, his reactions upon receiving word in 1965 that a coup against him and his colleagues might be possible. "I felt not necessary," he wrote, "to go so far as to let the Tunku know that if he were to take action of this kind, it would be unsafe for him to show his face at the Commonwealth conference, since a large number of his colleagues, including myself, would feel that such action was totally opposed to all we believed in as a Commonwealth."

Sending his greetings and best wishes to Singapore, Lord Wilson says: "Since these distant days, I have watched the progress of Singapore and of your Prime Minister with great admiration, respect and affection."

UK envoy gatecrashes Tunku's party

In KL, Malaysian leaders also took follow-up action. In anticipation of the separation to come, Tun Razak had, by late July, given notice of the Federal Government's intention to convene a sitting of Parliament on Aug 9.

This was to enable the Tunku to move a bill, on a certificate of urgency, to amend the Constitution and so provide for Singapore's separation and independence. So there was much to coordinate and finalise.

In the course of the day, a special RMAF aircraft sent to Singapore to pick up the agreement bearing the signatures of the entire Singapore Cabinet returned. The fact that all signed enabled Tun Razak to say later, in response to a suggestion that Singapore had been "injured"; that the Singaporean ministers had agreed unanimously to the separation. Only when the signed agreement was back in KL were all the Chief Ministers and Menteri Besar told of the purpose of the parliamentary session. By 4 pm, all Rulers of States in the Federation were also informed. Amid all this, something un-
LORD HEAD’S LAST-MINUTE INTERVENTION

And then it was morning, Aug 9. While Mr Fooong was translating the proclamation into Chinese, with Mr Lee personally checking to ensure that the words captured all that they were intended to convey, Lord Head arrived at the Tunku’s Residency in KL at 8.45 am. He pleaded with the Tunku to postpone the decision by one day, but was told: “Nothing can change our decision.”

At 9.30 am, Alliance MPS gathered in Parliament and were told the news. They were also asked to vote for the bill. As it turned out, 126 endorsed the amendment, none voted against. As agreed, all 12 Singaporean MPs were absent. Seventeen others, including Umno secretary general Syed Jalaluddin Albar, did not turn up. The Malaysian Senate also approved the bill.

This was how the Tunku began his statement to the House of Representatives: “What I am about to announce to this House will no doubt come as a big surprise and shock to Members. In fact, to me and to many Members, it is the most painful and heartbreaking news I have had to break. I consider it a misfortune for me to have to make this announcement. In all the 10 years of my leadership of this House, I have never had a duty so unpleasant as this to perform. The announcement which I am making concerns the separation of Singapore from the rest of the Federation.”

As he spoke, a letter dated Aug 7 went out from Mr Ismail, the Home Affairs Minister, to the Singapore Police Commissioner instructing him to take orders from Mr Lee from that day onwards. A similar letter also went out from the Tunku to Brigadier S.M. Alauddin, Commander of the Singapore-based 4th Federal Infantry Brigade.

SINGAPORE IS OUT OF MALAYSIA

In Singapore, Mr Lee, who had stayed up all night to supervise the despatching of coded messages to various heads of government explaining the situation, briefed the heads of all consulates in
At the historic press conference, a visibly distraught Lee Kuan Yew said: ‘What has happened has happened.’

Singapore at 9 am in City Hall. Then, accompanied by Mr Foo, he left for the radio and TV studios in Caldecott Hill, to prepare for the announcement and the televised press conference afterwards. On the dot at 10, just as the division bell in the Malaysian Parliament sounded, Radio Singapore announced: “Singapore is out of Malaysia.” The nation was stunned.

How Singaporeans subsequently rallied behind their leaders and worked hard to make a success of their country is history — and something all are proud of. But on that day, feelings were decidedly mixed. While some felt despondent, others let off fireworks to celebrate. The stock exchange recorded its most active day of trading that year, with 646,900 shares changing hands. After a bout of nervous selling, the market recovered to end the day on a “mildly optimistic” note. Traffic at the Causeway was normal.

Though some housewives began to stock up food and shops here and there closed for the day, the atmosphere, while tense, remained quiet. Coffee stalls did a roaring business. Many stayed open all night, catering to customers who wanted to talk about this turning point in their national life — or wait for the morning papers to hit the streets.

Mr Foo, the broadcaster, found himself at one such stall in Norfolk Road near his home, where he and some neighbourhood friends sat drinking iced tea and talking about their future till 3 am. On the way there, he had stopped by a community centre in Cambridge Road, where a huge crowd had gathered to watch the evening news on TV. He saw himself on the screen, seated a little behind the Prime Minister, ready to translate for him at the packed press conference.

Hardly anyone in the crowd at the community centre recognised him. All eyes were on Mr Lee. They felt for him. It was not just what he said but more importantly, how he said it. Looking back, many Singaporeans would point to that televised press conference as not only the climax of an unforgettable day but also the turning point when the nation felt as one, huddled against an uncertain future.

And this was what the visibly distraught Prime Minister told his fellow Singaporeans: “What has happened has happened. But be firm and calm. We are going to have a multi-racial nation in Singapore. This is not a Malay nation, not a Chinese nation, nor an Indian nation. Everybody will have a place in Singapore.”

With grim determination, Mr Lee vowed that his government would fight for Singapore’s survival. In response to questions, he announced the abolition of the payroll tax and spoke about the country’s economic future. Asked to recount the events that led to the final break, he paused, then explained how he was initially unconvinced that there had to be a split, a number of his colleagues had been passionately against separation, and how they had finally realised there was no other way.

With tears brimming and in a choked voice, he added: “Every time we look back to the moment we signed this document, it is for us a moment of anguish. For me it is a moment of anguish. All my life, all my whole adult life, I have believed in merger and unity of the two territories. We are connected by geography, the economy and ties of kinship... It broke everything we stood for.”

And then he wept.

A 25TH NATIONAL DAY SPECIAL
THE STRAITS TIMES continued with the trend of having advertisements – not the news – on its front page until after World War II. News made Page 1 on some days, however. The Sunday edition, which debuted in 1931, often put up lively features on Page 1.
A street named desire. Orchard Road has always shopped for change but the one constant nag has been traffic. In the 19th century, letters to ST would complain about the dangers on the road from horse-riders.

Orchard Road, 1950s

Today, shophouses are eclipsed by skyscrapers but they were once common in Orchard Road. This photo (left) taken on Sept 1, 1956, also captured the “traffic congestion” opposite MacDonald House. And the rush on the sidewalks (right) in 1949. ST FILE PHOTO AND ST PHOTO: LEE TUCK SOON
More than a century ago, fresh vegetables and fish were a common sight in Orchard Road’s popular wet market. Here, Christmas shoppers can be seen at a market on Dec 23, 1964. The dirty, smelly market gave way to Orchard Point shopping centre in 1983. ST PHOTO: MAK KIAN SENG
A decade of booming retail business led Cold Storage to open Singapore’s first supermarket in Orchard Road in 1917. Located where Centrepoint shopping centre is today, Cold Storage, captured in this photo from Nov 27, 1970, sold frozen meats, poultry and dairy products from Australia (left). The boom led to traffic jams between the junctions of Clemenceau Avenue and Dhoby Ghaut, as seen in this March 4, 1974 photo (right). ST PHOTO: MAZLAN BADRON AND MAK KIAN SENG
A transformation took place every evening from 1966 to 1978, with the car park opposite Cold Storage Supermarket becoming a bustling Glutton’s Square, as seen in this Aug 16, 1972, photo. With at least 80 hawkers thronging the place, two stalls would squeeze into each parking space. As nothing was provided, the stall owners brought their own water for washing and tables and chairs for customers. Glutton’s Square was cleared in 1978 to make space for a park. In the late 2000s, the park gave way to Orchard Central. ST PHOTO: STEVEN LEE
Development and redevelopment were relentless. Shaw House, with its distinctive accordion-style windows, glass mosaic fins and Italian marble, was not spared. By 1990, the three-decade-old Lido Theatre was considered outdated and was demolished to make way for a new Shaw House – a $400 million commercial, shopping and cinema complex. ST PHOTO: JACKY HO
With the arrival of new heartland malls such as Big Box and OneKM, tougher competition has driven change in the retail landscape. The Orchard Road Business Association started a monthly Pedestrian Night in October 2014 to inject vibrancy into the shopping belt. Parts of Orchard Road are closed to traffic from 6pm to 11pm on the first Saturday of the month. In its second edition on Nov 1, 2014, some 900 yoga enthusiasts stretched to the hip-hop beats of local musicians, including rapper Kevin Lester, at Yoga Beat. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN
THE SINGAPORE SWING
Duke of Kent (fourth from right) joins students in a Conga at a students’ social held at Raffles Institution on October 10, 1952. ST FILE PHOTO
As a rule, we have to be content with the pleasures of contemplation.

— The Straits Times, Dec 2, 1908

The “pleasures” of contemplation were, of course, sardonic euphemism for boredom in Singapore, which The Straits Times described in 1904 as “not the liveliest place in the world so far as amusements are concerned”.

The colonial quartet of theatre, social balls, horse racing and cricket were the popular pastimes. Their function, noted
The Straits Times on Sept 10, 1864, was to prevent “listless indolence” among the vanguards of the British Empire – young men who otherwise would have “grown prematurely old”.

Taking its role as the island’s arbiter of pleasure seriously, The Straits Times rigorously reviewed the rare tour by a theatre company.

By the early 1900s, Singapore had acquired the unsavoury reputation of being a haven for opium dens. In 1932, a rakish piece in The Sunday Times featured an article by a guest writer who chronicled his attempt to seek out the “dens of iniquity for which the city is notorious in Europe”. He could not find any, but his quest led him to the “Opium Monopolies Department”, where he was told he needed a licence to buy the narcotic. The point of the story seemed to be that Singapore’s disrepute was grossly exaggerated.

The Sunday Times, on June 24, 1956, mused about a national sport that required little exertion. “There are probably more good rumourists on this small plot of earth than anywhere else in the world,” said the writer. “In a land of high humidity, it has strong advantage over other sports in that it does not make you perspire, unless you happen to be the victim.”

There is broad truth to this claim. In the early days of the island’s history as a British possession, there was a special place on the seafront for the dissemination of gossip.

“Heard the latest about old X? Well it seems…”

“I say, No, really?
Hi-ya!”

“Alamak!”

The venue for such exchanges was called Scandal Point and was marked as such on early maps. Though it ceased
to exist in 1851, it is believed to have been at the north-east corner of the Padang, where the Singapore Recreation Club now stands.

People exchanged gossip while sitting on an embankment wall with a gun turret. The low wall was built to fortify Singapore’s defences, but was never used for its purpose.

Singapore’s transformation from a backward “fishing village” to an entertainment hub throbbing with nightlife – without fostering a culture of reckless abandon or mindless revelry – can be traced in the pages of The Straits Times.

Shakespeare proclaimed that there were seven ages of man. If Singapore were a stage, there would be seven stages of enchantment. They are:

1. THE COLONIAL QUARTET

The Singapore Cup for horse racing was instituted in 1842, three years before the birth of The Straits Times. The prize money: a princely $150. The races quickly became a fixture on the social calendar and were covered extensively in The Straits Times. Cricket matches were also covered, as were weddings of the rich, famous and powerful.

