

**SOCIAL MEDIA PLAYING BIGGER ROLE**

# Govt fine-tuning of Internet rules to be 'closely watched'

*Analysts agree harassment, bullying laws needed, but see some others as crimping debate*

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**SINGAPORE** – With social media playing an increasingly influential role in Singaporeans' lives, and more people wanting to air their views online, the Government's continued fine-tuning of regulations governing the online sphere will come under the spotlight in 2014, say analysts and observers.

While some measures are deemed as necessary — such as the new laws to deal with cyber-harassment and bullying that the Government is expected to draw up early next year — several other regulations that have been rolled out so far have been perceived as crimping online debate.

For instance, the new licensing framework in June for 10 online news sites and the notification for current affairs and news website The Independent, as well as socio-political commentary site Breakfast Network to register under class licensing rules triggered vociferous debate among netizens. Moves the Government made against online voices, such as contempt proceedings against bloggers such as cartoonist Leslie Chew and Yawning Bread's Alex Au, also sparked outcries.

Overall, analysts felt that regulating the vast online space — which they note is also constantly evolving — is something the Government seems to be still feeling its way about.

Referring to the new licensing framework for some online news sites, Singapore Management University Associate Professor of Law Eugene Tan described the move as "counter-intuitive".

"It's a recalibration that reflects an ambivalence towards social media and highlights the authorities' deep-seated concerns that the 'light touch' regulation may not be sufficiently robust," he said. "The emphasis is on pre-emptive regulation ... to deal with potential issues before they even arise."

In requiring socio-political website Breakfast Network to register under the Broadcasting (Class Licence) Notification, the Media Development Au-

thority (MDA) had maintained that the principle that foreign entities may not engage in Singapore politics is a long-standing one and the notice to the websites to register was to prevent local media platforms, which are "prime vehicles for political influence" from falling under foreign interests. The registration will not in any way affect what Breakfast Network can publish on its site, the media regulator had said.

Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Assistant Professor Liew Kai Khiun said: "Underlying the measures and concerns of the government over the online community is the assumption that the Internet can be or has been used systematically and deliberately by shady elements to undermine its authority."

But he pointed out that much of the online buzz this year had been "generated spontaneously or 'accidentally' by otherwise unexpected offline, real events", such as a Member of Parliament's posting about food and the Little India riot.

## FACILITATING CONSTRUCTIVE DISCOURSE

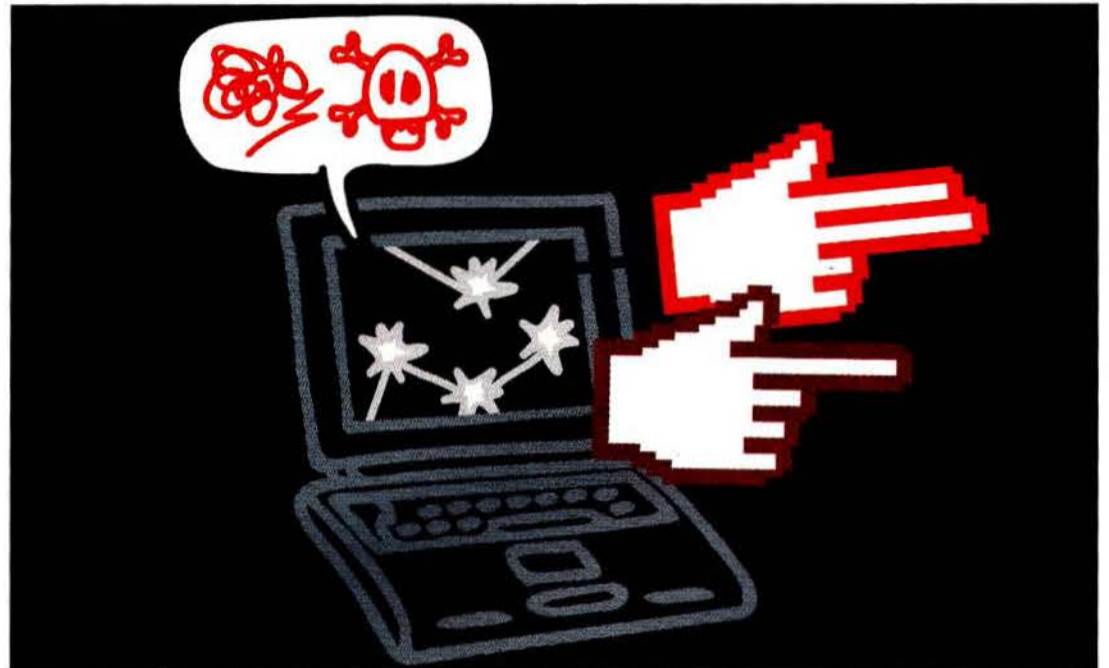
Holding people accountable for what they say online, and widening cyberspace for constructive discourse and participation among Singaporeans — especially the silent majority — are goals the Government has set out to achieve.

