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**MDA on licensing scheme for news websites:**

# The Online Citizen not affected

**But explanation as to why not as straightforward**

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**W**HAT about us? That is the question socio-political website The Online Citizen (TOC) is asking in response to the licensing scheme for news websites announced on Tuesday by the Media Development Authority (MDA).

The answer by MDA is simple: TOC is not affected.

The explanation as to why is not as straightforward.

This is how it works. News websites will need to apply for an individual licence if they have more than one news story on Singapore per week and attract more than 50,000 unique visitors from Singapore per month, over a period of two months.

On Wednesday, TOC declared that it had 171,601

unique visitors from April 26 to May 26, based on its own internal statistics.

Based on its figures, it should require a licence (which means posting a \$50,000 performance bond and agreeing to remove objectionable content within 24 hours when notified).

When contacted, MDA repeated its earlier statement that the site did not qualify, although it did not elaborate further.

But the MDA spokesman told The New Paper that it typically used reach as a criterion for various licences.

Added the spokesman: "In this case, our assessment is that a site accessed from more than 50,000 monthly unique IP addresses in Singapore has sufficiently high reach to warrant an individual licence. We use a range of data sources including traffic monitoring and consumer surveys to determine the reach of a website."

Media consultant P. N. Balji believes this approach will force "websites to now err on the side of caution".

He said: "By keeping the rules vague, this is a signal to the other websites that they too can come under these rules if they step out of line."

Still, the founder of social media consultancy

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Goodstuf, Ms Pat Law, is puzzled why "such a licence needs to be imposed" in the first place.

"Cyberspace is not as literal as traditional media, so to regulate online media in such a way is not understanding how the Internet works," she said.

Already, the Sedition Act, the Penal Code and the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act are there to deal with such violations, experts said.

Additionally, Internet service providers and Internet content providers must comply with the

# Meanwhile, in other countries...

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FOLLOWING the news of the Media Development Authority's new online licensing scheme, The New Paper speaks to professor Ang Peng Hwa from Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information to get his take on the levels of supervision in other countries.

**MALAYSIA:** Online news portals and bloggers are not governed by the existing registration and licensing regimes applicable to the mainstream media. But bloggers have faced defamation suits for alleging corruption in government.

**Some examples :**

Blogger Raja Petra Kamarudin was detained under Internal Security Act charges for 56 days in 2008. He faced sedition and defamation charges for suggesting that the Malaysian Prime Minister and his wife were involved in a murder.

In 2010, blogger Khairul Nizam Abd Ghani was charged with "insulting royalty". His blog had critical comments of Sultan Iskandar Ismail of Johor, who died that year.

**Verdict:** "Malaysia has retreated from its original position of low censorship," Prof

Ang said. "What was supposed to be a free regime has changed, after taking action against seditious acts."

**UK:** Free access, but with several laws on online harassment and terrorism.

**Verdict:** The UK's Internet is free, but its companies are more socially conscious. European Internet Service Providers have banded together to form a hotline to report online child pornography. The European Union has a strong cybercrime treaty. These are things we are missing in Asia, said Prof Ang.

"We do not yet have cooperation among the Association of South-east Asian Nations or Asia Pacific Economic Corporation countries to police cyber-crime," he added.

**AUSTRALIA:** Free access except for restrictions like child pornography, sexual violence, consumer fraud and online gambling. Mandatory filtering of websites was proposed in 2007, but the plan was scrapped last year.

**Verdict:** "Filtering depends on the government in power, so it changes from regime to regime. It was previously laissez-faire, and is more interventionist now," said Prof Ang.



MDA's Internet code of practice which, among others, prohibits any material glorifying, inciting or endorsing ethnic, racial or religious hatred.

Ms Law also wondered if the methods used to quantify the web visits are accurate because "the market has no accepted data auditors unlike traditional media because they use different tools".

This means the numbers collated will differ from the actual web visits, she said.

So is this a move away from the light touch approach currently practised?

**'Business as usual'**

On the contrary, said Nominated Member of Parliament and Singapore Management University law lecturer Eugene Tan, this latest development is "business as usual" on the part of the Government.

He said: "Yes, the new rules may strike some as the end of the light touch regime. But any regulatory regime requires rules, and these rules will have to be updated from time to time.

"What will determine whether the light touch regime is still the norm is not so much the rules themselves, but how the rules are enforced."

Singapore Management University social media expert Dr Michael Netzley said: "I think it is too

early to say whether or not there is a change in the light touch policy because the devil is always in the details.

"Certainly the new policy is written in surprisingly broad terms that invite concern as to how the policy will actually be implemented, that question we cannot answer until we are further down the road and see what this announcement means in practise," added Dr Netzley.

But political observer Bilveer Singh – who is an adjunct senior fellow of the Centre of Excellence for National Security at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies – reckoned the new rules have come into play because "it is clear that a light touch policy alone is not sufficient".

He said: "This is especially so when there is a perception that... in the online sphere, one can afford to 'get away' more easily. Hence, the need to balance the hard and soft or light touch."

Mr Balji believes the Government has always had a clear policy as far as media is concerned.

He added: "I think the key here is that as the next elections of 2016 come closer, the Government is sending a signal to the websites out there not to overstep their boundaries."