

Political podcasts to be allowed by the next GE

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BY THE next general election, voters can expect to watch podcasts and vodcasts put out by political parties as part of their Internet election advertising.

Such audio or video files could be of election manifestoes, election rally speeches, party press conferences or constituency tours to promote the election candidates.

In announcing this yesterday, the Government accepted an advisory council's call to widen the list of what is legally sanctioned for election advertising on the Internet.

This is to keep up with the evolving nature of technology, the Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society (Aims) had said in its report.

Going beyond political parties and election candidates, the Government will also allow individuals to 'participate in Internet election advertising' by 'blogging or posting election materials', it said.

This is a departure from the official line, ahead of the 2006 General Election, that blogs which 'persistently promote political issues' could have to register as a political site and submit to restrictions on election advertising.

Overall, Dr Lee Boon Yang, Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts, said the changes to the rules for online political content 'are quite substantial'.

Political parties, film-makers and new media watchers had mixed reactions.

Mr Lau Ping Sum, executive director at the People's Action Party (PAP) headquarters, welcomed the amendments, saying the PAP 'will be able to make more extensive use of the new media to further our outreach'.

National Solidarity Party president Sebastian Teo felt it was 'good that only raw footage is allowed because otherwise truths might be distorted'. But he also argued 'the rules are tweaked to the PAP's advantage because they have so many people and so many resources' to make films and videos for election campaigns.

Film-maker Martyn See, who has had two films banned, was 'utterly disappointed' that there was no unconditional and immediate repeal of Sections 33 and 35 of the Films Act, which respectively ban party political films and films considered to be against the public interest.

The Government had partly lifted the ban on party political films to allow factual documentaries but made no change to Section 35.

'One step backwards and a half step forward in liberalising the political space,' is how Mr See described the decisions.

The nature of the Internet makes it difficult to enforce any kind of a ban on party political films, said Mr Tan Tarn How, a media researcher at the Institute of Policy Studies.

Such a ban could be 'symbolic' but symbolic laws have effect only if there is a strong overwhelming support for such laws, he said.

As far as political content is concerned, 'I don't know whether there is such an overwhelming support that we need this', he said.

Mr Tan felt the Government's Internet policy was 'moving in the right direction, but the question is the speed of it'.