Former ST Chief speaks at Public Policy & Global Affairs talk

Former Chief Editor of The Straits Times, Mr Cheong Yip Seng, addressed students and faculty members at a talk jointly organised by the HSS’s Public Policy & Global Affairs Programme and the NTU Library. He spoke on how patriotism and quality media training are necessary to maintain a good press system in Singapore.

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To ensure a quality newspaper, proper training is necessary in a changing media landscape.

By Amir Yusof

Patriotism and quality media training are necessary to maintain a good press system in Singapore, said former Chief Editor of The Straits Times, Mr Cheong Yip Seng.

Speaking at a talk organised by the NTU Library on 28 Mar, Mr Cheong called young Singaporeans to step up and do their part for the country by putting their media skills into practice.

“If you are committed to this nation and want it to do well, join the media.

“Serve the mainstream media and help it maintain its high professional standards to preserve credibility for the long run,” Mr Cheong said.

This appeal came as he outlined the areas that the Republic’s political conditions have changed: the increasing difficulty to control national agenda, changing media consumption habits, and the need for a credible newspaper.

Mr Cheong explained that in the late 60’s, while he was still a rookie reporter, the ruling government had to ensure the media was supportive of its policies. This was done through a heavy-handed approach of controlling content.
“There was a sense of vulnerability at the time. Crime was high and the government was wary of threats from the north and the south,” Mr Cheong said.

“It needed its policies to sit well with the people. Hence, the media had to play a non-adversarial role.”

He agreed that those circumstances required the press to aid in nation-building efforts.

But with a developed Singapore and the advent of new media and the Internet, the focus has changed.

The increasing number of Singaporeans utilising social networks have “amplified the voices of dissent and forced the government to accept the Internet as a legitimate platform” for discussing topics concerning national interest.

The Internet also led to the digitisation of information and a new bite-sized way of consuming news.

The unbundling of information today allows people to choose the content they want, while abandoning news that does not interest them, said Mr Cheong.

He warned that bite-sized news consumption would lead to people ignoring other important points within policies.

Citing the recent White Paper debate, he joked that many only remembered the 6.9 million population figure from it.

“I’m fearful this way of consuming media will lead to a less-informed electorate.

“This is very dangerous because when you go to the ballot box, the risk is very high that you are going to make the decision of who to vote for based on incomplete information.”

A credible and well-informed newspaper is the answer to such a problem. This has always been a stand Mr Cheong takes but even more so now given the current situation.

A good press, however, is only possible if there is a steady stream of professionals who “collectively love this country and want this country to prosper”.

He explained that news-gathering is a complex process that requires a degree of professionalism and commitment that no online sites like TR Emeritus and The Online Citizen are capable of.

He stressed the importance of institutions that provide rigorous journalistic education beyond on-the-job training.

Final-year Communication Studies student, Jasmine Ng, 23, who was at the talk, agreed that a background in journalism does help.

But she does not discount that having knowledge in different subject areas could, in fact, add more value to the experience.
Koh Hui Yi, 19, a first-year Sociology student, who also attended the talk, shared similar sentiments.

It’s not impossible for students from other disciplines to pick up journalistic skills if they put in more time and effort, she said.

“It all boils down to whether these individuals have a genuine passion to make good journalists in the future,” she said.

It’s this same passion and dedication that Mr Cheong feels is lacking in newsrooms today.

He raised concerns over how the bountiful opportunities in Singapore might distract young Singaporeans from staying committed to journalism.

Citing the example of Singapore Press Holdings scholars, he said that many serve their bond and then leave for better-paying jobs.

Hence, the newspaper is unable to retain the talents they spent time and money training.

Repeating his call to action, Mr Cheong appealed to young Singaporeans to see that pursuing journalism is a worthy cause— a core group of quality journalists running the papers is essential for both the media and the nation.

“If the media loses some of its best people, the results will show very clearly in the paper and we cannot have a degraded product because it will not serve the people well.”