But balls were far and away the highlight of the year. The more important ones made it to Page 1,
such as the Sultan’s Ball, held at the Singapore palace of the Johor royal family. A report on Jan 15, 1895 described the entrees served: Findon haddock mayonnaise, chicken and beetroot mayonnaise, Aspic pate de foie gras and pigeon and egg pie.

Carefully catalogued at the end of such reports was the guest list, with names printed in the order of their importance. An omission spoke volumes.

The Straits Times also saw a role for itself in developing Singapore’s entertainment scene. Reviewing the first public concert by the newly formed Singapore Philharmonic Society in 1891, it grandly proclaimed the Society had “justified its existence” and thanked it for the “innocent amusement” provided.
2. ISLAND OF “CIVILISATION”

In November 1896, The Straits Times lamented the lack of a general social club in Singapore for “all the ordinary common or garden men among us”. Dismissing the Singapore Club as “merely a tiffin and ‘morning cocktail’ club for the heads of firms and other deities”, it saw the Cricket Club only as an athletic club. And the Tanglin Club was “but a dancing and bowling club”.

It was not until Jan 17, 1914 that it began a regular column on the entertainment scene. Singapore Amusements was a thrice-weekly column with summaries of ongoing social events.

By 1926, Singapore’s drawing power was in evidence. Just like the F1 night race today, there were events then that drew people from the region. One such attraction was Race Week at the Turf Club.

“Many people from upcountry find it convenient to visit Singapore, to renew old friendships and generally to enjoy the amenities which we have to offer... our friends in the back blocks look forward to these little excursions as bringing them, for a few days, back to something like civilisation,” The Straits Times reported on May 7, 1926.
3. LEISURE GOES LOCAL

Making a living was the overriding preoccupation of Singapore’s immigrant society. Opportunities for leisure were few and “ethnic vices” such as gambling and smoking opium exerted a strong pull on migrant workers.

So when the New World amusement park in Jalan Besar opened in 1923, with kiosks, a ferris wheel, merry-go-round and football ground, The Straits Times predicted its success.

For the first time, entertainment had gone local.
On Aug 29, 1932, The Straits Times reported the opening of Island Club in Thomson Road, Singapore’s first non-racial country club. It offered mostly golf, but tennis courts were being laid and a swimming pool was being planned.

Its founding president SJ Chan, a Peranakan lawyer, hoped it would provide “fertile ground for the growth of a deeper understanding among the different races of this city”. He noted that many large donors to the club were “providing for the future”. They did not even play golf.

For the elite, a column called The Social Spotlight made its debut on Jan 3, 1935. It was written by a woman reporter and covered parties and performances at established venues such as Raffles Hotel and Sea View Hotel. It carried fashion and costume reviews.

4. THE MOVE INDOORS

“Singapore is not so amused” was the wry headline of a July 13, 1949 report on leisure spending. Revenues from entertainment duties fell almost $560,00 from 1947 to 1948, a drastic drop from the period immediately after Japan’s surrender.

When Singaporeans were ready to spend again, they moved indoors to cinemas, shopping malls and what were called Chinese singing cafes, which sprang up during the Japanese Occupation. “Legacies of enemy occupation are usually unpleasant. A welcome exception, however, and one that has come to stay, is the Chinese evening singing cafe,” said a report on March 2, 1952, headlined “Pretty girls who sing in the evenings”. They were second only to cinemas in
Amusement parks and cafes eventually lost ground to cineplexes, malls and game arcades as tastes changed. But a royal visit could still cause a flutter. On Oct 11, 1952, The Straits Times reported that the “Duke of Kent danced the conga at a students’ social at the Raffles Institution. Following this, he danced a quick-step with 18-year-old Mabel Lee Soo Bee, a student from Singapore Chinese Girls’ School.” The Duke was visiting Singapore with his mother and the conga, from Cuba, was the rage.

“These socials are a regular part of school life in Singapore and last night’s dance was not specially put on for the Duke,” said the report.

The reminders of that visit remain, etched in granite at Kent Ridge, which was named after the royal visitors.

By the late 1950s, as Singapore moved to self-rule, there was a boom. “Never before in the history of Singapore had
there been so many concerts, variety programmes, drama and other forms of live entertainment as in seven days of the Loyalty Week,” The Straits Times on Dec 8, 1959, quoted Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew as saying at the opening of a variety show.

National Loyalty Week was held to encourage a sense of loyalty to the new state of Singapore and saw the adoption of key national symbols, including the state flag and national anthem, and the installation of Mr Yusof Ishak as Yang di-Pertuan Negara, or head of state.

5. NIGHTCLUBS AND THE HOME “COCOON”

Tropicana, Singapore’s first nightclub, launched a “new era” in entertainment when it opened, in 1968, where Pacific
Plaza building now is. Aimed at world travellers, executives and socialites, the four-storey complex housed a theatre-restaurant called the Orchid Lantern and two cocktail lounges. Among its famous visitors was the late American crooner Frank Sinatra. Jazz greats Duke Ellington and Count Basie also performed there.

Many other nightclubs sprung up to compete with it. The acts were risque, with topless shows at Neptune Theatre Restaurant in Collyer Quay, Goodwood Park Hotel and Mandarin Hotel.

The novelty, however, was wearing off by the late 1970s.

Tropicana’s closing in 1989 also marked the end of an older, more esoteric era of novelty-gazing at amusement parks.

A new insularity, however, emerged, an unforeseen effect of Singapore’s successful housing programme. Piped water, phones, radio and television were turning people into homebodies, fostering isolation and hampering a sense of community.

Community clubs – venues for cultural, sports and recreational activities – stepped in to help enhance social bonding and neighbourliness.
6. THE DISCO WAVE

After building up in the 70s, the disco wave crested in Singapore in the 80s, going mainstream with events for youth organised at neighbourhood community clubs. In one week in December 1979, there were at least 10 “disco nights”, said The Straits Times. Soft drinks were served and community centre officials kept an eye on things.

But not all were happy. A reader wrote to The Straits Times on April 23, 1980, complaining that disco dancing brought “accompanying vices” such as “illicit sex” and “cultural perversion”.

The 1980 census exposed a new trend of better-educated women not marrying. The government set up the Social Development Unit (SDU) in 1984 which, among other things, revived “tea dances” which had been popular in the 60s. Discos cashed in, slashing their entry prices between 2pm and 6pm on weekends to attract young people. A debate arose on whether the trend was healthy.

“While the SDU functions are squeaky-clean, their disco counterparts are
smoky, filled with young teens and loud music,” The Straits Times reported on May 21, 1989 in It's Saturday Afternoon Fever. It went on to quote Dr Paul Cheung, a prominent sociologist, who worried about the “sexual vulnerability” of the youth.

In the 90s, nightspots evolved to adopt an omnibus approach. They were discotheque, videotheque, karaoke, cafe, pub, wine bar and boutique, all rolled into one. Zouk, an $8-million club, opened in March 1991.

In 1997, entry to tea dances and disco for those under 16 was banned in 1994, not 1997.

7. HEALTH CLUBS AND SPEED-DATING

At the turn of the 20th century, gyms and fitness clubs mushroomed, mainly in and around downtown and the central business district. They were ideal venues for young professionals to exercise, people-watch and mingle, The Straits Times noted on July 19, 2003. Members were in the 25-40 age group, making health clubs a social gathering ground.

Speed-dating also came into vogue. The stigma attached to being single began to dissipate.

The 2000s also brought back an old favourite: the tea dance, but with a twist. This time, it was heartily embraced by foreign workers and maids, making it the rage at discos they frequented.
For Singaporeans, the night scene lit up with many options. Besides Zouk, another mega entertainment complex was St James Power Station, next to VivoCity. It cost $43 million and more than 2,500 people partied at its official opening, The Straits Times reported on March 13, 2007. Nine clubs and pubs are housed in the 70,000 sq ft complex that was once a power station. 
Feels like home... in the heartlands. By 1971, the swampland had become a self-sufficient town, where no housewife or child had to leave the neighbourhood for daily needs.

Toa Payoh, 1968

Once a swampland that squatters called home, Toa Payoh was the Housing Board’s (HDB) second new town, after Queenstown. Photographed in 1968, the lone temple, Lian Shan Shuang Lin Monastery, was the only piece of architecture that stood untouched during the massive construction of high-rise flats around it. ST PHOTO: ALI YUSOFF
By 1968, 1,560 flats had been completed, but the town began to take on a slum-like appearance. Operation Broomstick was launched by HDB to encourage residents to keep the estate clean. A contingent of men is seen marching down the road with broomsticks in this Straits Times photo.

ST PHOTO: LOW YEW KONG
By 1971, Toa Payoh, seen here in an aerial view, was a self-sufficient town where “no housewife need go outside the neighbourhood for her requirements. No child need look for primary education outside the new town,” said an HDB spokesman. ST FILE PHOTO
Toa Payoh quickly became the poster child of Singapore's public housing success and was visited by leaders from all over the world. Queen Elizabeth's tour in 1972 was welcomed by residents who were proud of their new home. ST PHOTO: WAN SENG YIP
Toa Payoh was the first HDB town to have an MRT station. The North-South Line’s opening ceremony was held there and the first train left Toa Payoh station on Nov 7, 1987. Train driver Shaharrudin Mokmin, then 22, told The Straits Times he was “very proud to be driving the first train”.

ST PHOTO: SIMON KER
In 2014, HDB blocks around the iconic dragon playground at Toa Payoh Lorong 6 were demolished. The dragon was "spared from the wrecking ball", said a report in The Straits Times report on April 3, 2014. Built in 1979, the dragon is now listed as one of the Top 15 Amazing Playgrounds From All Over The World by New York culture blog, flavorwire.com. ST PHOTO: ALAN LIM
Toa Payoh, 2014

Toa Payoh new town, as seen here in a picture taken in 2014, has already undergone several rounds of estate renewal and upgrading. A heritage trail was launched in Toa Payoh in 2014 to preserve historical milestones and tell the story of its development from swampland to vibrant town centre. It was Singapore’s 12th national heritage trail. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG
REPORTING ON CRISSES
A Marine Police patrol craft in the foreground shadowing the Laju ferry when it was hijacked by four terrorists in January 1974. ST PHOTO: JERRY SEH
1974: The Watergate scandal brought down United States President Richard Nixon and an Opec (Organisation of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) embargo quadrupled oil prices, tipping economies into recession. India detonated its first nuclear weapon, the Rubik’s cube was invented and Muhammad Ali knocked out George Foreman to become the Heavyweight Champion of the World.

Singapore, not yet 10 years old, had its first brush with international terrorism.
The Straits Times’ blow-by-blow reporting of the Laju ferry hijacking, a taut nine-day battle of nerves, the newspaper brought home two fundamentals. That Singapore was vulnerable to other people’s quarrels and that constant vigilance was the price of security.

The four terrorists armed with submachine guns and explosives landed at Pulau Bukom on Jan 31, 1974, intending to blow up the Shell oil refinery there. Two were Japanese from a communist militant group, the Japanese Red Army (Sekigun). Two were Arabs from the hardline Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Singapore by then was already the world’s third-largest oil refining centre and the terrorists sought to disrupt the oil supplies.

