

# Over 150 online sites hold 24-hour blackout protest

By **ANDREA ONG**

MORE than 150 Singapore websites and blogs blacked out their content yesterday in protest against the Government's controversial new rules for licensing online news sites.

Under rules announced by the Media Development Authority (MDA) last week, sites which put up Singapore news regularly, and with at least 50,000 unique visitors from Singapore every month, have to apply for an individual licence and put up a \$50,000 bond.

Even though MDA stressed this week that the rules do not apply to personal blogs, many in the online community still feel they are phrased too broadly.

Most of the sites yesterday replaced their homepages with a black screen saying "Free My Internet". Some included information about a related protest at Hong Lim Park tomorrow and an online petition calling for the rules to be withdrawn.

About 100 sites were blacked out when the 24-hour protest started at midnight, with others coming on board throughout the day. The sites that took part ranged from sociopolitical sites like The Online Citizen (TOC) and TR Emeritus, to lifestyle, arts and parenting blogs.

TOC co-founder Choo Zheng Xi, a spokesman for the Free My Internet movement, said the number and diversity of blogs that participated yesterday had exceeded expectations.

"It reflects the reality that the licensing regime is crafted so widely that it potentially affects any website, even though MDA has selectively chosen to apply it to 10 sites for now," he said.

On why independent arts centre The Substation took part, artistic director Noor Effendy Ibrahim said it was "deeply concerned about the impact of this regulation on the right of every Singaporean to access information and to be informed".

However, a few blogs put up

posts explaining that they were not taking part because a self-imposed blackout was the incorrect response to Internet regulations.

Yesterday afternoon, Acting Manpower Minister Tan Chuan-Jin changed his Facebook profile picture to a poster saying "Keep Calm and Carry On Posting".

Observers like Singapore Internet Research Centre director Ang Peng Hwa felt the blackout would need to be combined with offline action or other media platforms to be effective.

But he said the Government was unlikely to be moved: "That's just not its style. I believe the blogging community understands that."

Dr Michael Netzley, of Singapore Management University, said the online community might be "a bit too quick to pull the trigger" in its protests.

He said: "While I also share strong concerns about the excessively broad language of the MDA announcement, I do feel the authorities have made great effort

to clarify and we should give them a chance to do what they say they are going to do."

But Dr Netzley lauded people's interest and expression of opinions, saying: "The alternative of civic apathy is far worse."

The issue of MDA rules also came up in a question and answer session with Education Minister Heng Swee Keat at the Pre-University Seminar yesterday.

To questions of whether the rules would hinder expression online, Mr Heng said that the changes were to formalise the existing class licensing framework and were not intended in any way to stifle criticism or free speech.

Saying that he felt people agreed with the principle of being responsible in expressing views, Mr Heng added: "I do think that the principle is very important... And I think we agree by that principle. Then I think the details of how it is going to be done becomes quite clear."

✉ [andrea@sph.com.sg](mailto:andrea@sph.com.sg)