

## **S'pore 'Not Alone' in Tweaking Media Laws** **NZ, Britain also reviewing regulation of new and old media, says Yaacob**

**Leonard Lim**  
***The Straits Times***, 5 June 2013

SINGAPORE is not the only country tweaking the laws governing traditional and online media, Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim said yesterday.

New Zealand and Britain are also reviewing their regulatory approaches and frameworks for new and old media.

His remarks yesterday follow concerns that the Government's move - requiring prominent local news sites to get licences - amounts to tighter regulation.

He noted that New Zealand's Law Commission recently called for an independent watchdog to oversee broadcast, print and online news. It will have the power to censure and ask for material to be removed from a website as well as for a published apology.

The move, announced in the country's Parliament in March, was prompted by disparities in the frameworks applying to different news sources.

Dr Yaacob said: "The bottom line is that (the New Zealanders) now see that even the media can operate contrary to the public interest, and they need a regulator to ensure that this does not happen.

"They have also recognised the need for any regulator to oversee both traditional and online media."

The minister was speaking during a discussion with reporters at his ministry that followed last week's announcement by the Media Development Authority (MDA) that news sites which report on Singapore regularly and have significant reach will be individually licensed.

MDA's reason for it is to align the frameworks governing traditional and online media.

Previously, most of these sites automatically came under a class licence.

But the new scheme sets out a timeframe of 24 hours within which they must remove prohibited content after being told to do so.

Still, MDA's new move has led some to ask if it could not have considered or taken an alternative route: Deregulate mainstream media and do away with individual licensing altogether.

In response, Dr Yaacob pointed to New Zealand and said: "The 'alternative' of deregulating mainstream media is not much of a real alternative.

"New Zealand has problems with their self-regulatory system (for traditional media). They are, in fact, considering how to regulate their press."

In Britain, the authorities are planning a royal charter to establish an independent press regulator, with powers to demand prominent corrections and apologies from news publishers and impose monetary fines.

Singapore's traditional media like newspapers are individually licensed, and Hong Kong and Malaysia have similar arrangements too, noted Dr Yaacob.

The rationale for licensing mainstream media here is to ensure they report responsibly and do not carry content which, for instance, offends good taste, he said.

"This rationale remains valid even with the emergence of new media, and in fact extends equally to new media platforms," he added.

New media observer Carol Soon at the Institute of Policy Studies, when asked to comment on the ways that different countries are trying to regulate the Internet, noted that there were differences between the situation in New Zealand and Singapore.

"There, the regulatory body is independent, not established by legislation, and membership is voluntary. The move is perceived as providing the means for people to seek recourse, and not so much of censorship," she said.

Dr Soon also said a more "sustainable" way of regulation is for the Government to "step in when there is an undeniable need to do so", such as when there is a direct threat to public order.