

# The Straits Times

by Ho, Stephanie

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With a history dating back to 1845, *The Straits Times* is the most widely read newspaper in Singapore with a reported combined print and digital readership of 1.34 million in 2014.<sup>1</sup> It is currently the flagship English-language daily newspaper of Singapore Press Holdings Ltd (SPH), one of Asia's leading media organisations with commercial interests in newspapers, book publishing, radio, television, new media, real estate, online classifieds, events and exhibitions, and education.<sup>2</sup>

## Origins

How *The Straits Times* was first conceived remains in dispute. The account given by [Charles Burton Buckley](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1145\\_2006-08-29.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1145_2006-08-29.html)) – an amateur historian and a prominent resident of colonial Singapore – claims that the idea for establishing the newspaper came from an [Armenian](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_334\\_2005-01-26.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_334_2005-01-26.html)) merchant, Marterus Thaddeus Apar, who had employed an editor and ordered printing equipment from England for the purpose. Unfortunately, the intended editor died suddenly and Apar went bankrupt before the arrival of the equipment. As a favour to Apar, fellow Armenian Catchick Moses bought over the printing press and launched the newspaper in 1845 with [Robert Carr Woods](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1854\\_2011-11-05.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1854_2011-11-05.html)), an English journalist from Bombay, as the editor. Historian [Constance Mary Turnbull](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1382\\_2008-12-31.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1382_2008-12-31.html)) disputed this account, arguing that it was unlikely that an Armenian merchant would have wanted to set up an English-language newspaper. In addition, she argued that given the limited size of the potential readership, it was unlikely that one would have wanted to start a newspaper to rival [The Singapore Free Press](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_88\\_2005-02-03.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_88_2005-02-03.html)), which was more established.<sup>3</sup>

However, it has also been postulated that Apar wanted to set up a printing press to publish books in Armenian.<sup>4</sup>

## Private business (1845–99)

### Early beginnings

The newspaper was originally known as *The Straits Times, and Singapore Journal of Commerce*, a weekly paper first published on 15 July 1845. The first issue consisted of eight folio pages.<sup>5</sup> The content comprised advertisements, an editorial, local news as well as foreign news extracted from overseas newspapers. The newspaper operated from its offices at No. 7 Commercial Square (present-day [Raffles Place](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_864\\_2004-12-30.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_864_2004-12-30.html))).<sup>6</sup> With no more than 100 subscribers paying \$16 a year, the newspaper struggled to survive. Moses withdrew from the business and left it to Woods in 1846.<sup>7</sup>

### Growing pains

In 1858, the newspaper underwent a major change when a daily edition known as *Singapore Daily Times*, which carried political and local news as well as commercial and shipping information, was introduced.<sup>8</sup> *The Straits Times, and Singapore Journal of Commerce* was published for overseas distribution.<sup>9</sup> Shortly before midnight on 16 February 1869, a fire broke out that destroyed the newspaper's offices and printing equipment in Commercial Square. In spite of the loss, the newspaper managed to publish the issue for the following day with the help of another printer, and remained in print. The company moved into a new rented office space on 25 February.<sup>10</sup>

In January 1883, the name of the daily paper reverted to *The Straits Times*, while the weekly issue merged with the *Overland Journal* and became known as the *Straits Times Weekly Issue*.<sup>11</sup> The newspaper underwent significant changes when Scottish journalist Annot Reid took over the editorship of the newspaper in 1888. He made several improvements to the newspaper such as enlarging the paper size, expanding content coverage and reducing the price of the newspaper.<sup>12</sup> In 1900, Reid returned to United Kingdom and the press was put up for sale.<sup>13</sup>

## Joint-stock company (1900–49)

### Expansion and modernisation

In May 1900, *The Straits Times* moved from private ownership to become a joint-stock company with a capital of \$100,000.<sup>14</sup> The following year, the press acquired its own premises on [Cecl Street](#) ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1435\\_2009-12-10.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1435_2009-12-10.html)), and both the office and printing plant were relocated there in August 1903.<sup>15</sup>

Alexander William Still was the newspaper's editor from 1908 to 1926.<sup>16</sup> Still's fearless editorials attracted several commercial libel suits, but they also boosted circulation and advertising revenue.<sup>17</sup> In 1928, George William Seabridge, a former news editor of *The Statesman, Calcutta*, took over the reins as editor. During his 18-year tenure as editor, Seabridge updated the look of the newspaper, increased the number of pages and the use of pictures, and occasionally featured cartoons.<sup>18</sup> Seabridge's other achievements included increasing newspaper circulation and launching a Sunday edition of the newspaper known as *The Sunday Times*. He also introduced *The Straits Times Annual*, and acquired *The Singapore Free Press*. It was under his editorship that the newspaper purchased a rotary press in 1931 – the first to do so in Malaya. Seabridge also oversaw the opening of the newspaper's London and Kuala Lumpur offices.<sup>19</sup>