When police gave chase, they hijacked the ferryboat Laju at the Bukom jetty. Soon, it was surrounded by 15 marine police boats, Customs launches and three Singapore Maritime Command gunboats. There it bobbed for the next nine days.
A letter from the Laju terrorists to the Singapore government on January 31, 1974. The terrorists demanded a safe passage out of Singapore. They were members of the Japanese Red Army and the Popular Front for Liberation of Palestine. ST PHOTO: TAN WEE HIM

Statement signed by ‘Laju’ hijackers at the Ministry of Culture Press Section on February 8, 1974. ST PHOTO: FRANCIS ONG PUAY GUAN
SAIL FERRY TO FREEDOM

The Straits Times deployed more than a dozen reporters and photographers to cover the unprecedented event.

Two of the five hostages managed to escape the first night and the paper published full accounts of their ordeal.

Officials wrangled with the terrorists, night and day. They were offered safe passage out of Singapore because there had been no loss of life or serious damage.

The “Bukom Bombers” demanded food, water – and the local newspapers each day.

As the crisis entered its seventh day, Japan agreed to lend an aircraft to fly the terrorists to Kuwait. In exchange, the terrorists agreed to disarm and released the hostages. They left for Kuwait in the company of 13 Singaporean officials, led by the Director of Security and Intelligence Division at the
Ministry of Defence, Mr SR Nathan, who later became the President of Singapore.

The Straits Times reported that the terrorists’ farewell to the three hostages, whom they hugged and kissed, was “highly emotional”. One of the hijackers even said he wanted to visit Singapore again, as a tourist. They apologised to the
Singapore government and to Singaporeans for the “many inconveniences” caused.

The bizarre episode ended unexpectedly well. Crisis past, the nation took stock. The Straits Times summed it up on Feb 9, 1974: “The fact that Singapore was not involved does not guarantee the Republic’s safety. But the fact that Singaporeans can and do look after themselves will minimise chances of another Bukom-Laju emergency.

“Singapore was caught by surprise this time, but it has shown it is no pushover.”

The incident, said Mr Lee Kuan Yew, the prime minister then, demonstrated how impossible it was for Singapore to “isolate ourselves from conflicts in which we are really spectators”.

But he added: “We will minimise the reasons of any group to pick any quarrel with us.”

Mr Leslie Fong, the newspaper’s editor from 1987 to 2002 and currently senior executive vice-president of SPH’s Marketing and Digital Divisions, was then a 24-year-old...
The reporter deployed to cover the story. “It was a big story and everyone was excited,” he recalled.

Between the press briefings, he said, there was a lot of waiting, adding: “There was nothing you could actually see from a distance. Other reporters tried to hire bum boats to go out but were turned back by police.”

Still, there was plenty of drama at the nightly press briefings led by Mr Tay Seow Huah, the Home Ministry’s top civil servant then.

The international press was aggressive, demanding answers and the “right to know” how the Government would handle itself.

“Mr Tay would not bat an eyelid,” said Mr Fong. “He would say, ‘You know what I choose to tell you... you are in my country, you play by my rules. And if you cross the line, I will not hesitate to deport you’.

“You could see his mastery of the details. He opened my eyes to how a self-confident civil servant in a developing country could conduct himself with dignity and confidence.”
Noted Mr Tee Tua Ba, then officer-in-charge of Marine Police and now the chairman of the Singapore Red Cross: “It was only then that the Government realised that all vital installations were unprotected.”

The Laju lessons were not forgotten. Security was stepped up at critical infrastructure installations and public places. A crisis machinery was put in place.

Nearly two decades later, when SQ 117 was hijacked while flying from Kuala Lumpur to Changi on March 26, 1991, there were no hiccups. A team of commandos stormed the plane after it landed and rescued all 129 passengers and crew – after shooting dead the four Pakistani hijackers. It was almost textbook perfect, done in 30 seconds.

“I never expected something like this to happen. I realised that this was going to be a big case and it was going to be a prolonged siege.

– Tee Tua Ba, who led negotiations with the hijackers
Lieutenant-General Suharto (right) made an unexpected announcement when he gave The Straits Times Deputy Editor Wee Kim Wee an exclusive interview on May 2, 1966. ST FILE PHOTO
The story behind one of The Straits Times’ greatest scoops is a story in itself. As he stood in the immigration line at Jakarta airport, the unassuming man probably attracted scant attention. After all, Mr Wee Kim Wee was not everyman’s idea of the flashy, big-scoop journalist.

That changed when his name was called out over the public announcement system and he was ushered in.
Mr Wee reminisced about it years later, after he became a diplomat and then one of the country’s most beloved presidents.

“I was escorted into (Indonesia) without immigration delay,” he recalled. “I am sure the onlookers were thinking, ‘What is this enemy doing here?’

It was 1966. Singapore, nine months into its journey as a new nation, was yet to be officially recognised by Indonesia.

Along with Malaysia, it had been at the receiving end of Indonesia’s violent Konfrontasi policy for three years. Sukarno, Indonesia’s first president, saw the formation of the Federation of Malaysia in 1963 as Britain’s attempt to perpetuate its colonial rule in South-east Asia. He sent armed raiders, infiltrators and saboteurs to destabilise life in the Federation, of which Singapore was a part. Diplomatic and economic relations, going back centuries, were severed. No one from Malaysia or Singapore was allowed to enter Indonesia.

Mr Wee’s presence at the Jakarta airport that day was, in short, an aberration.

After Mr Wee, then the deputy editor of The Straits Times, was whisked away from the immigration queue, he was granted an interview with the enigmatic and powerful new leader of Indonesia.

It got better. Lieutenant-General Suharto, who had confined then president Sukarno to a palace in Bogor after a failed communist coup in 1965, made the dramatic announcement that Indonesia was ready for peace.
Attacks, related to the Konfrontasi policy, at Katong Park blew a car against the railing of the park, scattering twisted pieces of metal on the road on October 6, 1963. ST FILE PHOTO

More than 500 women held banners and shouted slogans in an anti-Sukarno rally at Istana Besar Padang on October 31, 1963. ST PHOTO: MAK KIAN SENG

Two men were killed in Sennett Estate by a bomb on December 10, 1963 – the fourth in the series of mysterious explosions in Singapore. ST PHOTO: LOW YEW KONG

A sergeant-major examining a grenade in the compound of the Pontian Kechil police station on August 18, 1964. ST PHOTO: LOW YEW KONG

Kampong folk helping the Malaysian Security Forces to carry a badly wounded Indonesian infiltrator out of a rubber estate on August 25, 1964. ST PHOTO: KOK AH CHONG
“Peace: The sooner, the better,” declared Suharto in that interview, which was splashed on the front page of The Straits Times on May 2, 1966 (above). This was the first time that the de facto leader of Indonesia had indicated that he was ready to turn the page on Konfrontasi.

True to character, Wee claimed no special credit for a story that changed the course of South-east Asia. The veteran newsman ascribed it to just plain luck. During a layover in Bangkok on his way back from London, he had chanced to
meet Indonesia’s former consul-general in Singapore. His friendliness encouraged Mr Wee to ask if he could get a visa to visit Jakarta.

To his surprise, the diplomat was agreeable, but on the condition that he travel from a third country.

Not long afterwards, Mr Wee was queueing up at Jakarta airport.

By this time, Mr Wee was rather known for his penchant for being at the right place at the right time. And he seemed to court danger. In late-1960, he rushed from Copenhagen, where he was on holiday, to civil-war torn Congo, where Malayan troops were suddenly despatched to help UN peacekeeping operations.

How he made it into that newly-independent territory on short notice, short on money, with no hotel room or even a visa, is the stuff of newsroom legend. As are his vivid stories of the war, delivered over cable and managing to beat the news relayed by military channels. Mr Wee died in 2005, at age 89.

The Suharto interview made headlines the world over, and less than a month later, Konfrontasi was over.

The chapter was far from closed, however. It took seven more years for real trust between Singapore and Indonesia to develop. It was helped by a small but significant gesture, witnessed by another Straits Times journalist.
Mr Cheong Yip Seng in 1974 when he was New Nation’s assistant editor. ST PHOTO: MAK KIAN SENG

Mrs Janet Koh mourns her daughter Juliet, 23, who was one of the two victims of the Macdonald House Bombing on March 10, 1965. ST FILE PHOTO

MACDONALD HOUSE BOMBING

Mr Cheong Yip Seng, who was to become the newspaper’s editor for eight years until 1987 and its editor-in-chief for nearly two decades, was barely two years into the job when a bomb went off at the tallest building in Orchard Road. It had been planted on the mezzanine
floor of the nine-storey MacDonald House, just over a kilometre away from the Istana, the office and residence of the President of Singapore.

“I was a rookie, barely two years into the job,” said Mr Cheong, 72, now retired.

“But my colleagues and I were pitchforked, with barely any journalistic experience, into covering a story that was basically a struggle for Singapore’s future.”

The March 10, 1965 incident was the deadliest in Indonesia’s Konfrontasi campaign, and remains post-war Singapore’s most serious bomb attack. Some 25 pounds (11kg) of explosives had been used in the blast that killed three people and injured 33.

“I remember vividly the whole place was cordoned off when the reporters arrived, so we could only observe what was going on outside the cordon that was thrown by the police around the building,” says Mr Cheong.

“Cars could not go through. We were hanging around Orchard Road by the road divider. There was shattered glass all over the place... it was drizzling.”
The damage was extensive – lift doors and toilet doors were ripped off, the inner walls collapsed and rubble rained down on employees. The blast was of such force that it shattered the windows of buildings within a 100m radius.

The culprits, Indonesian marine commandos Osman Mohamed Ali, 23 (far left), and Harun Said, 21 (left), were caught at sea three days later. They were convicted of murder and sentenced to death.

Indonesia appealed for mercy but the Singapore Government refused. On Oct 17, 1968, both men were hanged.

Mr Cheong remembered the tensions escalating as Singapore stood firm in the face of pressure from Jakarta.

He said: “If you allowed two murderers to go scot-free, even though the Indonesian president sent a special envoy to plead for their lives, can you imagine what a terrible blow it would be to our judicial system, our system of justice? How can you free two murderers who killed three people?”

Public anger mounted in Indonesia. About 400 students raided the Singapore embassy in Jakarta and embassy staff had to be evacuated. When the bodies of the two marines were flown back, they were buried with military honours. Hundreds of thousands joined their funeral procession which extended at least 8km.
Tensions simmered until Mr Lee Kuan Yew, then prime minister, made his first official visit to Indonesia in May 1973 at the invitation of Mr Suharto, who had by then shed his general’s uniform to become president.

Leading up to the three-day visit, Indonesian newspapers wrote about the mutual mistrust and “psychological barriers” between the two countries.

Mr Lee visited the Kalibata National Heroes Cemetery to lay a wreath for six Indonesian generals killed in an abortive coup that had paved the way for the Suharto presidency. Another gesture was to come.
Mr Cheong, who had travelled to Jakarta to cover the visit, watched in surprise as Mr Lee stopped to scatter flowers over the graves of the two men who had bombed MacDonald House eight years earlier.

In Indonesia, the duo were seen as heroes who were killed while carrying out a state-sanctioned mission. The country needed to see Singapore’s leader make a gesture that, in Javanese belief, propitiated their souls.

“If LKY had not ‘made amends’ through the sprinkling of flowers, it would...
not have been possible to turn the corner fully,” Mr Cheong said.

