

AIMS REPORT ON NEW MEDIA

A new assumption and a leap of faith

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THE report of the Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society (Aims) has hit more targets than some thought possible, though not as many as others had hoped it would.

The committee did not include a champion of new media. Its chairman, former Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) English and Malay newspapers division editor-in-chief Cheong Yip Seng, is a distinguished old media veteran. Despite its composition, however, the committee's recommendations were remarkable. They constituted a leap of faith.

The report was issued as a consultation paper. It is still a work in progress, and Aims seeks further comments from the public before it closes the book. There was a time when government-appointed committees would make recommendations, which the Government would then accept in toto. Aims was a welcome departure from this model

The report is titled *Engaging New Media: Challenging Old Assumptions*. Frankly, it is the subtitle that holds the key to the future.

The Government often invokes the sage saying that a river must be crossed slowly, as we feel our way across it stone by stone. Whatever its validity in the old media world, that approach has little application in the new media world. By the time the state gropes its way across the river, many of our children and civil activists would have leapt across it and gone into the forests on the other side. The state would be left struggling to catch up. The Aims report should help it realise that the new media is a different kind of river and that the state needs different crossing strategies.

Aims addresses some fundamental dilemmas that the new media has thrown up, disturbing the cosy and compliant old media world that the Government and citizens alike have grown accustomed to. One of the earliest edicts laid down by the PAP Government was that the media was not and can never be the watchdog of the Government. It had no mandate to play such a role.

Singapore's old media concurred with that edict without question. Even the old foreign media, such as The Wall Street Journal and The Economist, learnt that no matter how powerful they were as the Fourth Estate in their own or other countries, they had no estate in Singapore because they had no stake here.

All that worked rather well for a long time - until the Internet arrived. Now, there are many citizen watchdogs and the number is growing. It would be a stretch, even for a much-admired government, to tell citizens they have no mandate. They are the mandate.

And citizen watchdogs now have a media to go along with their mandate. Anyone can be a publisher, broadcaster or public critic today. They don't even have to live in Singapore to engage in domestic politics. Worse, we don't even know who is who. In the online world, you could be a dog or a subversive.

There is understandable concern that the cyber-world is chaotic. There is no government there, no gatekeepers, certainly none who would be accepted as the final arbiter on what is good for Singapore.

We have to learn to live with this reality, not deny its existence. Thus, the question to ask is not if the Government should engage the online world. There is no question it should. The Government has no choice. The real question is how - how to, how not to, how much, etc.

But the 'how' question turns on some fundamental factors: Is the Government willing and able to engage the citizenry in an open and robust public debate? Is it willing to share enough information to enable the citizenry to engage in meaningful exchanges? Is it willing to accept that it may not have the last word, as was possible in the old media world?

Equally, the citizenry has to answer some hard questions too: Does it care enough to engage and express its views on critical issues? Does it accept that solutions may not be reached quickly or to the satisfaction of everyone? Does it understand that consultation by the Government does not necessarily mean compliance with its wishes?

The extent of e-engagement will depend on the answers to such questions. The answers are not self-evident. What is clear is that the old assumptions will not serve us well any more. One such

assumption was that Singapore had a nanny state. Hopefully, doing away with that assumption will not involve too great a leap of faith.

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