

Singapore to regulate online news websites from June 1

10 websites to be licensed; foreign websites targeting S'pore market may be regulated from next year

By **TEH SHI NING**

[SINGAPORE] News websites that report regularly on Singapore and have a local reach of 50,000 or more will need to be individually licensed from June 1. This is to put them on a "more consistent regulatory framework" with traditional platforms such as newspapers and television stations, which are already individually licensed, the Media Development Authority said yesterday.

While the new ruling applies only to websites based in Singapore for now, the plan is to bring foreign websites offering media services to the Singapore market under the regime too, Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim told reporters yesterday.

"We will amend the Broadcasting Act next year, with a view to ensure that any other sites which are hosted overseas but reporting on Singapore news, are also brought into the licensing framework."

At the moment, the Act does not empower the government to take action

against any entity that is based overseas. "But, if they are transmitting news to Singaporeans and Singapore is their target market, then we will have to do something about it," said Dr Yaacob.

For now, 10 local online news sites will require an individual licence with effect from June 1. These sites met the two conditions under which individual licences, to be renewed annually, will be a must: that over a period of two months, they report an average of one article or more a week on Singapore news and current affairs, and, are visited by 50,000 unique IP addresses from Singapore each month.

Currently, most websites are automatically covered under the Broadcasting (Class Licence) Notification, and the Internet Code of Practice, which already prohibits content that is against public interest, public order, public security, national harmony and public morality. MDA's overall Internet guidelines do not

cover webpages operated by individuals, but individuals

or groups providing a programme for business, political or religious purposes are covered under the class licence.

Dr Yaacob said that the new rules come in response to the growing number of consumers that read news

online, and the larger number of news offerings online. Licensing will be "no more onerous" than what news sites are already subject to and there will be no change in content standards, he said.

He added that the new

criteria would ensure "that when Singaporeans go onto online sites, when they read the news, they know that what they read from online sites is the same as what they read from mainstream media".

The new guidelines also

provide more clarity on "prohibited material", which will include content that denigrates or offends the sensitivities of any racial or religious group and ads for prostitution entered in the comments section on websites for instance.

One difference under the new framework is that licensees must comply with directions from MDA to remove content that is in breach of standards within 24 hours. Current guidelines have no timeframe.

Second, a licensee must put up a performance bond of \$50,000. This amount is what is currently required of licensed niche TV broadcasters.

Seven of the 10 sites are run by Singapore Press Holdings: straittimes.com, asiaone.com, business-times.com.sg, omy.sg, stomp.com.sg, tnp.sg, and zaobao.com. MediaCorp runs two, channelnewsasia.com and [\[line.com\]\(http://line.com\), while the tenth is Yahoo! News' \[sg.news.yahoo.com\]\(http://sg.news.yahoo.com\).](http://todayon-</p>
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An SPH spokesman noted that the new licensing regime "is not significantly different from the current class-licence regime for websites" while MediaCorp said that both its news websites "will be able to meet the requirements of the new licensing arrangement by MDA".

Yahoo! Singapore's country ambassador, Alan Soon, said: "We are not in a position to respond until we receive the actual licence conditions for review."

The maximum penalty for illegal broadcasting under the Broadcasting Act is a fine of \$200,000 or three years' jail or both. But for sites that are licensed, failing to comply with conditions could result either in financial penalties or the licence being suspended or revoked.

NTU professor Ang Peng Hwa noted that the barriers to entry for lesser-known news sites are now raised, as the criteria set for licensing may discourage the growth of online news sites. "Our emergent sites are free or practically free."

He noted that this could also stifle the emergence of new online services. "Think of Summly, which was created by a 15-year-old boy and bought by Yahoo for US\$30 million. If you are a

teenager now in Singapore, you would worry about being caught by the law."

Warren Chik, SMU associate professor, said that the change would be perceived as tighter regulation and a "less light touch than before". He noted that the licensing requirements may eventually extend to sites such as The Online Citizen and Temasek Review. He said that the penalties under the licensing framework "may cause those running news sites to be more careful than before".

When asked, Dr Yaacob said that the new licensing framework is not a departure from MDA's "light touch" approach to Internet regulation, stressing regulatory consistency instead. "Whether we like it or not, Singaporeans are receiving news both from mainstream media and online sites. Our mainstream media is subjected to rules, why shouldn't the online sites be part of the regulatory framework?" he said.

Simon Chesterman, dean of the NUS Faculty of Law, said: "The move by MDA is an attempt to set higher standards for websites that are effectively serving as news outlets. The challenge will be how to implement the new framework in a way that does not have a chilling effect online."

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