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GROWING SINGAPORE'S FUNNY BONE: LAUGHING IN THE FACE OF DANGERS, PITFALLS AND POLITICIANS

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There was once a time in Singapore when the mocking of authority figures would be regarded as a [no-go zone](#). Leaders and politicians were rarely subjects of comedy for such jokes would be considered too distasteful and disrespectful for mass consumption. *Acceptable* local comedy, as such, was limited to the physical and sometimes lowbrow variety.

Enter the internet.

Emails became a popular mode of communication in the early nineties, and it was around that period that jokes about the country's leaders (and their policies) began to circulate – far and wide. Of the vast varieties of comical emails, none were perhaps as well received as Lee Kin Mun's, or as he is more commonly known, [Mr. Brown](#) – a moniker that has stuck with Lee since he was 18, due to his incessant repetition of the phrase, 'How now brown cow?'

Lee, who spoke at Singapore Management University's [Wee Kim Wee Centre](#), mentioned a time when one of his emails hopped so quickly in-between inboxes that it landed back in his inbox within a day. It was forwarded back to him by a friend who did not know that he was, in fact, the email's author. Lee noticed, however, that the email subject had been changed. Someone renamed it "Singapore National Education" – to coincide with the government's then newly launched [national education programme](#) for students of state schools.

Lee adopted that subject title for all subsequent emails. His 'National Education' series ultimately ran for a total of eight years, comprising [108 entries](#). More importantly, it turned 'Mr. Brown' into a household name.

"Sheer laziness"

Lee registered and set up his own website when he got tired of repeated requests for some of his old email essays. The website was, in his own words, "a place to dump everything so anyone asking for old issues – I just say go to the site." It was a humble (read: manual HTML) site borne out of "sheer laziness" with a two-megabyte limit. "(Running the site) was fun but it was also just painful to update, because every time I updated a page, I had to update another three by hand," he said.

While Lee would argue that it was "sheer laziness again" that led him to adopt his website's current blog platform, the breadth of his online offerings might reveal quite the opposite. He produces many short and snappy commentaries (he calls them "rants"), lots of photographs, videos, and a popular series of [podcasts](#) that boasts even the Prime Minister amongst its listeners.

'The Mr. Brown Show' podcast started in 2005 with a microphone attached to a click-wheel iPod, Lee said, and they were mostly made inside a small stuffy storeroom that would allow only five minutes of recording at any one go – "because we only had five minutes of air. If we made any mistakes and had to do it over, we had to open the door and let the air in," he joked.

As time went by, Lee admittedly got carried away, buying equipment after equipment to improve the quality of his shows. Soon, he found himself with his very own recording studio. "It's soundproof and everything," he boasted, adding that guests would often marvel at how surprisingly professional his work environment looks. "I think in their minds, we're recording the show at my mom's basement, and wearing our pyjamas."

Serious laughing matter?

While Lee's media diet comprises mostly of comedy and sci-fi television, neither provides as much inspiration as watching [Singapore Parliament discussions](#) or reading national broadsheet, [The Straits Times](#), which, according to him, is "one of the funniest papers in the world".

Singapore has the best environment for comedy because there is much humour to be found here, he said to a bemused audience. His argument goes that because government officials take themselves so seriously, failings and shortfalls make great fodder for cutting satire – perhaps more so when public figures keep stiff upper lips and refuse to budge.

It would come as no surprise that some have found Lee's brand of irreverent, wisecracking comedy to be less than amusing. Politicians, not used to an increasingly jibe-tolerant climate, might even find it downright offensive. Yet, with no tradition of tongue-in-cheek political speech, such comedy can register as expressions of dissent and sedition – and they have.

In 2006, right after Singapore's general election, Lee wrote a [column](#) for the Today newspaper that poked fun at rising living costs that surfaced following the polls. Soon after the article was published, the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA) sent a [letter](#) to the newspaper stating, "*It is not the role of journalists or newspapers in Singapore to champion issues, or campaign for or against the Government. If a columnist presents himself as a non-political observer, while exploiting his access to the mass media to undermine the Government's standing with the electorate, then he is no longer a constructive critic, but a partisan player in politics.*"

MICA's response sent Lee's supporters up in arms. To protest, some went as far as to gather at a train station, all dressed in brown, for a flash mob of sorts. This was viewed by many, including Lee, to be an audacious move, considering that demonstrations are largely unheard of, not to mention, illegal, in Singapore. It certainly compelled the Prime Minister to [comment](#) and elaborate on the government's move: "Countries can become unstable if political figures are not given basic respect." He added that if the government did not issue a response, such "untruths" will be repeated, eventually believed, and the government will lose its "moral authority to govern".