In 1937, the company appointed Alfred Charles Simmons as its general manager. One of Simmons's initiatives was to lower the price of the newspaper from 10 cents to five cents in order to reach out to the growing middle class. As a result, the newspaper's circulation rose from less than 5,000 in 1928 to 15,000 in 1939.<sup>20</sup>

## War years

*The Straits Times* stopped publication during the Japanese Occupation from 1942 to 1945. During the occupation years, the Japanese produced their own English-language newspaper known as *The Shonan Times* (later renamed *The Syonan Shimbun*) from the Straits Times offices. They used several technicians who used to work for *The Straits Times* and recruited local journalists.<sup>21</sup>

The first postwar issue of *The Straits Times* was published on 7 September 1945. The newspaper was initially printed in a shortened format due to printing difficulties in the immediate postwar period.<sup>22</sup> It also started a trend by placing the news instead of advertisements on the front page, which was the practice at the time.<sup>23</sup>

### Public limited company (1950–83)

#### Postwar expansion

The 1950s was a time of change for the newspaper. In March 1950, *The Straits Times* became a public limited company and increased the number of shareholders as well as capital to finance operations and expansion.<sup>24</sup> In 1952, the newspaper purchased the Kuala Lumpur-based *Malay Mail*, and in 1957 it started the romanised Malay newspaper *Berita Harian*.<sup>25</sup>

With Simmons leading the newspaper's expansion, the offices on Cecil Street became too small for the company's operations. Thus, the newspaper purchased the former *Malaya Tribune* offices on Anson Road ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_348\\_2004-12-17.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_348_2004-12-17.html)). When these two offices proved insufficient for the company's needs, the newspaper acquired land at the junction of Kim Seng ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_217\\_2004-12-27.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_217_2004-12-27.html)) and River Valley (<http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/search.aspx>) roads to build Times House ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_581\\_2005-01-19.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_581_2005-01-19.html)).<sup>26</sup> The fully air-conditioned building opened on 3 April 1958 and consisted of a front block and a double-story press block.<sup>27</sup>

#### Relocation to Kuala Lumpur

In 1959, the company relocated its headquarters to Robson House on Pudu Road, Kuala Lumpur. Simmons had started considering the move soon after the Federation of Malaya gained independence in 1957. He felt that Kuala Lumpur was a more convenient distribution point, given its central geographical location and the rising circulation figures in the Federation.<sup>28</sup>

There were other reasons behind the relocation. The Alliance government in Malaya at the time looked to be more stable and open to free enterprise compared with Singapore, which was then faced with militant trade unions and strikes.<sup>29</sup> There was also the assumption that Kuala Lumpur would eventually become the capital of a united Singapore and Malaya.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the People's Action Party ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2015-02-04\\_094340.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2015-02-04_094340.html)) (PAP) at the time was antagonistic to *The Straits Times*, accusing the newspaper of inaccurate reporting and representing British interests.<sup>31</sup>

The relocation to Kuala Lumpur required some reorganisation. Most of the journalists were transferred to the new headquarters. A skeletal staff remained in Singapore's Times House supervised by the deputy editor, Wee Kim Wee ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_255\\_2005-01-12.html?s=Wee%20kim%20wee](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_255_2005-01-12.html?s=Wee%20kim%20wee)), a former staff who had left to join the United Press International agency but was invited to return.<sup>32</sup> The editor-in-chief at the time was Leslie Hoffman, who was based in Kuala Lumpur.<sup>33</sup>

#### Union strikes

From the 1950s onwards, relations between the newspaper's local staff and management became increasingly strained. In 1954, the newspaper's printers who belonged to the Singapore Printing Employees' Union staged a 14-day strike ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1240\\_2008-11-30.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1240_2008-11-30.html)). The underlying issue was discontent over poor pay among the printers.<sup>34</sup>

In 1966, journalists who were members of the Singapore National Union of Journalists (SNUJ), together with printers, clerical and other staff members of the newspaper staged a five-day strike. This was in response to cuts made to the salary of two SNUJ officials, Peter Lim and Francis Rozario, for taking time off for union work without waiting for management approval.<sup>35</sup> The strike was eventually settled when management agreed to higher salaries and back pay for its employees.<sup>36</sup>