“He had to swallow the bitter pill for the sake of a new chapter in bilateral relations. That gesture, that act of contrition, if you like, made a big difference to bilateral relations.”

As a reporter, Mr Cheong would not witness a more historic occasion.

“The tone completely changed from cold hostility to one where both sides decided that we better be pragmatic about the future, be pragmatic about how we should conduct bilateral relations. We’ve got to look forward, we can’t keep looking back.”

Mr Cheong chose not to lead his story that night with PM Lee’s graveside gesture, focusing instead on the overall improvement in the relations.

During the Konfrontasi period, media reports from Jakarta were hawkish and shrill. But The Straits Times had steered clear of rhetoric.

“It helped to lower the temperature,” said Mr Cheong, although he maintains that it would “attach too much importance” to the newspaper to say its tone helped ease tensions.

But he added: “I suppose you cannot deny that The Straits Times did make a small contribution.”
THE TRAGEDY OF MARIA HERTOGH

Maria Hertogh, 13, and Madam Aminah at the Supreme Court on May 19, 1950. ST FILE PHOTO
The KLM plane stood silently on
the tarmac at the Calcutta airport,
wraithlike, in the cool December
afternoon. A ring of armed police kept
a smattering of reporters at bay. In 1950, there
were yet no television camera crews jostling to
record what was a major news story.

Inside the plane sat a terrified 13-year-old girl with her
mother, fleeing a personal tragedy that had ballooned to
engulf Singapore in a riot.
Her name, familiar to any secondary school student in Singapore today, was Maria Hertogh. Or, Nadra Ma’arof for eight years of her life.

Maria’s story became a defining moment in a Singapore moving towards independence from British rule. The lessons it taught about the power of religious and racial issues to polarise a diverse society are today ingrained in the Singaporean consciousness, although the twists and turns of Maria’s own story have been forgotten.

The tragedy also provided a cautionary tale on the media’s ability to exacerbate divisions and inflame passions. For The Straits Times, which too had participated in the breathless coverage of the Maria story – though perhaps with more restraint than others – the lessons were to become indelible.

Maria’s journey to Calcutta that day had been carefully planned by the authorities, acutely conscious that they had failed to
detect an ugly turn in public mood and prevent a riot that in three days left 18 dead and 173 injured as well as 72 vehicles burnt and 119 damaged.

The violence halted only after the army was called in and the country placed under curfew.

When the news of her arrival in Calcutta appeared in a Page 1 article in The Straits Times, Singapore was reported to be back to law and order. But only just.

A Straits Times reporter travelling in an armoured car described the “strange silence” that enveloped the area around Sultan Mosque, which was under daylight curfew.

“In the still smouldering wreckage of dozens of private cars and army vehicles, shattered glass from windscreens, brickbats and broken timbering lay everywhere. But above all was the strange silence. Not a sound of life as our mobile arsenal came to a halt at every street corner.”

Maria had been raised a Muslim from age five by Malay divorcee Aminah Mohamed. But after the
war, her biological parents, the Hertoghs, launched a legal effort to reclaim her, saying they had asked Madam Aminah to look after their daughter, not given their child to her.

The Singapore Chief Justice ruled on May 19, 1950 that Maria should be given into the care of Dutch diplomats who would return her to parents in Holland.

Madam Aminah appealed and won on a technicality to have Maria returned, and the teen was married four days later to Mr Mansoor Adabi, a 22-year-old English teacher.

Maria’s Dutch parents challenged the marriage and another court battle began.
“Maria with nuns” was The Straits Times’ Page 1 headline on Dec 3, a day after the court ordered that Maria be returned to the custody of her biological mother. The judge also declared the marriage invalid, sending ripples of shock through the Muslim community, who had viewed it as properly solemnised.

Maria slept that night in the lodgings of a convent school, where The Straits Times said her re-education was to begin right away. Red-eyed and still dressed in Malay attire, Maria asked The Straits Times reporter who met her: “How is my foster mother?”

A day later, the reporter spotted Maria running hand-in-hand with a friend at the convent and wrote another Page 1 story: “Maria is a little girl again.”

In the next few days, The Straits Times, along with other newspapers of the time, the Singapore Tiger Standard and Utusan Melayu, photographed her. The Straits Times showed her
playing dominoes with her mother; the Standard showed her holding hands with the Mother Superior, along with a report that said she had knelt before the Virgin Mary statue. The Malay newspaper Utusan Melayu reported she had pleaded for their reporter’s help and showed her weeping.

The Muslim community was enraged that her marriage had been invalidated. Passions were stoked further by radical politicians who viewed the affair as a means to undermine the colonial authorities.

On Dec 11, more than 2,000 people gathered to hear an appeal against the judgment. It was dismissed within minutes. Rioting broke out soon after, mobs blindly targeted any European or Eurasian in sight. Hundreds were arrested, mainly for breaking the curfew.

Hundreds wait outside the Supreme Court on December 11, 1950 to catch a glimpse of Maria. ST FILE PHOTO
Protestors wrecking havoc at Padang on December 11, 1950 (top). A fire-fighter extinguishing a destroyed van on the same day (bottom). ST FILE PHOTOS
When the fury abated and Singapore began asking why a custody battle could prove so inflammable, fingers were pointed at the newspapers.

In London, the House of Commons and British press had criticised the “inept handling” of the Maria Hertogh case and its bloody sequel, The Straits Times reported on Page 1.

Police officers giving evidence before a commission of inquiry said two factors had precipitated the violence: putting a child raised as a Muslim in a convent and the emotional press reports and photographs which had stirred up passions.

The Straits Times ran a letter from a European reader who was categorical: “The one absolutely cardinal blunder was the story prominently published in a Singapore newspaper that Maria had knelt in worship before the statue of Our Lady of Fatima. In Muslim eyes, the worship of images is anathema. That, more than any other story, inflamed Muslim feeling.”

The Straits Times was not that newspaper; its photographs had steered clear of religious imagery and its reports had explored the human dimensions in Maria’s story – the tug-of-war over a child, Maria’s love and heartache, the hopes of a foster-mum, the distress of a biological one.
In a piece dissecting the tragedy, The Straits Times also felt that “Muslim feeling was affronted by Maria’s stay in a Catholic school at a moment when utmost prudence was necessary rather than merely desirable.”

But it also recognised that reporting responsibly in a multicultural society meant being aware of racial or religious tensions that can be invisible until they ignite.

When Singapore experienced Chinese Malay riots in 1964, the newspaper was mindful of the need to play down trouble. Similarly, during the 1969 racial riots in Kuala Lumpur, The Straits Times made no mention of race while reporting the violence, a practice it has kept to this day. The mob were described as “rioters”, “curfew-breakers” and “armed youths”, rather than by their ethnic identities.

For Singapore, the incident was a painful lesson that tolerance and understanding are paramount in keeping the peace.

In the ensuing years, the Government single-mindedly put in place policies to integrate the different races, such as through public housing quotas to prevent racial enclaves, and through national education. There have been no race riots since the country’s independence in 1965.
If you were a resident of Katong in the late 1800s, it is likely you were a victim of a petty crime, ST reported. Still, it had the seaside charm of a weekend spot.

A shophouse at Joo Chiat slated for conservation. The familiar sight of old juxtaposed with new is an outcome of decades of development and change in Katong. Since 1993, the Urban Redevelopment Authority has gazetted more than 800 buildings in Joo Chiat to preserve their unique architecture. ST PHOTO: JAMES CROUCHER
Growing demand for seaside recreation led to the construction of Katong Park in the 1930s. Katong Park was most famous for its swimming bay, which was enclosed by a pagar (a fence) to protect swimmers from shark attacks and strong waves. ST FILE PHOTO
During the Konfrontasi years when Singapore was part of Malaysia, Katong was attacked thrice by Indonesian saboteurs. The first two bombs let off at Katong Park in September 1963 failed to incur significant damage, but the third one, planted on the rear axle of a car on Oct 7, 1963, was more devastating. The force of the explosion overturned the car and threw it against the park railing. “I heard an explosion. When I ran out, I saw my car on fire,” said Mr Low Poh Lin, a lifeguard at Katong Park who was the owner of the broken car, a Black Mayflower. Nobody was injured.

ST FILE PHOTO
Katong, 1969

Roads and walkways in Katong became congested with the growing population of residents and students. The chaos at bus stops led the Safety First Council to start a “queue-up at the bus stops” campaign. This queue of children stretched 400m down the road from the bus stop outside Tanjong Katong Girls’ School. ST PHOTO: CHRISTOPHER LOH NJ
Tanjong Katong and Joo Chiat are widely known for their rich Peranakan roots. But in the 19th century, wealthy Chinese and European immigrants also built bungalows and recreational facilities there. Back then, Katong faced the sea. Its sea view and cooling breeze gave it a relaxed atmosphere, attracting hundreds of people every weekend.

ST PHOTO: JUNID JUIANI
The presence of the Hollywood Theatre probably further augmented Joo Chiat's popularity in the late 20th century. The Hollywood Theatre was famous for screening Chinese blockbusters in the 1960s and 1970s. It even staged live performances by popular Hong Kong movie stars such as Siao Fong Fong and Fung Bo Bo. As other cinemas sprouted up with better facilities, the theatre's blue mosaic tiles and faded colour photographs of old movie stars made way for a church, a supermarket and finally OneKM today.

ST PHOTO: LIM SIN THAI
OneKM now stands where the Hollywood Theatre was. Since the mixed-used development opened at Tanjong Katong Road in November 2014, new cafes have been springing up further along the stretch. Positioned as a lifestyle and knowledge mall, OneKM targets nearby office workers, residents and students. ST PHOTO: NEO XIAOBIN
170 YEARS OF
SINGAPORE LIFE
A HOUSE FOR THE HAWKER

Hawker Tan Cheong Chuan selling Tu Tu kueh at People’s Park in the 1970s. PHOTO: TAN BEE HUA
Ah Koong fishball noodles stall on October 26, 2006 at Food Republic, a food court set in early 20th century style at Vivocity.

TNP PHOTO: MOHD ISHAK

There was a time when hawkers riding trishaws with tinny bells were as common a sight in Singapore as are people today with eyes glued to smartphones.

Until they were swept off the streets and moved into markets with roofs, walls, taps, drains and gas connections, the hawkers were footloose purveyors of cheap food described simultaneously as tasty and of doubtful quality. A
somewhat endangered species today, the hawkers made it through the rough, early days of Singapore and even defined those times.

At the turn of 19th century, hawkers began to make cameo appearances in The Straits Times – for all the wrong reasons. Sometimes, they were accused of crime or engaging in questionable activity. One of the earliest mentions of a hawker is from the July 28, 1898 edition. The unnamed man was “fined with two dollars, or three days, for gambling with cakes with children”.

Another, also unnamed, was fined $15, in default of 15 days’ rigorous imprisonment, for “obstruction with baskets” on March 13, 1901. He had been fined earlier, the short report noted grimly. Was he perhaps the same man who was fined $2 on March 5 for slapping a woman on the face? “Evidence showed that the woman quarrelled with the hawker over the purchase of some fruit. He objected to her returning the fruit and she tore his coat. He slapped her face.”

