Cherian George's book offers a highly informative glimpse into the workings of Singapore's press system, and what he calls “the PAP [People's Action Party] model of press control” (p. 24). Against accusations of crude political repression and blatantly dictatorial control, George argues that the approach to managing the press that the ruling party has developed over its tenure is far more sophisticated, resilient and diffuse. While the national government maintains the legal rights that it inherited from Singapore's British colonizers to ban any newspaper and detain individuals without trial, it has in recent decades especially, eschewed the use of these heavy-handed measures in favour of more market-based mechanisms.

First among these is the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (NPPA) of 1974, which states that newspapers can only be published by publicly-listed companies, and that no single shareholder can own more than a 12 per cent stake, without attaining the government’s permission (p. 30). It also requires all newspaper companies to have two classes of shares: ordinary and management. Management shares carry 200 times more voting weight on matters of personnel appointment than ordinary shares do, and their assignment is decided not by the company itself, but by the state (p. 31). Management shareholders of Singapore's biggest newspaper company, Singapore Press Holdings, currently include Great Eastern Life Assurance, NTUC Income Insurance Cooperative, Singapore Telecom, DBS Bank and United Overseas Bank. These are institutions that have no common political causes or ideals, but do have massive financial interests in the stability of Singapore's economy and society. Such an ownership structure itself, George argues, sufficiently ensures that Singapore's press remains relatively conservative in its orientation.
George is also careful to emphasise, however, that such corporatisation of the news media is not unique to Singapore, but a prevalent trend worldwide. Here again, he counters exaggerated depictions of authoritarian press control in Singapore—this time by showing that the conservative tendency of Singapore’s press does not contravene, but is, in fact, in accord with global, and particularly Western, industry norms.

What does set the PAP model apart, George argues, are certain historically contingent features that perhaps afford the ruling party more discretionary power over the press than other national governments enjoy. This includes the fact that its administrative dominance over the small city-state makes sure that “the trust of the top leadership is indispensable for any establishment institution, including the news media” (p. 65). Conscious that their organisation’s very existence depends on the maintenance of this trust, George argues, news professionals in Singapore are easily drawn into self-censorship, and what he calls “meta-censorship: censorship of information about the exercise of censorship” itself (p. 115). The very extent of the political dominance that the PAP government has by now achieved thus enables it to impose its own agenda without resorting to political force. Rather than trying to meet all dissent with repression, it now strives to maintain a “soft authoritarian” (p. 147) form of rule by “calibrating [its] coercion” (p. 115).

Although George acknowledges that logical consistency is rarely ever a determinant of political reality, he seems unable to resist engaging in a personal debate with PAP-government statements on the press and its politics—if only for the satisfaction of pointing out the more aggravating logical weaknesses that an attentive follower might find in them (pp. 71–93). For example, the repeated reference of official discourse to the dangers of excessive democracy, when Singapore’s political situation does not currently stand near this end of the spectrum (p. 88); and its tendency to contradict itself by portraying the Singaporean public as irrational and easily misled when explaining the need for continued press restrictions, and portraying it as rational, astute and wise when celebrating its electoral support for the PAP government (p. 90).

George also highlights some potential drawbacks of today’s softer but more finely pervasive approach to managing the news media. One is the tendency of a commercially-oriented national press, that focuses “increasingly on ‘lifestyle,’ entertainment and personal finance”, to “cultivat[e] the public as consumers and investors rather than citizens” (p. 45). Another is “the cultivation of political apathy” (p. 107) that may result from the government’s practice of converting contentious matters of political principle into technical questions of administration. By framing the parameters of public political discourse through the binary alternatives of trust in the PAP government’s stewardship, on the one