



Photos of Maria tell different stories

People rely on media to tell them the news, but media reports can sometimes confuse the public. The Maria Hertogh story was a classic case in Singapore's past.

In 1950, Maria Hertogh was a media **sensation** in Singapore. She was a Dutch child separated from her parents by war and raised in a Malay family for seven years. Her birth mother, Adeline Hertogh, said she had asked her good friend, Aminah Mohamed, to look after Maria for a few days. But, Cik Aminah said she was asked to adopt Maria as her own child. Each side would not give in.

Cik Aminah took the matter to court. Maria became front-page news in Singapore due to a long court case over who should

get parental custody. You can read about the families' quarrel and the court trials in the first two stories of this series.

With each move in the court battle, the Maria Hertogh story grew. Before long, the story had little to do with Maria herself. Instead, her story was used by **activists** to stir the emotions of their followers, so much so that riots erupted when the High Court in Singapore ruled that Maria must be returned to her birth parents, the Hertoghs, in the Netherlands.

From different angles

In the week leading up to the riots, most of Singapore's newspapers repeatedly reported on Maria's case. While the English press chose happy images of Maria, the Malay press portrayed the same girl — also known as Nadra — as miserable.

Even though there was only one girl at the centre of this controversy and only one series of events, various media reported the affair from different angles. They chose different facts, photos, and quotes. These different frames gave very contrasting impressions of what was going on.

Newspapers could have simply focused on the sad story of a girl and her two loving families whose lives were turned upside down by the terrible events of World War II. Instead, some newspapers treated the tussle as a fight between different nationalities, races, and religions. After a while, people were less interested in what was good for Maria. They just wanted their side to win.

Happy Maria. Sad Nadra.

The Sunday Times, an English newspaper, published two images of Maria on 3 December 1950. One showed her crying while sitting next to a nun in a convent where she was staying. The other picture showed Maria looking sad and was published next to a picture of her husband, Mansoor Adabi, under the headline "Parted by the Law".

The next day, *The Singapore Standard*, another English newspaper, produced a large photograph of a happy Maria in the convent, under the headline "First Day in Convent, All Smiles". On 5 December 1950, *The Straits Times* published an image of Maria and her birth mother, Mrs Hertogh, playing dominoes in the convent.

In stark contrast to the portrayal of a happy Maria, Malay newspaper *Utusan Melayu*



In this illustration from *Melayu Raya*, Maria is shown having to choose between a church or a mosque. The pair of weighing scales at the top of the picture represents justice. This type of reporting framed the conflict between Maria's two families as a religious one.

published four images of a weeping Maria on 7 December 1950. These images were published along with an article describing Maria as crying and begging journalists for help. It was reported that Maria said, "I am very miserable — forced to wear a dress." Until she was placed in the convent, Maria had been wearing traditional Malay clothes.

The day after the report in *Utusan Melayu*, Karim Ghani gave a speech at the Sultan Mosque. Mr Karim was a very influential media professional. His speech was published in a special edition of his newspaper, *Dawn*, which was given out for free. The *Dawn* report said Sultan Mosque was "packed to overflowing" with Muslims who were angry

about Maria's case. In his speech, Mr Karim rallied members of the Muslim community behind Maria's cause, declaring that Maria's case had to be won by any means necessary.

Religious concerns

Meanwhile, *The Singapore Standard* published an image of Maria holding hands with a nun at the convent. The report published alongside the image stated that Maria had knelt before a statue of the Virgin Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ, while in the convent.

Mrs Hertogh had arranged for Maria to stay at the convent only until she could take her to the Netherlands with her. The English newspapers' editors may not have realised that these stories and pictures of Maria at the convent could be hurtful to the feelings of Muslims who were following the saga with intense interest.

For months, many Muslims had followed the court case with great concern. They became upset that European authorities were trying to force a Muslim girl to leave her adoptive family although she had been happy there. These articles and images were seen as proof of how unfair their colonial government was being towards Muslims.

Fueling the fire

The contrasting images and newspaper reports of Maria's stay in the convent resulted in many local people resenting British authority. Anger was mounting quickly, waiting to erupt during the demonstrations that quickly became riots.

When people are upset, they may not think clearly or logically. On the day of the final court ruling,

no serious incidents occurred at first. Then, as emotions intensified, people started throwing stones and bottles at the police, and hitting with sticks cars driven by Europeans. The police told the crowd to leave but they refused.

At 1pm, sanitary inspector H L Velge left his office next to the Supreme Court. As he was a member of the Volunteer Special Constabulary, he was allowed to carry a gun. The crowd attacked Mr Velge simply because he looked European. Fearing for his safety, Mr Velge drew his revolver and fired three rounds, injuring two Malay men. The police immediately arrested Mr Velge.

Word spread like wildfire that the police were shooting at Malays! The police tried to tell the crowd that it was not true, and that Mr Velge was not a policeman. No one listened because they were furious by then. This led to more violent incidents for three days across Singapore. Photos of the rioting led to even more acts of aggression.



The emotionally-charged crowds outside the Supreme Court breaking through the police cordon on 11 December 1950.

Be media smart

The newspaper reports of the Maria Hertogh story can teach us all a lesson. Hindsight helps us to see clearly how media images of Maria strongly influenced the public at that time.

Separate photographs, even from the same event, can capture different moods and facial expressions of a person. Editors can select images to create a certain impression. Some of them wanted to show that Maria was happy in the convent, rescued from Cik Aminah who refused to return her to the Hertoghs. Other media were determined to show that Maria was miserable being separated from Mr Mansoor and Cik Aminah — they selected photos that fit their news angle.

The clever use of photos to influence us is still happening today. When you look at news

photos and watch videos, be media smart. Ask yourself what the context was. How, when, and why were the shots taken? Then, decide for yourself what the most likely reality might be. And, even if the situation really is something to feel angry about, this does not mean you have to act on your anger. People need to follow the law and find peaceful ways to express their unhappiness.

— By ZACHARY JOHN

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VOCAB BUILDER

sensation (say "sen-**say**-shen"; noun) = big news that captures people's attention.

activists (say "ak-tiv-ists"; noun) = people who believe strongly in a cause and push for change.

Read the other stories in this series to learn more about Maria's childhood, her life in the Netherlands, what the world was like at that time. It is now over 70 years since the Maria Hertogh riots took place. Yet, these and other stories in this series offer fresh lessons that we can apply to our lives today. For the full series, visit our website, www.more.whatsup.sg.