

Progress, a step at a time ; Many of Aims' recommendations incorporated into Govt's strategy; task is now to extend Reach

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AFTER almost two years of buzz and engagement with Netizens over how Singapore should handle the new media, the Government has weighed in with the final word — and in doing so, effectively outlined its strategy to manage information, particularly political content, on the Internet.

While it has accepted 17 out of the 26 recommendations put up by the Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media to Society (Aims) — such as liberalising the Films Act, allowing more room for election campaigning, and setting up a taskforce to protect minors — it has rejected other hotly-debated points, such as giving civil servants more space to air their views.

For now the chief move will be to expand the role of its feedback unit, Reach, as its authoritative online source to engage Netizens, dispel “falsehoods” and perpetuate the Government’s position on issues and policies. This is opposed to “wandering the whole of the Internet just to debunk every single misleading or wrong posting”, said Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts (Mica) Lee Boon Yang.

The announcements left some Singaporeans hoping for a sea-change feeling a bit shortchanged.

Several bloggers told Today they were especially disappointed with the Government’s stance to limit its engagement with the online community to Reach, though it would be open to replying to letters carried on the online forums of Singapore’s mainstream media.

Said blogger Choo Zhengxi: “After all we’ve been through — and Aims did go quite a long way (in its recommendations) — to get these kind of results is a bit underwhelming.”

But Dr Lee said: “Of course, you can always look at a glass ... Some will choose to say it’s half-empty, but we have looked at it and say it’s half-full. We’ve made progress.”

Why there is no obligation to explain ban

As expected, the Government accepted the recommendation to liberalise the Films Act which bans party political films. It will move within two months to allow “factual and objective” party political films. Such films would be assessed by an advisory panel headed by retired Judge Richard Magnus.

And come the next elections, which are due by February 2012, the Government will also allow individuals to campaign online for political candidates.

However, political party films deemed to be “dramatised, sensationalistic and emotive” will remain banned. The Government also rejected the recommendation for the Minister to give reasons when banning films under Section 35 of the Films Act.

Pointing out that this provision has been used only once in the last 20 years — when the Minister banned Zahari’s 17 Years in 2007 and voluntarily gave reasons for doing so — Dr Lee said: “There may well be situations where the giving of the reason itself could reveal

certain sensitive information that may be against public interest, or may reveal some element of the film which could aggravate race or religious relations.”

The banning of Zahari’s 17 years — a film based on an interview with former Internal Security Act detainee Said Zahari — saw the film being posted on the Internet by the film-maker for public viewing.

Even so, Dr Lee stressed: “There is a difference from giving such films the privilege to circulate freely in Singapore, to saying that those who want to watch it, you go to the dark reaches of the Internet and watch it.”

And the Government sees no point in proactively rebutting any falsehoods perpetuated by such films. If need be, it would publish its rebuttals on Reach.

Said Dr Lee: “We have decided we should create, endorse, promote a single platform that will be recognised as the place for Singaporeans who want to engage the Government, who want to know what are the facts, who want to know what is the truth behind policy consideration.”

Let’s talk – in our living room or yours?

Senior research fellow Tan Tarn How of the Institute of Policy Studies concurred that it was impractical for the Government to “counter every falsehood or factual error”.

And he was hopeful the Reach portal could “become a platform for debates that are informed, considered and intelligent”.

Mr Tan told Today: “The Government just needs to put in resources and signal that this is a platform where we don’t mind alternative views ... it can become a genuine vehicle for Government to put its views across and for people on the other side to engage on the issues.”

While Senior Minister of State for Mica Lui Tuck Yew noted that some netizens might not welcome the Government’s “intrusion” on their websites, blogger Gerald Giam said: “There are some that do welcome a response ... No one is expecting the Government to respond to all blogs.

But this should not prevent them from responding to some, particularly those of serious socio-political bloggers who make cogent and rational suggestions.”

Blogger Alex Au added: “If they want to engage with citizens, they need to seriously deal with such issues rather than expect people to come into their living room and deal with them.”

Aims’ chairman Cheong Yip Seng concurred that Reach “has a perception problem” — a finding from the council’s own studies. “If they tackle that, over time they could be seen as more credible,” he said.

“The other side of the coin is that the Government is going to devote more resources to engaging people online. Civil servants are going to be trained to engage, maybe even specialist manpower might be deployed.”