The last journalists' strike occurred on 23 December 1971 and was staged in protest of the small size of the journalists' bonus packages.<sup>37</sup> The eight-day strike, which involved around 900 journalists and printers from the Straits Times Group and *New Nation*, prevented *The Straits Times* from publishing for a week.<sup>38</sup> The strike ended when *The Straits Times* management agreed to pay the workers a two-and-a-half month bonus. Clement Mesanas, then secretary-general of the SNUJ, suggested that the strike helped quicken the pace of decolonisation in the newspaper.<sup>39</sup>

#### Separation from Malaysia

Singapore's separation from the Federation of Malaysia in 1965 made it untenable for *The Straits Times* to be headquartered in Kuala Lumpur. The impetus for relocation of the newspaper's headquarters to Singapore came from the Malaysian government, who found it unacceptable that *The Straits Times* and its subsidiaries, which had widespread circulation and influence in Malaysia, had nearly 70 percent of its equity capital owned in Singapore.<sup>40</sup>

In 1973, Simmons, then chairman of the Straits Times Group, announced a restructure of the group. This resulted in the formation of two companies: the New Straits Times, which would be a Malaysian publicly owned company; and the Straits Times Press (Singapore), which would be responsible for the group's subsidiary companies in Singapore and abroad.<sup>41</sup>

A subsequent reorganisation of the Straits Times Press occurred in 1974 with the passing of the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act. To comply with the Act, the company had to separate its newspaper business from its other subsidiaries. Following this reorganisation, a new company, Straits Times Press (1975) Ltd, was incorporated on 28 May 1975 to operate the newspaper publishing business.<sup>42</sup>

#### Reorganisation and restructuring

Up till the early 1980s, the government continued to be wary of *The Straits Times* and its news coverage. In order to avoid government intervention, the newspaper's management decided to appoint the former permanent secretary at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, S. R. Nathan ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_490\\_2004-12-23.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_490_2004-12-23.html)), as executive chairman of the Straits Times Press in 1982.<sup>43</sup> Nathan has been credited as a bridge-builder who was successful in establishing friendlier ties between the newspaper and the government.<sup>44</sup>

That same year, the newspaper industry underwent a major restructuring that created two competitive newspaper groups publishing both English and Chinese newspapers. The Singapore News and Publications Ltd (SNPL) was formed by a merger of the Chinese newspapers Nanyang Siang Pau

([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2017-01-10\\_095946.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2017-01-10_095946.html)) and *Sin Chew Jit Poh* as a competitor to the Straits Times Group. In addition to its Chinese papers, SNPL published the English-language *Singapore Monitor* as well as *New Nation*, which was a newspaper originally under the Straits Times Group and later handed over to SNPL.<sup>45</sup>

### **Part of Singapore Press Holdings (1984–present)**

#### Formation of Singapore Press Holdings

In 1984, The Straits Times Press (1975) Ltd merged with Times Publishing Berhad and SNPL to form Singapore Press Holdings Ltd (SPH). Shareholders of the various companies were issued with shares in SPH.<sup>46</sup> The merger made SPH one of the most cash-rich companies in Singapore, allowing it to seek new investment opportunities that would permit it to grow into an even larger publications and communications conglomerate.<sup>47</sup>

Former banker and cabinet minister **Lim Kim San** ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_645\\_2005-01-11.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_645_2005-01-11.html)) replaced S. R. Nathan as executive chairman of SPH in 1988. Upon joining the organisation, Lim's main objective was to assimilate the SPH into a cohesive entity.<sup>48</sup> He also established a management culture that emphasised profitability as well as cost and operational efficiency. Lim served for 14 years as executive chairman, after which he remained for another three years as senior advisor.<sup>49</sup>

#### 150th anniversary celebrations

The newspaper celebrated its 150th anniversary in 1995. The commemorative items produced for the occasion included a 400-page book titled *Dateline Singapore: 150 Years of the Straits Times*, written by Turnbull; a special news supplement; and a reproduction of the front page of the first issue of the newspaper published in 1845.<sup>50</sup>

#### Consolidation and evolution

In 2002, SPH consolidated its English, Malay and Chinese newsrooms and moved them to its new headquarters in **Toa Payoh North** ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2014-06-16\\_150303.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-06-16_150303.html)).<sup>51</sup> Following the move and consolidation, 65 staff from its production, administration and information technology divisions were retrenched as a cost-cutting measure.<sup>52</sup> In 2003, Times House was sold to Marco Polo Developments for approximately S\$119 million.<sup>53</sup>

*The Straits Times* has continued to adapt and improve as a newspaper under SPH, garnering awards and accolades such as the 2014 Newspaper of the Year title by Marketing Magazine.<sup>54</sup> The newspaper also started corporate social responsibility initiatives such as the Straits Times School Pocket Money Fund, which was launched by *The Straits Times* in 2000 as a community project to provide pocket money for children from low-income families.<sup>55</sup>

