

Regulation Aimed at ‘a Level of Responsibility’ for Those Reporting News

New licensing regime for online news sites comes under intense scrutiny from callers on Channel NewsAsia’s Talking Point programme

Amir Hussain

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SINGAPORE — The Media Development Authority’s (MDA) new licensing regime for online news sites came under intense scrutiny from callers on Channel NewsAsia’s Talking Point programme last night.

The discussion featured a panel consisting of Acting Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin, Institute of Policy Studies Professor Arun Mahizhnan and Breakfast Network Editor Bertha Henson.

During the programme, nine out of callers criticised the regime, raising criticisms over the lack of consultation with the online community in making the regulation, the lack of clarity in the new regulation, and the inability of the Government to police the online space thus negating the need for regulation. Some also sought the assurance that the Government would never classify blogs and personal sites as news sites.

A vote on the show’s website also swung heavily against the new regime as the hour-long show progressed. Answers to the question “Will the new licensing rule limit online news content?” were evenly split at the start, but wound up with more than 70 per cent against it at the end.

The new licensing regime, which kicked in last Saturday, requires operators of these news sites to remove content deemed objectionable by the MDA within 24 hours. Site owners are also required to put up a “performance bond” of S\$50,000.

Describing the online space as “somewhat sacred”, Prof Arun said criticisms of the regulation were understandable as the regulation could be “seen as a kind of slippery slope”.

He added: “The old mainstream media space has been bottled up for a very, very long time. So people who have come into (the online) space, don’t want the same thing to happen again.”

Ms Henson, a former journalist with The Straits Times for over two decades, said: “I think the problem is the way the Government has proceeded to launch this licensing ... it is seen as a constrain of Internet space, because the Internet community hasn’t been consulted prior to it. So it makes a little monkey out of the whole transparency and public engagement exercise that the Government has been so hot about.”

Non-Constituency Member of Parliament Gerald Giam, who called in to the show, asked whether “the Government’s intent is to control the online space, like how it controls the mainstream media”. Mr Giam was a former Deputy Editor of online socio-political news site The Online Citizen.

To this, Mr Tan replied: “The intent is not to control the online space — firstly I don’t think that’s possible, and nor should we try. I think what we are asking for is a level of responsibility for those who are reporting news.”

Ms Henson, however, pointed out that “those who act irresponsibly are not those list of 10 (sites)”. “There’s some professionalism to be injected into report(ing) on news — the big question, though, is whether this current scheme is the way to do it,” she added.

Mr Tan, who appeared on the show in place of MDA CEO Koh Lin-Net, also sought to assuage speculation on why he was appearing on the show.

“When we pass regulations on policies where there is quite a lot of public interest, I think it is important for the public office holders to front it,” he said, adding that it was useful “to have a non-MCI (Ministry of Communications and Information) perspective” on a debate that also involved the public engagement space.