

# Minister: MDA will be 'judicious' with Internet regulation

**But panellists at TV forum call new rule ambiguous, creating a 'mental hurdle' to entry for new players**

By **JOYCE HOOI**

[SINGAPORE] Yaacob Ibrahim, Minister for Communications and Information, assured the public yesterday that the government will continue to be "judicious" in its regulation of the Internet, even with the introduction of a new licensing framework for online news sites.

Speaking to the media yesterday, Dr Yaacob conceded that the new framework could have been communicated better last week, but also defended the lack of a public consultation over the move.

"This is not a fundamental shift in terms of our policy. It is just a tweak. Perhaps we could have given them more time to digest," he said - "them" ostensibly referring to the online community.

"But at the end of the day, I want the online community to understand: this is not an attempt to clamp down on anybody. This is really to ensure that those who are in the business of reporting news do it responsibly."

Later in the evening, Tan Chuan-Jin, Acting Minister for Manpower and Senior Minister of State, Ministry of National Development, agreed that how the licensing scheme was initially presented could have been improved.

"In hindsight, more details should have probably come out earlier. When



**Dr Yaacob:** *It's just a tweak, not a fundamental shift in terms of our policy*

some of the details were not addressed upfront in the initial release, I think people began to speculate and think, 'This is censorship and therefore I'm not going to be able to say what I want to say' . . . You need to allow people to articulate their views because we will be shortchanged if we don't have that," he said as a panellist on current affairs programme *Talking Point* last night.

At the same time, Mr Tan echoed the government's message, stating that the new framework is more of an update of the regulations that already govern print media, as opposed to a fundamental shift in policy.

Last week, the Media Development Authority (MDA) said that websites reporting regularly on Singapore - an average of at least one article a week over two months, with at least 50,000 unique local IP addresses monthly - will have

to be individually licensed. Such sites will have to put up a \$50,000 performance bond and remove content that breaches existing standards within 24 hours.

The news provoked vehement opposition from sociopolitical websites and bloggers, some of whom will hold a rally at Speakers' Corner this Saturday to protest the ruling.

Yesterday, Dr Yaacob stressed that little will change in the wake of this licensing regime.

"How we'll approach this is what we've been doing since 1996 - very judicious," he said. He noted that since the class licence scheme took effect in 1996, MDA had issued the take-down notice only once for religiously offensive content: the "Innocence of Muslims" video last year. The other 23 instances were for websites with pornographic or sex-solicitation content.

"Sites can still operate the way they can today . . . Supposing . . . you're just giving your own commentary . . . you disagree with the government. You can still continue, because you're not a news site," Dr Yaacob said.

Personal blogs will not be affected, so long as they do not "morph into news sites", he added.

Even so, MDA is steering clear of a prescriptive drawing of the boundaries for news reporting. "It would be impractical for any law to attempt to exhaustively define the answers for every possible permutation," Dr Yaacob said.

But what MDA considers as discretionary powers

that give it flexibility, others might interpret as ambiguity.

"Where do you draw the line? It's not that easy to say that something is 100 per cent a personal blog and something is definitely a news site. There are a lot of sites that are somewhere in the middle . . . there will be a certain level of uncertainty," said Singapore Management University (SMU) associate professor Warren Chik.

Yesterday, Dr Yaacob reiterated that the \$50,000 performance bond is not meant to act as a financial burden on websites and that alternatives exist, such as putting up a banker's guarantee.

While the bond might not be a big issue in the grand scheme of things, it remains a barrier to entry for new players, said Nanyang Technological University (NTU) professor Ang Peng Hwa. "For those attempting to start up such news sites, it would be a hurdle; a minor hurdle but a hurdle nevertheless. Prob-

ably the larger hurdle would be the mental one: that one has to have a licence to function," he said.

Currently, 10 news sites - comprising those run by Singapore Press Holdings (SPH), MediaCorp and Yahoo! News - have to be licensed under the new ruling. "The 10 sites that we are licensing, we really have no problem with them altogether," Dr Yaacob said. No subsequent tranche of sites have been identified for future licensing.

When contacted yesterday, Yahoo! Singapore said that it was not in a position to comment on the matter, as it was in the process of "evaluating all aspects internally".

As sites run by CNN and BBC Asia report on local news only occasionally in their current form, they are not the target of the new ruling. For "overseas broadcasters" who meet the Singapore-centric criteria, however, the Broadcasting Act will be amended next year so that the licensing re-

gime applies to them as well.

SMU's Prof Chik said that in the absence of political assistance from the country in which the outfit is based, enforcing such a law on an extraterritorial site will be "almost impossible". "(If) it is a website that is foreign but has some sort of presence in Singapore, then it may be easier to enforce. Then you will have a presence, whether it's an office presence or somebody here to serve papers on," he said.

Now, as the Internet gains increasing relevance, the stakes will be even higher as governments worldwide grapple with the issue of taming this new beast.

NTU's Prof Ang cautioned: "Whatever the impact, the government has to be very careful not to dent our hard-earned reputation as a city with buzz. I've been to so many meetings where Singapore is mentioned in highly favourable terms in so many areas. Being at the top, it's easy to fall back."