The hawker was sometimes seen as a nuisance because his unsanitary methods brought on ravages such as cholera and typhoid. Here, a street hawker makes the rounds in the Singapore Improvement Trust (SIT) flats in Tiong Bahru, on September 12, 1961 (left). Another is captured in this October 19, 1935 photo, waiting to fill his buckets with water on. ST FILE PHOTOS
One of the earliest pictures of a hawker appeared in The Straits Times on January 24, 1934. Woolworth’s on wheels! said the caption of the faded black-and-white photograph of a man on a trishaw, his face in shadows under the trademark conical hat. “This enterprising hawker can sell you anything from a pair of chopsticks to a dinner service,” it continued. Readers never learned his name though.

Still, by then, the hawker had assumed a certain place in the Singaporean’s life. He had come to seem desirable. The Sunday Times, June 27, 1937 (left), almost saluted him with a photo spread. “The Singapore itinerant hawker is an indispensable man to many thousands of people, whatever may be said of his unsanitary methods. To these thousands, the sound of the ice-waterman’s tinkle is like sweet music and the sight of him riding along on his tricycle more welcome than a chariot from the heavens.

“What a necessary part the cake and fruit seller, the ice-cream man, the newspaper boy, the satay seller, the cobbler, the cigarette vendor and the
hundred and one other people, who bring their wares to their customer’s doors play in the everyday lives of Singapore’s citizens.

“At some time or the other in the day, they are to be seen in any street in town. They appear in the smallest villages. They find their way into the most inaccessible country lanes to delight kiddies and receive the silent blessing of eyes.”

In 1930s Chinatown, for instance, it was common to see “baskets being lowered from the fourth storey to the hawker in the street”, in what was probably the country’s first incarnation of home delivery. But mostly, it was concluded, the hawker was a nuisance. His unsanitary methods caused disease, especially the reckless disposal of refuse.
Singapore’s colonial government saw the hawker as little more than a risk to public health. Unkempt and unorganised these “peripatetic” men and women obstructed traffic and impeded pedestrian flow. They competed with the government for land use. Sometimes, they were accused of trying to bribe policemen. The Straits Times reported on Page 2 on May 3, 1898, that a hawker was fined $5 or 14 days’ in jail for offering 10 cents to a policeman to release him.

The tension between the law enforcer and the hawker continued through the 1930s and 1940s and even into the 50s. The more common problems were with unlicensed hawkers setting up stalls along areas like Boat Quay. Police would demolish these rickety structures and confiscate their supplies and food items. In these battles, the public often took the side of the hawkers, according the The Straits Times records.
Soon after the Japanese Occupation, the British colonial government came up with a policy in 1950 to house the hawkers at centralised locations. Predictably, this was easier said than done.

It was not until the late 1960s, in independent Singapore, that order came. After an island-wide hawkers’ registration, the government announced on Aug 4, 1970 that all 25,000 hawkers in Singapore were to be cleared off the street under a massive five-year scheme. The policy, which sparked what can be called “pre-emptive” nostalgia for hawker haunts that were soon to disappear,
Hawkers in Bugis Street in October 1985, serving beef noodles, wanton mee, chicken porridge and raw fish, just before the area was demolished to make way for the development of the underground MRT network. The area was known for attracting transvestites.

ST PHOTOS: TAN SUAN ANN

A Straits Times report on Aug 9, 1970 chronicled the atmosphere at these noisy, egalitarian places that came alive after dark and where millionaires and mechanics sat and ate alongside each other.

Bugis Street (left), then a top tourist haunt in Singapore, was described as a place of inimitable colour and curiosity value. As famous for beef kway teow as for people who went there not only to eat but also to see and be seen. “Its habitues, hip swinging and handbag twirling, with their occasional escorts, are a piquant contrast with the sober appearance of tables spread with white cloth,” said the report, referring to the transvestites who flocked to the area.

It spoke of the unique serenity of the Satay Club in Hoi How Street in Beach Road. “Many who visit it will regret the passing of its intrinsic features: the flickering flame in a container of oil and water, the steady fanning of charcoal
brazier and the revving of buses just across the narrow side street.”

In Hokkien Street, celebrated for prawn noodles, hawkers would slit the shrimp and ladle soup into bowls of noodles for their faithful clientele: millionaires, government ministers, cabaret girls, night-shift workers and couples looking for a snack after a date at the cinema or nightclub. Sometimes, those doing the slitting and the ladling were millionaires themselves, although clad in the unofficial hawker uniform of singlet, shorts and slippers. Fatty was one such icon. “In Albert Street we basked in the good company of 46-year-old Au Chan Seng, better known as Fatty. “Widely rumoured to be a millionaire from his chilly crab, sweet and sour pork, shark’s fin soup, roast chicken and fish-head, he is a voluble and entertaining talker. Hear him speak with gay frankness of the family’s 47-year-old restaurant and two stalls outside: The sooner the government move us into
hawker centres the better – the street is crawling with cats, rats and bugs. I’ve maintained the stalls only to please my old Pa, he started the business and has great attachment to them.”

Fatty was a hawker that a newspaper reporter could love. He was the only one who could “cook, roast and cut” among his 11 siblings who were teachers, lecturers and chartered accountants.

The moon-faced hawker, a tourist attraction in his own right, was often seen in a chauffeur-driven Mercedes Benz although he told ST it was his father’s car. Fatty’s restaurant was eventually relocated to Bencoolen Street and although he died in 2000, it continues to draw crowds.

The transformation of Singapore’s street food culture, with the ushering in of hawker centres built with modern amenities, happened quietly in the mid-1970s. The Government doggedly pursued the hawkers, coaxing them to move in, educating them and holding them to higher standards of hygiene. Newspaper coverage focus mainly on the benefits of this uniquely Singaporean attraction: the availability of affordable local fare in clean surroundings. The first hawker centre built by the Government in post-independent Singapore was Yung Sheng Road Hawker Centre, now called the Taman Jurong Market & Food Centre. At its opening in July 1972, layed in keeping the cost of living down, which was among
the reasons why millions of dollars were spent in setting up hawker centres.

By 1986, all the hawkers had been resettled. At last, the Singapore hawker had a roof over his head, with all the facilities – water, electricity, gas, waste disposal, ventilation, freezer and wash areas - that made for a safe and pleasant dining experience. The rating of the hawker stalls for cleanliness and food handling, from A to D, offered an assurance that the era of suspect hawker hygiene, associated with typhoid and cholera outbreaks, had passed.

For more than 20 years after that, no hawker centres were built. Residents of new HDB estates especially longed for these eating places which offer good food at affordable prices. People also mourned that the nation’s food heritage was on the wane amid growing recognition that the hawker was a uniquely Singaporean institution worth preserving.
In October 2011, the Government announced that 10 hawker centres would be built in new towns such as Pasir Ris, Jurong and Punggol. And in March 2015, plans were announced for another 10 new hawker centres by 2027 to make affordable hawker fare more widely available.

Recently, some university graduates made news when they swapped their briefcases for frying pans to become hawkerpreneurs. At the same time, many famous hawkers, now in their 70s, are giving up as their children show no interest in taking over the business. Some, however, are quitting with a tidy profit while keeping Singapore's food heritage alive.

Madam Betty Kong, 68, and her husband Ha Wai Kay, 64, made headlines in 2012 when they put up their 30-year-old hawker business for sale, at an eye-popping $3.5 million. Of the asking price, $2 million alone was for their secret Guangzhou-style barbecue recipe. The couple had hoped their 32-year-old son would take over but he chose to stay on in Australia after his studies.

In 2014, their Kay Lee Roast Meat Joint, in an old shophouse in Upper Paya Lebar Road, was sold for $4 million to Aztech Group. The conglomerate made it a franchise and opened several outlets. Madam Kong said she and her husband would work with the new owners to ensure the signature Kay Lee style survives. “We wanted the name to continue successfully and we will support them. When I’m 90 years old, Kay Lee will still be here,” she told The Straits Times on Oct 21, 2014.

In other words, the hawker has not left the building.
A subdued bull elephant (centre) is led off by trained elephants in an operation on June 9, 1990 to capture the jungle giants who had strayed into Pulau Tekong. ST PHOTO: ALBERT CHUA
The creatures seemed to have materialised from nowhere, on the island of Pulau Tekong used by the Singapore Armed Forces for training.

They were clearly not denizens of the sea: large footprints had trampled over grass, coconut trees lay uprooted and large droppings were left behind.

A group of national servicemen first spotted the jungle giants around end-May 1990 and reported the sighting to incredulous officers. Officials from the Defence Ministry and the Singapore Zoo made several trips to the island but
saw nothing.

The Zoo analysed the dung and confirmed it came from elephants, which it emerged, had swum the 1.5km expanse from Johor.

The three wild elephants had probably been driven away by forest-clearing and logging in Johor, the officials surmised.

For the Singapore Armed Forces, the three animals in their training ground became a jumbo-sized problem.

But Singaporeans could not get enough of the unexpected visitors, several called The Straits Times to say the elephants should be allowed to stay.

The solution, in the end, was a new home in a Malaysian forest reserve. After a brief stay in Singapore, from late May
to June 10, the three bull elephants were captured with the help of Malaysian wildlife experts and taken by lorry to Endau Rompin Park on the border of Johor and Pahang, where they were released.

The visitors left but revealed a hitherto hidden aspect of Singapore. “Singaporeans do care - some even passionately - about conservation of wildlife even though they live in a highly-urbanised country,” The Straits Times observed in a report on June 18.

A soft spot for the island’s diverse flora and fauna has often motivated Singaporeans to launch conservation campaigns like the one in 1986 to save the bird haven of Sungei Buloh, home to more than 200 avian species, as well as a few salt water crocodiles. In another instance, passionate nature lovers worked with the authorities to

An affectionate pair of Purple Herons claim their spot in the Sungei Buloh Nature Park on March 15, 2002. The park also plays host to plovers, sandpipers and bitterns at different times of the year.
ST PHOTO: STEPHANIE YEOW
preserve Chek Jawa in 2001, an oasis on the island of Pulau Ubin, so untouched that it offers a glimpse of what Singapore’s shores could have looked like before the 1950s.

Meticulous planning as well as research, public education, reforestation and clean-up projects have also led to a few success stories for the animals.

The oriental pied hornbill, for instance, had once disappeared. But it was taken from captivity to help strengthen numbers of Singapore’s native creatures, and now, is a fairly common sight in parks here.

In recent years, families of the critically-endangered, smooth-coated otter have begun charming visitors with
their antics in mangroves, coastal areas and even urban parks and drains.

But perhaps the honour of most frequently mentioned animal in The Straits Times should go to the tiger.

Singapore’s first zoo, established in the Singapore Botanic Gardens grounds in 1875, housed a tiger. On May 18, 1896, a reader wrote in to The Straits Times to complain of animal cruelty. But he did not mean the tiger. He was distressed about a live dog being put in the cage to feed it.

“Can you not break a lance in your much-read paper for our faithful quadruped friends?” the writer asked.

More often, though, stories in The Straits Times were about tigers of the uncaged variety.

“Excursionists to Changhie may, if so inclined, have a tiger hunt,” began an article on April 3, 1875. It was a short report, unusually so given its grave content, about the appearance of the “Pulo Obin man-eater”, who had already killed a man. The animal had been seen by a policeman as he went about “trimming the lamp”. In the days without electricity, this meant trimming the wick of street lamps, to keep the flame burning clean and bright.

