

Websites with Local News Content to be Licensed

10 sites affected for a start; rules require them to remove objectionable content within 24 hours, among other things

Tan Weizhen

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SINGAPORE — After several rounds of national discussions and measures over the years on regulating the Internet, the Media Development Authority (MDA) yesterday introduced a new licensing regime for websites that regularly carry local news content.

From June 1, websites, including those run by individuals, which have “significant reach” — defined as having 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 would be affected.

Analysts whom TODAY spoke to did not think that the authorities were trying to clamp down on online political dissent — noting that the regime was targeted at larger, more reputable news websites. **Institute of Policy Studies Research Fellow Carol Soon said: “This is an example of how the Government is trying to shift the onus of promoting accountability from individual users to site owners, especially when it comes to large sites.”**

Currently, most websites are covered automatically under a class licence scheme. But the new rules would require websites to be individually licensed once they meet the two criteria. For a start, 10 websites would fall under the regime: Seven are operated by Singapore Press Holdings, two by MediaCorp and one by Yahoo! News Singapore. Under the new regime, which would rely on complaints from the public, operators of these websites have to comply within 24 hours with any directives from the MDA to remove content found to be in breach of standards. These sites are also required to put up a “performance bond” of S\$50,000.

Prohibited content may include those that undermine racial and religious harmony or go against good taste. An example is the gory images of two brothers killed in a car accident in Tampines Avenue 7, which were widely circulated online. Comments posted on the news websites would also be regulated.

Under the regime, operators of news sites which defy the authorities’ order to apply for a licence could face a fine of up to S\$200,000 or a maximum jail term of three years or both.

Speaking to reporters after the announcement, Communications and Information Minister Yaacob Ibrahim signalled that the rules may in future apply to overseas news sites reporting on Singapore. He said the Broadcasting Act would be amended next year, “with the view to ensure that any other sites which are hosted overseas but reporting on Singapore news is also brought in the licensing framework”.

The MDA said the new regime would place online news sites “on a more consistent regulatory framework with traditional news platforms which are already individually licensed”.

Dr Yaacob stressed it was “no more onerous” than what the news websites are currently subjected to. “Most of our online news sites are class-licensed ... therefore, they are subjected to certain content criteria and so it’s not new. They are also subjected to Internet code of practice,” he said.

He added: “Except now you have to be licensed on an annual basis and ... we know who the editors are, we know the people responsible, and if there are some things we need to discuss, we know who to discuss with — so the most important thing is the ... recognition that they are part of the reporting landscape,” he said.

In 2008, an Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society was formed to determine how best to manage the impact of new media on the Singapore society. Among other things, the council recommended a “light touch” regulatory approach.

Last year, Dr Yaacob called for the online community to develop an Internet code of conduct.

On whether the new regime would be a departure from the “light touch” approach, he said: “No, it’s not ... It’s just about making sure that our regulatory framework is consistent — that’s the most important thing. At the moment, whether we like it or not, Singaporeans are receiving news both from mainstream media and online sites. Our mainstream media are subjected to rules ... Why shouldn’t the online sites also be part of that regulatory framework?”

As to whether it is acknowledged that the previous regulatory framework was not working well enough, Dr Yaacob noted that since the Class Licence Scheme took effect in 1996, a lot more websites have emerged to provide news to Singaporeans.

“We realised we need to do something to the framework because it’s not fair to our mainstream media ... But we also do not want to stifle creativity on the Internet,” he said.

The new rules were crafted in consultation with the industry players.

Dr Yaacob noted that Yahoo! News Singapore “did not in any way say it was bad”. He said: “It gives them certain privileges because they are recognised... by meeting these obligations they can do their work better and be recognised as part of the newspaper landscape.”