

MDA Rolls out Licence Scheme for News Websites

Govt: Move to ensure consistency of treatment with traditional platforms

Leonard Lim And Tessa Wong
The Straits Times, 29 May 2013

NEWS websites that provide regular reports on Singapore and have significant reach will need individual licences from Saturday, in a bid to align the regulatory frameworks of online and traditional news platforms.

The need to ensure consistency of treatment, Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim said yesterday, is driven by the fact that more Singaporeans now receive news online.

But the news was swiftly interpreted by many in the online fraternity as a move to rein them in.

Now, all locally based sites, except personal ones like blogs, are automatically included in a class licence scheme and are expected to observe Singapore's Internet guidelines. But with the change, to be gazetted today, news sites must be individually licensed once they meet two criteria.

These are: if they report an average of at least one article per week on Singapore news and current affairs over a period of two months, and reach at least 50,000 unique Internet Protocol addresses from here each month over a period of two months.

Licences must be renewed yearly, similar to permits for newspapers under the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act.

The sites must also put up a performance bond of \$50,000, similar to that required for niche TV broadcasters.

Dr Yaacob, speaking to reporters after visiting Tamil Murasu, said: "Given the evolving landscape, it's important to give some form of parity between online news sites and traditional mainstream media newspapers and TV broadcasters.

"But we recognise that we don't want to put too high a burden on news sites and therefore if you look carefully at the content criteria, performance standards, it's no different from what they are subject to under the Broadcasting Act, except now they have to be licensed on an annual basis."

The new licence requires holders to take down content that breaches certain standards within 24 hours of being notified.

This could be something that goes against good taste, for example, gory pictures of a recent Tampines traffic accident in which two young boys died.

It could also be material that may offend religious sensitivities, as when the Media Development Authority (MDA) got Google last year to restrict access to the "Innocence of Muslims" video [here](#).

It could also be material relating to vice, such as prostitution.

The Broadcasting Act will also be amended next year to give the Government powers to apply the framework on overseas-based news sites targeting the Singapore market, Dr Yaacob said.

Based on surveys and traffic monitoring studies MDA has used, 10 sites will need the new licence. They include seven Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) sites, such as [straitstimes.com](#) and [Stomp](#), and two by MediaCorp.

Yahoo Singapore is the only one not run by either SPH or MediaCorp. The Straits Times understands that Yahoo Singapore intends to comply, though its "country ambassador" Alan Soon declined comment until it receives the actual licence conditions.

MDA did not rule out including other prominent socio-political sites if they meet the criteria.

The media regulator stressed that as websites are already subject to the Internet Code of Practice which prohibits content that, for instance, undermines racial harmony, "no change in content standards is expected".

But media watchers like the Institute of Policy Studies' Dr Carol Soon said the ruling will "inevitably have a chilling effect". "This is due to uncertainty over whether the regulation will stay as it is, or be expanded," she said.

An SPH spokesman said the company is waiting for the gazette notification before knowing what the next steps are.