

Is Govt's light touch over?



Socio-political website Breakfast Network shut on Monday after it decided not to register

Report by ZUL OTHMAN
zothman@sph.com.sg

Are the days of the Government's "light touch" approach to Internet regulation over?

Observers The New Paper spoke to are divided over whether the decision by socio-political website Breakfast Network (BN) to close on Monday points in that direction.

Some allege a lack of clarity in the rules enforced by Media Development Authority (MDA) for licensing online news websites.

Others said the "light touch" is still being applied, albeit in a different form.

Earlier this week, BN's owner, shareholder and editor Bertha Henson announced that it has decided to suspend operations, citing the "onerous" registration process which required several forms to be filled, including details on finance and volunteers, as one of its reasons.

The following day, the MDA responded that since BN, which had been given a Dec 17 deadline, had decided not to submit the registration forms, it "will require that Breakfast Network cease its online service".

BN is not the first website to shut down following a call for registration.

In 2001, Sintercom, Singapore's first online magazine, decided to close down when the Government asked it to register.

LACK OF CLARITY?

Blogger Andrew Loh said that the main issue here "is a lack of clarity on the regulations".

The enforcement of the regulations also "leads to confusion", argued the editor with sociopolitical blog The Online Citizen. The blog has not been asked to register, although it has more than 50,000 unique visitors a month and more than one news story on Singapore per week.

He said: "They seem to be implemented arbitrarily and in a confused manner. While BN and The Independent were asked to register, other sites like The Real Singapore and New Asia Republic have not."

On his blog, political commentator Cherian George also questioned MDA's move and lamented the loss of the "light touch" the authorities once took.

Singapore Management Universi-

ty (SMU) associate law professor Eugene Tan told TNP: "The Breakfast Network episode is perhaps a not so subtle, counter-intuitive shift towards more regulation for social and political commentary."

NOT CENSORSHIP

But this is not censorship, said Assoc Prof Tan, but "rather, it seeks to regulate as much as it can without being seen as censorious. This is notwithstanding perceptions to the contrary."

Despite the shutdown, BN continues to be active on Facebook. Ms Henson also continues to blog on her own personal account, Bertha Harian.

DISTINCTION

Social media expert Dr Michael Netzley, however, sees it as a "straightforward case" of requirements being applied.

Said Dr Netzley, the academic director of SMU's executive development: "If the next step was taken to pursue the blogger and assert that MDA's requirement is being skirted via Facebook and the blog, then this would raise my attention very quickly. But right now that is not the case."

But is there distinction between a personally-run website and a blog or a Facebook page?

Dr Netzley said: "Perhaps there are good arguments to support this distinction. So considering the changes we have seen since the 2011 general elections, a bit more discussion and public input would perhaps be a well-balanced approach to this somewhat thorny issue."

Singaporean news and current affairs website, The Independent, had also been asked by the MDA to register. It submitted its forms on Dec 5 for MDA to review.

When contacted, one of the website's founders, Mr P. N. Balji, a former editor of The New Paper and Today, said: "When it comes to a lot of things in Singapore, especially the media, it is the Government that mandates. The media players and the rest of Singapore are just bit players."

He said: "I start on the basis that rules that put an undue control on media are archaic and unworkable in the longer term."

"The 'light touch' approach is a government invention; what has changed is the form, not the substance."