

Yahoo! Singapore will Abide by MDA's Licensing Framework

New rules 'redundant' but will put company in 'better position' to cover S'pore news

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The Straits Times, 6 June 2013

SINGAPORE — Yahoo! News Singapore has indicated that it would abide by the Media Development Authority's (MDA) controversial licensing framework for Singapore news websites, calling it "redundant" but conceding that being a step closer to being an accredited media outlet has its benefits.

In the website's first public statement since news of the regime broke, Country Manager for Singapore, Mr Alan Soon, noted that the website is already bound to comply with the MDA's Internet Code of Practice, which complements its own internal editorial policies, and "further regulation is redundant".

Nonetheless, "it is important to reiterate that regulations and guidelines remain meaningful and do not become a tool that restricts freedom of expression and genuine debate. We need to preserve this fine balance and Yahoo! continues to champion this critical aspect of Internet freedom," Mr Soon said.

With this development, Yahoo! will be in a "better position" to cover news in Singapore, he added. It is currently not accredited by the Ministry of Communications and Information, unlike the other media entities behind the nine websites also covered under the new framework.

"In the past few years, we were restricted from government and other authoritative sources because we were not seen to be an accredited media. The licensing changes will help pave the way for full accreditation and access for our reporters. We will be a stronger editorial team and our stories will improve because of that," Mr Soon said.

The regime, which kicked in last Saturday, affects websites which have 50,000 unique visitors from Singapore each month over a period of two months and publish an average of at least one article a week on "Singapore's news and current affairs" over the same period.

Operators of these news sites will be given 24 hours to remove content deemed objectionable by the MDA, and are also required to put up a "performance bond" of S\$50,000.

The regime has since come under fire from the online community, and a protest at the Speakers' Corner in Hong Lim Park has been planned for Saturday. About 800 people have signed up for it, according to the Free The Internet group.

An online petition has collected over 2,600 signatures, while a "blackout" has been planned for today, where various blogs and websites will be blacking out their pages in protest.

A group of university students — studying here and overseas — has sought a dialogue with Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim, calling his explanations, so far, unsatisfactory.

A statement issued yesterday read: “This new framework concerns us as the wording of the amendment suggests that the state will have unmoderated power to muzzle not only journalists, but virtually everyone and anyone who uses the Internet.”

In a response, the Ministry of Communications and Information noted that clarifications have already been widely reported in various media.

It added: “The Minister for Communications and Information Dr Yaacob Ibrahim and the MDA have explained that the refinement to the licensing framework for popular online news sites is to place them on a more consistent footing as traditional media, and have also addressed the various issues raised.”

Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Carol Soon, noting the public engagement efforts underway via Our Singapore Conversation, felt this issue could have “generated many useful insights and suggestions”.

She said: “Public engagement to solicit people’s views is important, especially when any form of Internet regulation is likely to be perceived as an encroachment of individuals’ online space and freedom of expression.”