

Local biz starts online gay mag

It bypasses strict publishing laws by going digital

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WHEN local software development and publishing company Epic Media wanted to start a magazine, it decided to go online.

The company figured few readers would pick up its publication in public. That's because the magazine, Element, is targeted at gays.

In addition, printing costs were prohibitive and the firm wanted to bypass the strict publishing regulatory climate here, too.

Launched last month with little fanfare, the title, which is published every two months, is available in digital format only.

While iPad users can download the application for free, they have to pay US\$1.99 (S\$2.45) for an issue.

Touted as the "voice of gay Asia", Element's inaugural issue includes articles on gay-friendly resorts in Thailand and insurance.

Magazine director Huang Junjie, 30, said going online made sense: "We want to hit the pink dollar and break stereotypes that the gay lifestyle is only about sex and drugs... And the Internet, with its unlimited reach, can let us do that better."

Bypass traditional licensing

But going digital also means Element bypassed traditionally strict licensing requirements for printed content, the Wall Street Journal (WSJ) reported last month. Being hosted on a US website would also free the online magazine from having to toe the same code of practice as Singapore-hosted sites, WSJ said.

It's a point Element's managing director Hirokazu Mizuhara, 27, is aware of. He said: "We're careful not to create discomfort. There's no porn, no nudity, no sleazy sauna ads."

"The fact that people have to pay means the magazine is not easily accessible and it's intentionally done so."

The e-magazine had registered over 8,300 downloads in Singapore by the end of last month, he said, with more than 2,000 hits from overseas.

While he felt Singaporeans, especially younger ones, tend to be quite open-minded, Mr Mizuhara is prepared for negative comments online. "You can't expect everyone to like you."

Before Element's arrival, there was Fridae.com, now known as Fridae.asia. The website provides news, city guides and opinion pieces.

Nanyang Technological University's associate professor Cherian George said: "Fridae already demonstrated the potential for commercially-run alternative media serving the gay community."

"It's exciting that there are now Singapore-based media entrepreneurs exploring the opportunities provided by apps and tablets."

A Media Development Authority (MDA) spokesman said it takes "a pragmatic approach" towards

VOICE OF GAY ASIA

ELEMENT

CITY SPECIAL: SINGAPORE

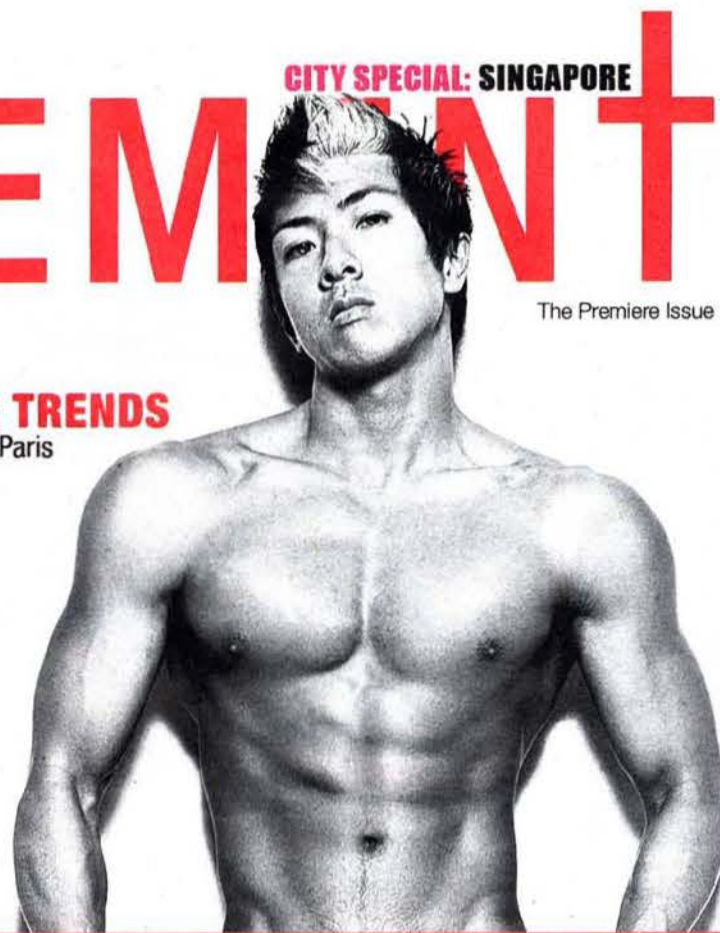
The Premiere Issue

SPRING/SUMMER TRENDS
 Our Editor's Pick from Milan & Paris

HOW TO GET MORE RIPPED FOR SONGKRAN IN 2 WEEKS

THE BATTLEGROUND
 My Life As A GoGo Boy

HIV + AFTERLIFE
 Finding happiness against all odds



PICTURE: ELEMENT MAGAZINE

OUTREACH: Directors of gay magazine Element say going digital lets them reach out to more people.

Media licensing conditions

SINGAPORE'S media regulations have traditionally been structured along various platforms, including television and radio, films, arts performances, newspapers and other printed materials.

The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (NPPA) gives the Government the authority to grant one-year permits to publishing firms that produce periodicals. Examples include newspapers and magazines.

The licence must be renewed annually. Applications can be rejected without the need for an explanation. The Government said this ensures the media oper-

ating here play a responsible role and that publishers are accountable for the content they print.

Some conditions:
 *Print publications with adult content must be shrink-wrapped and carry an "Unsuitable for the Young" advisory.

*Content not pre-vetted has to follow guidelines on moral, racial, religious issues and matters related to Singapore's national interests.

*The Media Development Authority's Publications Consultative Panel will investigate any complaints against a publication.

Internet regulation, relying on both industry players and public education to serve as checks and balances.

The spokesman added: "Online magazines which are hosted overseas are not within the reach of our regulations. (See report above.)"

"Nonetheless, MDA blocks 100 high-impact websites as a symbolic statement of our community values."

A light touch does not translate into no touch.

Mr Lionel Tan, technology partner at law firm Rajah & Tann, said online publications are automatically covered by MDA and have to abide by the same code of practice.

"As long as you're offering a publication from Singapore, you'll still be subject to Singapore laws," he said.

This applies even if a website is technically not considered a publication.

Recent cases seem to bear this out. A cartoonist was arrested and is being investigated for sedition. A freelance video reporter was

questioned by police. Some websites had to apologise for alleging a court ruling was too lenient.

"What the recent cases show is that netizens cannot make outrageous statements as the law will protect against defamatory statements in general," Mr Tan said.

Singapore Management University social media expert Michael Netzley said the public generally doesn't understand the difference between a light touch and no touch.

"It depends on the reference points used. Singapore would appear to have a heavier touch compared to North America."

"But if we look at mainstream media and what people can get away with online, then it's really a light touch."

While the light touch online offers space for a gay title like Element, its directors are banking on the positioning and content to win readers. As Mr Huang noted: "As a start-up, we face challenges (like any other company), such as managing investments and cash flow. We're a business after all, not a gay rights magazine – and we want to play it safe."

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