

News Website Licensing: Questions over Whether More Rules are in Store

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SINGAPORE — In the wake of the Media Development Authority's (MDA) announcement yesterday that 10 online news sites will be placed on an individual licensing scheme, analysts contacted by TODAY had two questions on their minds: Does this amount to a move away from the current "light touch" approach to online media, and, if so, what's next?

Some of the analysts answered their own questions, and felt that the announcement was a harbinger of more regulations to follow.

Their reasoning: Current regulations already provide for enough checks, and the new regulations amount to an additional layer.

"We have very specific laws pertaining to different things online, like, say, libel, contempt of court, even without this regulation," noted National University of Singapore lecturer Alfred Siew.

Institute of Policy Studies Research Fellow Carol Soon, noting that the new move "resonates with the Government's previous calls for (online) community moderation and self-regulation", said: "I think the more important question to ask is, is this regulation going to stay as it is, or is it going to expand to include for example other sites?" She added that the rules will have a "chilling" effect on the online community because it "engenders a fair bit of anxiety".

Nanyang Technological University Professor Ang Peng Hwa felt that the new rules amount to a "natural progression" of the MDA's approach to the online community. "It is a move away from the light touch approach, but even so, it is still a relatively light approach" because only larger, more prominent players are affected for now, he said.

Communications and Information Minister Yaacob Ibrahim had noted that the new regime would allow the authorities to engage the people responsible for the news sites. However, the analysts felt it could drive underground those who decide that their comments might see them fall afoul of the new rules.

Mr Siew, who sits on the Media Literacy Council, said: "There's a complete question mark, whether this will push people who have stuck their necks out by putting their names on an article ... to go underground (and) post from overseas or host their content overseas or just hide their names."

Dr Soon felt the Government is "trying to find a very intricate balance between coming up with a clear enough definition and criteria, but allowing for some form of a discretion that allows it to decide on action on a case by case basis".

The analysts also noted that complying with the regulations will come at some cost for online news sites. Said Prof Ang: "The major cost is having somebody on standby to delete objectionable content within 24 hours."

When contacted, the various parties affected offered differing responses. A spokesman for MediaCorp, whose channelnewsasia.com and todayonline.com sites will be affected, said both sites operate under a class licence under the MDA's regulatory framework and abide by the Broadcasting (Class Licence) Notification and Internet Code of Practice.

Both websites will be able to meet the requirements of the new licensing arrangement by the MDA, the spokesperson added.

A spokesperson for Singapore Press Holdings, which has seven sites affected, said: "We are awaiting the notification by MDA before knowing what the next formal steps are."

Meanwhile, Yahoo! Singapore Country Ambassador Alan Soon said: "We are not in a position to respond until we receive the actual licensing conditions for review. We are expecting that to come to us some time in the first week of June."