Sightings were not uncommon at the time.

“We have had reports of a tiger being seen about Singapore; first he was seen on two or three occasions near Changhie; then he was heard of at Siglap; and then there were signs of him near the Botanical Gardens, and there seemed ground for hope, that H.R.H would exhibit himself, if not among the animals at the Gardens, at least as a mark for some of our sportsmen,” said a report on November 6, 1875. “We now hear of him at Seletar.”
On March 24, 1935, the king of the jungle earned prime billing: a banner headline across Page 1 that screamed: ‘TRACKER FINDS SINGAPORE TIGER’. A small blurb assured The Sunday Times readers it was NOT A MAN-EATER.

A ‘beat’ was organised to hunt ‘Mr Stripes’, as The Straits Times dubbed him.

In the early 20th century, a tiger reportedly visited the iconic Raffles Hotel for tea. The wild cat hid beneath a billiard table and was shot square between the eyes by the school principal of Raffles Institution, The Straits Times reported on August 13, 1902.

Not as majestic as the tiger, but feared nonetheless, were crocodiles and sharks. In February 1904, a column titled Singapore’s Excitements boasted about a macabre haul. “There are few cities for instance which can boast like Singapore of having had two crocodiles captured and a tiger killed within the limits of one week.”
In 1965, a sword-nosed shark weighing more than half-a-ton was caught off Pasir Panjang. Two years later came the grisly discovery of a man’s limbs and part of his torso inside a shark’s stomach. The shark had been bought by an Ellenborough Market fishmonger at a fish auction in Boat Quay. It was reportedly caught at a kelong off Pasir Panjang but police concluded the victim was not Singaporean and probably hailed from a neighbouring island.

In 1969, Singapore police issued a “missing” report with a difference. The description read: Height 4ft, 6 inches. Has a dark brown head, black beak, blue neck, double red wattles, brown legs and black feathers.

The description was of a rare cassowary bird (below) that had been stolen – along with two peacocks and a pair of storks – from the Jurong Bird Park. It turned up at a Chua Chu Kang farm.
Another great escape happened four years later when the Zoo’s black panther Twiggy made a bid for freedom in March 1973 and remained at large until the next February. The animal was eventually cornered and killed in a monsoon drain.
What about when Singapore’s much-loved star orang utan was on a film shoot at MacRitchie Reservoir in 1982, and was meant to be filmed half-way up the tree?

But the Zoo’s poster girl had other ideas. She climbed to the top, and stayed there for three days before falling off and breaking her arm.

“Ah Meng stages sit-in,” was the paper’s front page headline on March 30, 1982. The last tiger is believed to have been shot in Choa Chu Kang in the 1930s.

But in the late-90s, the big cat made a fleeting appearance in The Straits Times, although perhaps not in Singapore. On April 29, 1997, the paper reported the Police advising people to stay away from Pulau Ubin after a grandmother hunting for clams claimed to have seen a tiger.

Exhaustive searches yielded nothing.

When the newspaper visited the island at the end of the year, the story was being described the tallest ‘tail’ of the year. “The only tiger here is Tiger beer,” joked one visitor.
When Nanyang University was opened officially in 1958, it was the first university outside China catering to high school graduates from Chinese schools. Tens of thousands of people made their way to Jurong for the ceremony, causing a massive traffic jam. This made Sir William Goode, Singapore's Governor then, two hours late for the opening. Nanyang University merged with the University of Singapore in 1980, forming the National University of Singapore.
Jurong is widely believed to take its name from “jerung”, the Malay word for shark. In the early years, the waters surrounding the industrial estate were said to be shark-infested. Houses were poorly built and when a midnight fire struck in 1961, 50 people lost their homes. In 1962, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew made a 10-hour “problem probing” tour of Jurong’s farmlands.

ST PHOTOS: LOW YEW KONG
The bulk of supplies and workers for Jurong’s factories were far away from Jurong. In 1965, the now-defunct Jurong Railway Line was built to transport goods. ST PHOTOS: LOW YEW KONG
The Jurong Central fish market springs to life in the early hours of the morning. The multi-million-dollar complex, which was opened in 1969, supplies 81 per cent of Singapore’s seafood. In a report on Aug 31, 1986, The Straits Times reported that “there was enough fish that night to fill at least a couple of three-room HDB flats to the ceiling.” ST PHOTOS: LOW YEW KONG
Jurong was home to Singapore’s first open-air drive-in cinema built in the 1970s. The cinema was said to be a perfect place for dates, picnics, gatherings and family outings as “children could run around while their parents watched the movie”. It closed in 1985. ST PHOTOS: CHRISTOPHER LOH NJ
In 1978, Jurong’s $1.2-million bus interchange was touted as “the largest bus terminal of its kind in the region”. In 1990, it was shifted to a plot beside Boon Lay MRT station for the convenience of commuters. ST PHOTO: WONG KWAI CHOW
Future developments include the upcoming Singapore-Kuala Lumpur high-speed rail (HSR), which will have a terminus at the site of the current Jurong Country Club. Jurong is set to be Singapore’s second Central Business District. ST PHOTO: JAMIE KOH
THE SINGAPORE SOUL
Spectators waving the national flag during 2010 National Day Parade at the Padang.

ST PHOTO: JOYCE FANG
National identity is a lot like individual identity: it begins to take shape after birth and continues to form well into maturity.

Singapore’s sudden, traumatic birth after separation from Malaysia in 1965, its youth and astounding success have combined to make the question of national identity an especially fascinating one.

It is a question that has been examined time and again...
in The Straits Times: by leader writers and letter writers; columnists and ministers; academics and foreigners. Through interviews and polls, speeches and discussions, or just layman’s comments.

In the early years after Independence, building a national consciousness was no intellectual exercise. It was imperative to Singapore’s survival. As a deliberate construct, it sometimes tended to be seen as aspirational, or even artificial.

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew first raised the “grave problem of identity” in 1968, noting that all new countries faced the problem when an era of stability ends.

In Singapore’s case, there were added complications. In the first place, Singaporeans did not want to be Singaporean. “We wanted to be Malayans,” said Mr Lee. “Then the idea was extended and we decided to be Malaysians. But 23 months of Malaysia – a traumatic experience for all the parties in Malaysia – ended rather abruptly with our being Singaporeans.”

He also provided an “emotive definition” of a Singaporean: “a person who feels committed to upholding this society as it is – multi-racial, tolerant, accommodating, forward-looking – and who is prepared to stake his life for the community”.

In the ensuing years, a few key words and concepts crystallised in describing national identity or its lack: pragmatism, passion, meritocracy, creativity, materialism, bilingualism and tolerance.
NATIONAL DAY FUN PACK

What makes Singapore special? The National Day Parade 2015 fun pack design contest asked that question and invited Singaporeans to submit ideas. These 50 unique designs were picked:
PRAGMATISM VS PASSION

In 1979, physician and social advocate Nalla Tan noted in The Sunday Times that while Singapore had succeeded in forging a national identity to establish itself as a “self
respecting and reliable society”, materialism and smugness had unfortunately emerged as offshoots.

The lack of passion and its cousin, patriotism, also became a concern. In this sense, passion is antithetical to “pragmatism”, a quality Singaporeans saw themselves increasingly as having.

Mr Lee was close to tears at the 1989 National Day Rally when he spoke of Singaporeans emigrating, a problem compounded by falling birth rates. He urged Singaporeans to “have the conviction that Singapore is their country and their life... to build a country, you need passion”.

The ruling ethos of pragmatism was also seen
as inhibiting romance and courtship in a society with falling birth rates. A 2006 report on Valentine’s Day memorably described romance in Singapore as “seasonal, consumerist, functional and in denial”. It described, somewhat unkindly, that the local variant of the conventional marriage proposal, “Shall we get married?”, as “Shall we get an HDB flat?”

An elevated form of pragmatism also seemed to be at play for young men serving national service (NS), as indicated in a 1982 Defence Ministry survey.

Most said self-interest was the strongest motivating factor for serving NS because they were committed to defending “the Singaporean way of life”, which included “the food, the shopping centres, East Coast Parkway and Orchard Road”.

In 1997, 260 couples rushed to book a wedding date at the Registry of Marriages to beat an HDB deadline.

Young Singaporean men reporting for National Service call-up on August 30, 1967. ST PHOTO: KOK AH CHONG
IDEA WITH MOST MERIT

As an idea, meritocracy is perhaps the component most baked into national identity. It has been emphasised as a key tenet of policy since Independence as the lack of natural resources makes the development of human resources paramount.

In 1981, Trade and Industry Minister Goh Chok Tong expanded the meaning of the term. He noted that meritocracy had been misunderstood by being equated with a person’s ability, regardless of his ability to work in a team.

“In our definition of meritocracy, we must give double weightage to a person’s ability to mobilise all concerned behind a common goal.”

SOMETHING IN THE WAY WE SPEAK

A 1985 column noted that Singlish, Singapore’s edition of English, was tied to the national identity “like the smell of durian – a true child of Singapore would recognise it anywhere”.

But some feel its usefulness is limited for pragmatic reasons.

In 1992, The Straits Times examined both sides of the debate. Though it concluded Singlish was not “bad English”, it pointed out that its widespread use on mainstream
broadcast channels would make things difficult and confuse those who could not speak proper English.

THE CULTURE OF RESILIENCE

Ethnic cultures have also helped shape the national identity in unique ways. In a 2014 commentary in The Straits Times, Professor Wang Gungwu, chairman of the National University of Singapore’s East Asia Institute, drew an intriguing line between identity and “cultural resilience”. A recent surge in interest in heritage issues, he said, was a sign of local cultures responding to national and global forces.

In a migrant community like Singapore, local cultures that draw on ancestry do not merely survive, but are “badges of pride”, an embodiment of “cultural resilience” in a bewildering, fast-changing environment.

Members of Singapore Kityang Huay Kwan’s new youth wing, on September 2, 2014. The Teochew clan group plans to hold a coming-of-age ritual called Chu Hua Yuan, or “coming out of the garden” by August 2016. ST PHOTO: SEAH KWANG PENG
SINGAPORE GIRL

Accomplished and confident, Singapore’s young women are shaping the Singaporean identity while being shaped by it. In 2002, a columnist defended the perception of Singaporean women as “fierce” and made no apologies for the lack of submissive, feminine behaviour.

The Singaporean woman was shaped by her society, its competitive nature, emphasis on education and merit. She was “pragmatic and hence, materialistic”; she “goes out to work and tries to excel in her career, and is “frank and has no time for mind games”.

TIME WILL TELL

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser noted in a comprehensive 2012 report that the 2011 watershed general election gave netizens an opportunity to air views on Singapore that drew a distinction between love for the country and support for
the government in power.

“Singapore is at the threshold of a defining moment in its history when the people are rising up to take ownership of its destiny, while state paternalism makes way for state–people partnership, armed with a strong sense of national purpose. This will produce a patriotism which is more than just about love of food, place, family and friends, but extending into the realm of a national community where the people can be counted upon to stick with it through thick and thin.”

Perhaps one of the most insightful observation on national identity was made more than 40 years ago, by one of Singapore’s founding fathers Goh Keng Swee. In 1973, he suggested “the true Singaporean” would emerge from generations of Singaporeans sharing the experience of NS.