*The Straits Times*, which is available in both print and digital versions, continues to be the most widely read newspaper in Singapore with a daily average circulation of 481,700 as of August 2015.<sup>56</sup>

#### 170th anniversary celebrations

*The Straits Times* released a special edition of the paper on 15 July 2015 for its 170th anniversary. The occasion was also marked by a string of events and gifts, including an exhibition held at the **ArtScience Museum** ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1816\\_2011-07-01.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1816_2011-07-01.html)), titled *Singapore Stories: Then, Now, Tomorrow*, which showcased the paper's archival materials;<sup>57</sup> a free concert by the **Singapore Symphony Orchestra** ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_853\\_2005-01-11.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_853_2005-01-11.html)) at the **Botanic Gardens** ([http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_545\\_2005-01-24.html](http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_545_2005-01-24.html)),<sup>58</sup> a commemorative e-book made available for free download,<sup>59</sup> a number of contests organised for readers;<sup>60</sup> and an overhaul in the newspaper's design.<sup>61</sup>

### **Timeline**

**15 Jul 1845:** First issue of *The Straits Times*, and *Singapore Journal of Commerce* is published, with Robert Carr Woods as editor.

**1858:** Newspaper becomes an afternoon daily and is renamed *Singapore Daily Times*.

**16 Feb 1869:** Fire razes *Straits Times* office premises and printing equipment.

**1883:** Daily issue is renamed *The Straits Times*.

**1888:** Arnot Reid is appointed editor.

**May 1900:** Newspaper becomes a joint-stock company.

**1908:** Alexander William Still is appointed editor.

**1928:** George William Seabridge is appointed editor.

**1931:** Newspaper purchases a rotary press.

**1937:** Alfred Charles Simmons is appointed general manager.

**1942–45:** Newspaper stops production during the Japanese Occupation.

**7 Sep 1945:** First issue of the newspaper published after the occupation.

**Mar 1950:** Newspaper becomes a public limited company.

**1954:** Printers go on a two-week strike.

**3 Apr 1958:** New office at Times House begins operations.

**1959:** Newspaper headquarters relocates to Kuala Lumpur, and Singapore premises become a branch office.

**1966:** Printers and journalists go on a five-day strike.

**1971:** Printers and journalists go on an eight-day strike.

**1973:** Newspaper restructured into two companies: Straits Times Press (Singapore) and New Straits Times.

**1975:** The Straits Times Press (1975) Ltd is incorporated.

**1982:** S. R. Nathan is appointed executive chairman; SNPL is formed as a competitor to the Straits Times Group.

**1984:** The Straits Times Press, SNPL and Times Publishing Bhd are merged to form SPH, a multiplatform media organisation.

**1988:** Lim Kim San is appointed executive chairman of SPH.

**2002:** SPH headquarters moves to Toa Payoh North.

**2015:** *The Straits Times* celebrates its 170th anniversary.

**Aug 2015:** *The Straits Times* reaches a daily average circulation of 481,700.

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[The Straits Times strike](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1240_2008-11-30.html) ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1240\\_2008-11-30.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1240_2008-11-30.html))

The Straits Times strike arose from a dispute over the terms of reinstatement of a dismissed worker. The strike was ...

[Robert Carr Woods, Sr](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1854_2011-11-05.html) ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_1854\\_2011-11-05.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1854_2011-11-05.html))

Robert Carr Woods, Senior (b. 31 July 1816, England–d. 16 March 1875, Singapore), popularly known as Robin, was the ...

[Singapore Chronicle](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_513_2005-01-06.html) ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_513\\_2005-01-06.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_513_2005-01-06.html))

The Singapore Chronicle was the first newspaper in Singapore. Its inaugural issue was published on 1 January 1824. Originally ...

[The Singapore Free Press](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_88_2005-02-03.html) ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_88\\_2005-02-03.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_88_2005-02-03.html))

Published for the first time on 8 October 1835, The Singapore Free Press was Singapore's second English-language newspaper, ...

[Times House](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_581_2005-01-19.html) ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_581\\_2005-01-19.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_581_2005-01-19.html))

Officially opened on 3 April 1958, Times House, the operation base for Singapore's leading newspapers once stood at ...

[Laurence Nunns Guillemard](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-04-23_085352.html) ([https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP\\_2014-04-23\\_085352.html](https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2014-04-23_085352.html))

Sir Laurence Nunns Guillemard (b. 1862 – d. 1951, London, England) was the only Governor of the Straits Settlements ...

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