

MDA's new licensing framework for online news sites

Govt's light touch to continue: Yaacob

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THE new ruling is not a "fundamental shift of policy".

But while the "light touch" approach to regulating the Internet remains, the new licensing regulation put in place by the Media Development Authority (MDA) last week could be expanded to other news sites and even broadcasters, said Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim yesterday.

He said: "We will consider websites 'news sites' if they report regularly on Singapore's current affairs. We have identified 10 websites (seven Singapore Press Holdings sites, two by MediaCorp and the Yahoo Singapore site) which meet the criteria, and if other sites are deemed to be reporting regularly on Singapore's current affairs, we will license them at a later stage."

The minister made these comments in a nine-page response to 22 common questions as a result of the new rules that came into force last Saturday.

Clarifying the guidelines to reporters, Dr Yaacob said: "There is no subsequent tranche of sites that have been identified for future licensing. However, now that the new framework is in place, as and when MDA makes a determination that a new site has met the criteria and needs to be individually licensed, it will notify them."

Under the new ruling, 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.

These websites would also have to post a \$50,000 performance bond and agreeing to remove objectionable content within 24 hours when notified.

Personal blogs will not be affected as long as they do not morph into news sites.

Dr Yaacob also said a site is required to be licensed when MDA sends formal notification that it has met the criteria of content and reach.

But he said netizens' claims that the new regime is an attempt to limit public discourse online is a "far-fetched claim".

Dr Yaacob said: "I think the best way is for people

"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 all those in the business of reporting news do it responsibly."

— Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim

to see, after the licences are issued, whether activists are indeed limited in their public discourse."

But do these explanations point to a tougher stance by MDA than previously presented?

Singapore Management University social media expert Dr Michael Netzley doesn't think so.

He said: "The additional comments from Minister Yaacob Ibrahim seem to take great pains to emphasise that the potentially broad language will not result in a change in the light-touch approach. I think the minister, in all honesty, hits the nail on the head when he says that he hopes the critics admit they were wrong when they see what happens in practice. Time will be the ultimate test."

"While I would have preferred greater clarity and perhaps a more tightly defined announcement at the start, the elaborations have been helpful and everything I read suggests that day in, day out the average Internet users should not experience any change," said Dr Netzley.

Media consultant P.N. Balji said all the confusion and criticism "could have been avoided" if MDA had done a proper consultation with the

stakeholders.

He said: "The clarifications are not going to change anything. I think the big questions are: If these regulations were not implemented, would Singapore be worse off? And why was there no attempt to consult the stakeholders?"

He also noted that the need to have a security bond and the 24-hour takedown rule did not do justice to the light-touch policy.

However, Dr Yaacob told reporters that despite the new guidelines, there is no change in content standards for licensed online news sites.

Moreover, in the 15 years since the Class Licence scheme was introduced in 1996, MDA has told websites to take down content only 24 times – and all of them concerned religiously offensive or pornographic content.

As for the imposition of a performance bond of \$50,000, Dr Yaacob added: "It is not for us to impose a financial burden on the site but to register the fact that you have a certain degree of responsibility. We are very flexible on how the performance bond can be put up. It can be provided as a banker's guarantee. If you can't do so, MDA is prepared to exercise flexibility."

There are also plans to "amend the Broadcast Act to cover overseas broadcasters in general which are specifically targeting Singaporeans".

This will include online news sites which may not be operating in Singapore, but regularly report on Singapore news and are targeting a Singaporean audience.

"This has become more imperative with technological advances increasingly blurring the divide between local and foreign online news providers," said Dr Yaacob.

But in the end, the minister said the Government is "very careful of how we approach the online space".

He said: "...it is important for us to put a regulatory framework which is as light as possible to ensure that those sites that are coming on board to report on Singapore news have to conform to certain minimum standards as far as we are concerned."

"We think it is not as onerous as what has been made out by some people online".



PICTURE: THE STRAITS TIMES