In 2006, then-Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts Lee Boon Yang said there was no need for Singaporeans to be anxious about creating a national identity quickly. It would evolve naturally over time.

Still, 50 years is a long time. What does it mean to be Singaporean today, as National Day 2015 nears? Is there a way to measure passion? Pragmatically?

And so the quest continues.
THE STRAITS TIMES went full colour in 1998 although it had produced its first colour supplement as early as 1897. The newspaper had frequent makeovers to remain visually appealing, with the latest design update in July 2015.
2015. The Straits Times turns 170, and Singapore turns 50. It is a year to celebrate, reflect, and then to look ahead.

The Straits Times has been an integral part of Singapore for 170 years. It has become an important and vital institution in our society, a force for much good.

But to remain relevant, all institutions must adapt along with societal change. So even as it celebrates its
170th Anniversary, the ST is confronting a fast-changing landscape.

ST, like all traditional media outlets, has to confront the changing role of the media in society. As the leading national broadsheet, the role that ST defines for itself forms an important benchmark for the role of media here in Singapore.

One question which frequently arises is: should ST adopt the ideology of the media as Fourth Estate: ferretting out the truth, holding governments to account and championing the poor against the rich.

A corollary to this ideology is that the media should not be subjected to rules and regulations, so as ensure that those in power cannot withhold information and stifle criticism.

But there are some realities which this ideology must confront:

- The reality of press barons who control substantial sections of the media, and use this influence to compel governments to pander to them and their interests - the media then becomes the handmaiden of the rich.
- The reality that the media, not infrequently, has to have an eye on its revenue, and hence the interest of its advertisers.
- The reality that the media holds tremendous power to discredit legitimately chosen governments, derail policies which may be good for society as a whole, and colour people’s perceptions.

These realities are quite at odds with an ideology built on the belief that the media will always put forward different
views objectively, without bending to pressure, financial or otherwise. These realities reflect how the media, left entirely to its own devices, might not always choose to act in the best interest of society as a whole.

A faith in the media as Fourth Estate also allows the media to become a powerful political actor, despite being unelected. It can and often does make or break governments. It can and often does decide which party wins elections. It can and often does make politicians of all stripes fawn on media barons.

We see this in many other countries, and this is not healthy for democracy.

In Singapore, we believe that the media best serves society by reporting honestly, accurately and truthfully on what is happening in the political arena.

In Singapore, we have thus employed a mix of approaches:

- Rules which prevent any single person from having majority control of the media (to prevent the rise of media barons);
- Laws which circumscribe, among other things, gratuitous insulting of race and religion; and
- Laws, conventions and mores which constrain the media from being a political actor and which encourage the media to be neutral, fair and objective in reporting.

Over time, these have formed the boundaries for media operating in Singapore. We want our media, including ST, to be neutral prisms, reflecting accurately the viewpoints across the political spectrum. They must let the people decide for themselves, based
on the facts put forward, honestly and objectively.

In this way, the people benefit. They get to hear the viewpoints across the political spectrum without distortions. It makes for a freer, more honest debate.

MEDIA AND SOCIAL HARMONY

This approach is not without its detractors. They see these constraints as stifling free speech, rather than a response to the realities of media as a business.

This is another ideological stance, one which states that there should be minimal constraints on information and speech. This ideology states that complete freedom of information and ideas results in greater discussion and enlightenment.

This ideology is often imbued with universality: that all societies must adopt this same approach, because it is equally good for all.

On 7 January this year, two gunmen forced their way into the office of the French magazine Charlie Hebdo. They killed 12 people in cold blood, calling out the names of their victims as
they shot them. The gunmen believed that they were the warriors of God, and were avenging insults to their religion.

Charlie Hebdo is a product of this ideology of complete freedom of information and speech. Charlie Hebdo’s creed was irreverence. It had portrayed Jesus, the Pope and Prophet Mohamed in sexual cartoons, and published images of masturbating Catholic nuns on their pages. Nothing was sacred nor out of bounds.

But the belief that free speech, regardless of what form it takes, will necessarily lead to greater understanding is itself built on another belief: that groups of people in society, when faced with attacks on their own identity - be it race, religion or culture – will choose to react calmly and engage in philosophical debate about the merits and demerits of the attack, however vitriolic.

Experience shows that the truth is sometimes the opposite. Charlie Hebdo had faced lawsuits from Catholics. It faced much more from the self-styled Muslim warriors of God on that fateful day in January.

Especially in diverse societies, people do react violently when attacks are made against them. Over the long term, distrust and animosity builds up as a result of such attacks, and racial, religious and cultural fault lines are deepened and widened.

Any honest debate on media freedom must reflect these realities. A society could choose to accept the inevitable societal consequences in pursuit of the broadest possible set of media freedoms. But it cannot proceed on the assumption that complete media freedom will have no impact on racial, religious harmony, that there will only be rational debate and enlightenment, more light than heat.
Singapore’s choice has been to accept the realities of our society. Our people generally do not want to allow their race, religion or culture attacked or demeaned. They are not willing to accept the consequence of allowing such attacks, which is a higher propensity for violence in society, and a less harmonious society, with deeper fault lines.

This is why we have laws which proscribe the freedom to launch an attack along racial, religious and cultural lines.

A crowd at Orchard Road on August 31, 2010. In Singapore’s diverse society, media has to handle race and religious issue carefully. ST PHOTO: BRYAN VAN DER BEEK

CONFRONTING A DIFFERENT MEDIA LANDSCAPE

The debate about the rules of media in society is only one of the challenges that traditional media, like the ST
face, the world over. There are other challenges as well.

The way people consume news is changing. There is less faith in institutions. There is less faith in mediated viewpoints. We live in the age of citizen journalism, where anyone with internet access is able to disseminate news and information. There is a proliferation of views on many issues, which dilutes the value of truly expert, well-considered views put across through traditional channels.

If we do not hold everyone to the same rules of integrity and honest reporting, we risk the media landscape becoming one which sensationalises and pander to popular sentiments.

And even as traditional media around the world face the challenge of falling advertisements and revenues, new players are finding ways to profit from their activities. The same realities on media freedoms apply equally to these new players.

The emergence of new players should not trigger a race to the bottom. It behoves ST to find the right platforms to reach out to a younger generation, whose consumption patterns are very different, without compromising its integrity.

ST’s rich heritage must continue to serve as its lodestar. Through credible, honest and objective reporting, ST has been an enabler of our collective conscience. In playing this role, it has contributed significantly to the success of Singapore over the last 50 years.

I wish ST the very best as it celebrates its 170th anniversary, in our jubilee year. Long may it continue as an important institution, and play its part in defining our society.

ABOUT THE WRITER:

Mr K Shanmugam read law at the National University of Singapore. He was admitted to the Singapore Bar as an Advocate & Solicitor in 1985.

He went into private practice and became one of the Senior Partners and head of Litigation & Dispute Resolution at Allen & Gledhill LLP.

In 1998, he was appointed a Senior Counsel of the Supreme Court of Singapore at the age of 38, one of the youngest lawyers to be so appointed.

On May 1, 2008 Mr Shanmugam was appointed a Cabinet Minister. He is now the Minister for Foreign Affairs and the Minister for Law. He has also served as the Minister for Home Affairs.
Singapore’s urban jungle. The evergreen Botanic Gardens have spun plenty of gold. Pioneering work on rubber cultivation was carried out there in the 1880s and 1890s, laying the foundation for the Malaya’s rubber boom, the source of many a fortune.

The keepers of Botanic Gardens pose for this July 8, 1877 photograph, including Kew-trained botanist James Murton, and Javanese and Chinese gardeners and coolies. When Singapore fell to the Japanese in 1942, Mr Kwan Koriba – a botany professor from the Imperial University of Kyoto – was appointed director of the Gardens.
To set up the gardens, the Agri-Horticultural Society acquired a plot of land in 1859 from influential Singaporean businessman Ho Ah Kay. A zoo with 140 animals, including a leopard, four kangaroos and a wallaby, was introduced in 1875 to attract more visitors. The zoo, however, was criticised for its smell and small range and closed in the early 1900s. Still, it remained an animal-friendly garden as seen in this January 23, 1966 photograph. ST PHOTO: MAK KIAN SENG
The Botanic Gardens is not only home to the giant Tembusu tree, featured on Singapore’s $5 currency notes, but to many other conserved heritage trees as well. This picture shows school-leavers Ivy Yeo and June Tok singing Christmas carols under an old, knotted tree on December 25, 1980. In the 1980s, the Parks and Recreation Department took the greening of Singapore zealously, planting 56,000 flowering trees, 400,000 shrubs and more than 10,000 fruit trees in a typical year. ST PHOTO: HAIRIS
On July 11, 2015, thousands turned up at the Gardens to watch the SSO perform for The Straits Times’ 170th birthday. The high-rise tree cover and thick vegetation along the perimeters of the Gardens shield visitors from the bustle of traffic, and partly explain why it draws more than 4.4 million visitors annually, making it the most-visited botanic garden in the world. Now that it is on the UNESCO World Heritage Sites list, the Gardens will continue to draw visitors from near and far.

ST PHOTO: JAMIE KOH
Faced with the challenges of an independent Singapore in the mid-1960s, the Government assigned the Botanic Gardens the responsibility of creating a “Garden City”. In 1967, the Gardens welcomed two Australian swans: gifts from the Western Australian Zoological Gardens in Perth. Swans continue to be hallmarks of the Singapore Gardens, as seen in this August 22, 1996 photograph. Not forgetting its original purpose, which is research, the School of Ornamental Horticulture was opened in 1972. ST PHOTO: GEORGE GASCON
Depending on what time you visit the park, sightings include exotic dog paraders, tree-huggers, brides and grooms posing for wedding pictures or that lone office worker having lunch. This April 3, 2009 photograph shows a group of friends posing for a photo after climbing onto a low-lying Tembusu tree branch. The tree, which is the most well-known in the Gardens, was there long before plans were made for the site in 1859. ST PHOTO: JOYCE FANG
Even after the 101-hectares Gardens by the Bay opened, the Botanic Gardens continues to hold its ground. It has more than 1,200 species of orchids and about 2,000 hybrids housed mainly in its National Orchid Garden – making it the largest collection in the world and a leading centre for botanical research and conservation. This May 15, 2015 photo shows a couple having their wedding photographs taken amid trees at the Gardens. ST PHOTO: KUA CHEE SIONG
The Singapore Botanic Gardens became the country’s first Unesco World Heritage Site on July 4, 2015, making it the third botanic gardens in the world to be placed on the list, and the only one in Asia. The Unesco committee said the 156-year-old Gardens, shown here in a May 29, 2015 photo, was an epitome of a British tropical colonial garden evolving into a modern and world-class botanic garden, scientific institution and place of conservation and education. ST PHOTOS: JAMIE KOH AND MARK CHEONG
Singapore’s top-selling newspaper, The Straits Times, was born 170 years ago. Its journey from an eight-page weekly read by a few hundred people to a multimedia news organisation with more than a million readers is marked by dramatic turning points. Here are some highlights.

**1845**

**A BANKRUPTCY AND A DEBUT**

Armenian merchant Marterus Thaddeus Apcar orders a printing press and materials from England, but he goes bankrupt before they are delivered.