"That was my last column for Today... the newspaper yanked the column; suspended it indefinitely," Lee recounted. In 2009, the same thing happened again for a column that Lee had written for [InSing.com](#), a website owned by SingTel, a government-linked telecommunications corporation. This time, [the article in question](#) made fun of the floods that had occurred in parts of Singapore, and of the statements that followed from the government body in charge. The article was taken off the website at the request of MICA, Lee said.

Right after the article went "missing", Lee posted it on his own website. People seemed to only realise then that he had been an [InSing.com](#) columnist, he said; so it might have been a case where outright censorship actually had the opposite effect of bringing greater awareness to his article. "It was nice to have that publicity... Once a while, you need to get banned," he joked.

Above politics and politicians

While Lee believes he has "cheesed off every ministry" and "pissed off just about anybody in the government", he was asked by government officials to participate at (not one but) two National Day Parades - a move he described as both "odd" and "farsighted". He agreed, received the autonomy to do as he pleased and had fun while he was at it. For both years, Lee turned in spoofs of popular national songs; videos that have collectively garnered more than a million views.

Lee's 'coverage' goes all the way up to late August, when the Prime Minister would deliver his annual National Day Rally speech. Many people do not watch the rally, Lee said, and so "I see it as a public duty to inform - but of course, with my spin lah." Each year, Lee would stay glued to the television (and Twitter) for the entire three-hour duration of the speech, tweeting updates and thoughts throughout. In 2006, Lee created a podcast to commemorate a gaffe that the Prime Minister had made during his speech. More than 500,000 people downloaded that particular episode, he said - and this number does not even include unauthorised copies on YouTube, email circulation, etc.

A fan-created video to complement the Mr. Brown podcast

Lee has something to say about almost every development in Singapore's socio-political landscape. When Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong was conferred the title of Emeritus Senior Minister, Lee created a title for himself: [Emeritus Senior Blogfather of Singapore](#). When an unflattering picture of member of parliament Tin Pei Ling surfaced on the internet, Lee proceeded to post an equally unflattering picture of himself.



Source: [Mr. Brown.com](http://Mr.Brown.com)

To demonstrate further just how un-serious he is, Lee told the audience, “Some of you may think I only satirise politics, but that’s not true. I also like to [make fun of Tay Ping Hui](#).” Tay is a TV actor with state broadcaster, MediaCorp, a singer, compere, and also, a budding politician; “a man of many faces”, Lee noted – sarcastically, of course.

All's fair in love, war and comedy

With hundreds of thousands of website visitors, podcast and YouTube subscribers, Twitter followers, and so on - audience members wanted to know if Lee might consider channelling his relatively large following to champion important social causes, or even run for office in the future.

On the latter suggestion, Lee said, “I’ve been asked that before. I don’t have the temperament for it. Also, there are too many unflattering pictures of me on the internet.” On top of that, he added cheekily, “my Chinese cannot make it [sic]” - a [dig](#) at recently elected President Tony Tan.

On the former suggestion of championing social causes, Lee continued, “We mustn’t [write cheques that we cannot cash](#)... It’s humour, so once you cross over into activism, you’re constitutionally crossing boundaries of what’s expected of you. You need to be above politics... You need to be able to make fun of everybody, so once you start taking up a cause (or endorsing any particular candidate), then that becomes a bit difficult to make fun of... Want to whack, all whack, right?”

On possibilities that he may get chided and censored again in the future, Lee is unperturbed. He has, after all, listened to warnings from nagging parents, relatives, friends and colleagues for more than a decade now – fears he attributes to the generally risk-averse climate here. However, he believes that the environment has changed - and many observers would agree with him that the 2011 general election outcomes suggest a more mature, open and vocal electorate than previously thought – a development that, of course, bodes well not just for local political satirists, but also (one might argue) for the citizens in general.

“I don’t think we’re that far away from being risk-takers and standing up for ourselves,” he said. Meantime, he intends to keep writing, tweeting, recording, entertaining, taunting and teasing. “I enjoy doing what I do... I don’t think of myself as the kind of person with an agenda, or as a flag-waving activist... more like the class clown at the back of the class, making remarks during lesson time.”