

The dangers of dual media regulation

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IF the current strict regulation of mainstream media continues unabated while the alternative media freewheels in cyberspace, Singapore could become a "schizophrenic" nation.

That was the observation of Dr Cherian George, an Institute of Policy Studies adjunct senior research fellow at the institute's annual Singapore Perspectives conference yesterday.

He said: "A dual regulatory regime has evolved: Stricter supervision of mainstream media — the national press and TV — and more latitude for niche or alternative media. Alternative media are also structured differently, allowing them to act differently from the mainstream."

While online media like blogs and forums can deliver news fast and loose, mainstream media has to go through layers of checks. And where alternative media can reflect dissenting opinions, traditional media is limited in that respect, he said.

"The danger is in creating two different worlds and two different set of experiences for Singaporeans. I don't think it is entirely healthy, there needs to be some connection between the two worlds or we'll end up being a schizophrenic nation," he added.

Regulation on traditional media hence needs to be "loosened up", he said, adding that some media laws could soon be reviewed or passed.

Dr George suggested that a privacy law to regulate the intrusion of privacy that comes with the posting of videos or photos online, could surface as soon as this year. While the existing Film Act, which puts the onus of weeding out politically biased films on the Board of Censors and the Police, may be reviewed in the "next two to three years".

The online medium has resulted in a "democratisation of influence" which the government is finding the hardest to get used to, said Dr George.

He said: "In the alternative media, reputation can be built but rank and status per se are not respected. In engaging online discourse, the government cannot 'pull rank'. Arguments will be won or lost on their merits."

But the widening informal public sphere has positive outcomes. These include the possibility of more sensitive and nuanced government policies and the creation of a greater sense of ownership amongst active netizens.

And what happens when old and new media converge?

Dr George noted that mainstream media are trying to cater to the demand for authentic — not just accurate — content via more 'user-generated content' such as The Straits Times' Stomp portal and Today's publication of columns by popular blogger mr brown, aka Lee Kin Mun.

Noting that the column was rescinded, following the Government's strong rebuttal of one of his pieces, Dr George said: "A lot of observers saw the episode as a crackdown on bloggers. I take a different view ... It is a reminder to editors that they still need to perform a filtering function. Certain views that may be tolerable online should not so easily be given the status or platform of mainstream newspapers or broadcast stations."