Another Armenian, Catchick Moses, buys the machine and hires Englishman Robert Carr Woods as the editor to bring out the paper: The Straits Times And Singapore Journal Of Commerce. The first issue comes out on July 15. It appears every Tuesday, with eight pages of news, market reports and advertisements. It sells at 16
Spanish dollars a year or 36 Company rupees, the currencies of that time. A single copy sells at one Java rupee. After a successful four months, it is published twice a week.

Moses puts up the paper for sale. There are no buyers and editor Woods takes over the printing press.

The Straits Times covers its first breaking news event: the mutiny of 93 Chinese convicts on board the ship General Wood, off Singapore’s St John’s Island. The captain, chief officer and some sailors are killed. The convicts are recaptured and their trial is marked by controversy because despite the murders, they are charged only for seizing the ship.

A series of international and regional news events provides engaging content for the next few years – riots among Chinese secret societies, the Crimean War (1853–1856), the Second Opium War in China (1856 to 1860), a rebellion in Sarawak and the Indian Mutiny (1857).

The Straits Times becomes one of the main supporters of a
10-year campaign to transfer the Straits Settlements to direct colonial rule from London. The transfer takes place in 1867.

The paper becomes an afternoon daily, with a new name: Singapore Daily Times.

A fire destroys The Straits Times premises and plant, bankruptcy editor John Cameron (left). But aided by a friendly printer, the paper comes out the day after the fire with an editorial lambasting the inefficient fire brigade.

With the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the first ocean telegraph cable linking Bombay to Britain is laid. The Straits Times begins subscribing to Reuters news agency to provide fresh international news.

The title Singapore Daily Times is scrapped and the name reverts to The Straits Times.
Three supplements with colour pictures are produced, a first by a Malayan newspaper. Much admired, they cost $12,000 to produce and make a handsome profit of more than $3,000.

Bringing an end to proprietor/editor days, The Straits Times is incorporated as a private limited company, capitalised at $100,000.

World War I breaks out. The Straits Times raises money and recruits volunteers for forces overseas.

The Great Depression pushes down rubber and tin prices and brings the economy to a standstill. The Straits Times urges companies to extend – rather than shrink – activities and sets an example by buying a fleet of Morris Minor vans to deliver the paper, investing in new printing machinery and building a new office.

Malaya’s first Sunday paper, The Sunday Times, is launched to head off competition from the Malaya Tribune. It carries 16 pages of news and features and includes a women’s page and book reviews.
The Straits Times reports on Sept 4 that Britain is at war, but suggests that the possibility of the conflict reaching Singapore is remote.

A Japanese air raid in the early hours of Dec 8 takes Singapore by surprise. The Straits Times downplays the extent of casualties.

Singapore falls to the Japanese on Feb 15 and is renamed Syonan, Light of the South.

The Japanese operate their own English-language newspaper, The Shonan Times, from The Straits Times compound.

The Shonan Times is replaced by The Syonan Shimbun, operated by The Syonan Shimbun Association headed by Japanese-Americans who control all English and Chinese newspapers. A Malay publication Warta Malaya, edited by Indonesians and subject to Japanese supervision, also runs from The Straits Times premises.
World War II ends in September, when the Japanese surrender. On Sept 7, the first post-war issue of The Straits Times is published, bearing the headline: Singapore Is British Again! Our Day Of Liberation!

From this day, the front page is no longer just packed with advertisements, but also carries major news. The paper is also published in the morning.

Coverage reflects the growing rise of Asian nationalism and international pressures against European imperialism.

The Straits Times is held partly responsible for the events leading to the Maria Hertogh riots. From then, the newspaper exercises extra caution when touching on race and religion.
Reacting to a Straits Times report that addresses the sensitive issue of merger between Singapore and Malaya, Mr Lee Kuan Yew warns on May 18 that “any newspaper that tries to sour up or strain relations between the Federation and Singapore will go in for subversion”.

The Straits Times takes the case to the International Press Institute (IPI) in West Berlin and warns of a serious threat to the freedom of the press in Singapore. IPI carries out an investigation and concludes that both sides had over-reacted.

The PAP goes on to secure a clear victory in the election, sweeping 43 out of 51 seats in the new legislative assembly. Singapore is now under internal self-government, with the British government only taking charge of foreign policy and defence, and internal security shared between Singapore, Britain and Malaya.

The Straits Times moves its headquarters to Kuala Lumpur.

The newspaper is printed in both Singapore and Kuala Lumpur.
The Federation of Malaysia, which includes Singapore, is born on Sept 16.

The PAP’s General Election victory is seen by The Straits Times as an approval of the merger, which the paper supports. It also acknowledges the PAP’s ability to deal with the communists.

The outbreak of Chinese-Malay riots in July and September worsens existing tensions. Journalists seek to downplay the trouble, and The Straits Times encourages moderation.
Singapore becomes independent following its shocking separation from Malaysia on Aug 9, 1965.

The Straits Times keeps its measured approach in a bid to calm the situation.

The Straits Times plays an instrumental role in ending Indonesia’s violent Konfrontasi policy towards the Malaysian Federation: Deputy editor Wee Kim Wee (left) is granted an exclusive interview with Indonesian president Suharto who tells him of his wish to end Konfrontasi. After the scoop is published, diplomatic relations are restored. The nations cooperate in fighting communist subversion.

In September, 60 Straits Times Press staff members go on strike for better pay and working conditions, to which the management agrees on the fifth day.

In December, 870 workers go on strike to protest against their small bonus. The management and union take 13 days to reach an agreement, during which time there is no newspaper.
1972
SPLIT INTO TWO

The paper splits into The Straits Times and New Straits Times.

1973
BACK HOME

The Straits Times becomes a Singapore-based newspaper.

1977
IMPROVING STANDARDS

The questions of how to improve editorial standards and contribute to the nation-building process, while preserving the paper’s integrity, emerge as key concerns for The Straits Times. Motivated by sharp criticism from government leaders, the board decides that The Straits Times should define an editorial policy that would promote national development. It starts its School of Journalism and prepares to open its first overseas bureau in Asia in Bangkok.

1979
ATTRACT MORE GRADUATES

By-elections are held. Mr Lee Kuan Yew criticises The Straits Times at the traditional chap goh mei party at the end of the Chinese New Year for treating the elections like a “cockfight”. The Prime Minister further states at a meeting with senior and middle-grade journalists a month later that the paper’s English-speaking journalists lack a grasp of realities on the ground, and that the paper needs to attract more graduates with training and better salaries.

1981
NOMINEE

Mr J.B. Jeyaretnam, the leader of the Workers’ Party, wins a by-election in the Anson constituency. He emerges as the
first opposition member in parliament in 13 years. The Prime Minister largely blames the loss of a seat on The Straits Times’ election coverage, which had included reports of an impending hike in bus fares.

Fears of direct intervention by the government in the operations of The Straits Times prompt the management to request an interview with Mr Lee. It is eventually agreed that a government nominee approved by the company will be made executive chairman of The Straits Times. The company suggests Mr S.R. Nathan, a top civil servant on the verge of retirement.

Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) is formed with the merger of three publishing companies: Singapore News and Publications with the Straits Times Press and Times Publishing. It brings all English, Chinese and Malay newspapers under one umbrella.

SPH is incorporated as a public company on Aug 4.

The Straits Times celebrates its 150th anniversary and goes online by launching SPH’s website AsiaOne on June 15 and The Straits Times Interactive website on Dec 1.
The Straits Times goes full colour.

Launch of The Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund, a community project to help children from low-income families with school expenses. The fund supports over 10,000 children and young people every year. It has disbursed close to $42 million and benefited over 130,000 cases until 2014.

SPH sets up SPH MediaWorks Ltd to make a foray into broadcasting and The Straits Times launches a nightly TV news bulletin in the following year. This is pulled off the air in 2004 when the TV venture folds.

An April 19, 2004 article headlined: The NKF: Controversially Ahead Of Its Time? reports the outrage felt by a contractor who was asked to install a gold-plated tap in the bathroom of the office of National Kidney Foundation chief executive T. T. Durai.
Mr Durai sues senior correspondent Susan Long for defamation, but drops the lawsuit after two days of questioning in court in July 2005.

With SPH and MediaCorp bleeding from the competition, they merge their mass market TV and free newspaper operations. English-language Channel i ceases to transmit in 2005, while Channel U merges with MediaCorp’s Channel 5 and Channel 8 to make up MediaCorp TV Holdings Private Limited. SPH now holds a 20 per cent stake in the new company.

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<th>Year</th>
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<td>2005</td>
<td>Two magazines for schools, IN and Little Red Dot, are launched to attract young readers.</td>
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<td>2006</td>
<td>My Paper is launched as Singapore’s first Chinese freesheet. The Straits Times steps up efforts to establish a strong digital presence. Stomp (Straits Times Online Mobile Print), an interactive online portal designed for Straits Times readers to share viewpoints and stories, is launched. The site gets 600,000 hits within a week.</td>
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<td>2007</td>
<td>STI is renamed straitstimes.com, and drops the subscription model to offer free breaking news.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2008</td>
<td>RazorTV, The Straits Times’ online video news channel, is launched.</td>
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My Paper is relaunched as the first bilingual newspaper in Singapore.

The Straits Times is revamped to feature a new masthead and a layout that incorporates some elements from the original 1845 design, reflecting the rich heritage of the paper.

The Straits Times’ iPhone application is launched.
The Straits Times’ Twitter account, @STCom, is started.

The Straits Times’ print-plus-digital pricing strategy is launched, reflecting a growing focus on multi-platform media and the need to boost digital circulation, given the worldwide decline in print readership.

Han Fook Kwang hands over editorship to Warren Fernandez and The Straits Times is revamped to give it a fresh contemporary look.
ST Communities is launched to allow readers, journalists, artists and community partners to get published alongside one another.

The paper kicks off the Straits Times Appreciates Readers (STAR) programme on its 167th birthday with a carnival and concert at Gardens by the Bay. The programme is launched to reach out and connect with readers of The Straits Times.

The annual ST Run is launched. The inaugural event at Punggol Waterway is attended by 12,000 participants.

The Straits Times steps up efforts to engage readers through
a series of public forums on education, investments and foreign affairs.

SPH embarks on a 10-month transformation project to keep the company in sync with the changing media landscape. Editor-in-chief Patrick Daniel notes that digital growth has “more than offset” the decline in print circulation.

The Straits Times celebrates its 170th anniversary with a major revamp of all products, offering a new look and sharper content on its print and website editions and over its apps for smartphones and tablets. The newspaper also holds its first-ever public exhibition, drawing on its news archives of photographs and Page 1 coverage, to showcase its history.

SOURCES: The Straits Times archives and Dateline Singapore, a book by CM Turnbull
The Straits Times staff gather for a group photo outside the Times House at 390, Kim Seng Road in 2002, days before the ST newsroom moved to Toa Payoh North. The iconic building had housed the ST office for more than four decades.

ST PHOTO: TAY KAY CHIN

CREDITS

Living History: 170 Years Of The Straits Times

Editor: Warren Fernandez
Writer and project coordinator: Bhagyashree Garekar
Researchers: Yuen Sin, Charmaine Ng, Louisa Goh and Madeleine Lim
Copy editors: Siva Arasu and Chang Ai-Lien
Designer: Sally Lam
Animations: Manny Francisco, Marlene Rubio and David Gan

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