Several Ministers had this year warned against misinformation on the Internet, with Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen in August cautioning that DRUMS (Distortions, Rumours, Untruths, Misinformation and Smears) on the Internet can spread far and wide, weakening the country's resolve and causing disunity.

He had also called on the authorities to have a quick response plan to online rumours, and urged Singaporeans to be more discerning about information on the Internet.

Last month, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said Singaporeans should fight back against trolling, while noting that a framework has to be developed over time so as to take full advantage of the new media.

To demonstrate the Government's will to tackle the problem, Mr Lee also announced the change requiring log-ins before one can leave comments on



**\* INTERNET RULES: KEY CHANGES NEXT YEAR**

- The Broadcasting Act will be amended, with the view of applying the new licensing regime on overseas news sites reporting on Singapore as well.
- There will be stronger laws by early in the year to better protect people against harassment, both online and in the real world.
- The Government will also look at laws to curb the growing problem of cyber-bullying.
- Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said a framework for new media has to be developed over time, to widen the space for constructive discourse and participation among Singaporeans and allow different perspectives to surface.

While enforcing laws dealing with harassment and bullying in cyberspace may not be easy, NTU Professor Ang Peng Hwa said 'it's a question of political will and resources'.

PHOTO: THINKSTOCK

and bullying in cyberspace, however, analysts were in agreement of the necessity.

While enforcing such laws may not be easy, Prof Ang said "it's a question of political will and resources". "Whatever laws that exist can be broken. It doesn't mean that just because the laws can be broken that therefore there shouldn't be the laws," he added.

## POLITICIANS NEED TO BE 'SAVVIER' WITH SOCIAL MEDIA

What is clear is that more, politicians and activists alike, will try to harness the potential of social media, say analysts. Several Ministers already keep blogs or post on their Facebook pages about their thoughts on policy tweaks and reactions to developments, for instance.

While he noted that the medium favours dissenting voices, Assoc Prof Tan said social media is an important mode of communication and "increasingly a tool for influence and the moulding of opinion".

Asst Prof Liew also said more politicians will learn to be savvier with social media. He cited the buzz generated when PM Lee posted a "selfie" with his Malaysian counterpart and a picture of a barn owl in the Istana.

More activists and regular Singaporeans could also take to social media to organise themselves for ground-up causes, they added, citing opposition towards developing part of Bukit Brown Cemetery and efforts during the haze episode and after the Little India riot.

Assoc Prof Tan felt that further growth of ground-up movements online — ranging from cultural, heritage, sports and the arts — is "inevitable and reflects development in active citizenship".

Noting that social media is a "force multiplier", he added that the growth of social media activism will also give impetus to the growth of civil society.

Reach, its feedback portal arm.

But analysts had mixed feelings about whether the move would indeed encourage more than just the vocal minority to speak up or for more perspectives to surface.

While some like SMU's Assoc Prof Tan believe that the rule may indirectly make the "silent majority" feel that it is safer to speak up, others like NTU Professor Ang Peng Hwa felt it would lead to a drop, overall, in comments online. Just because people are using their real names also does not lead to an increase in credible comments, he added.

Agreeing, industry watcher Alfred Siew said people will still feel safer commenting anonymously. "I'm not sure this contributes to having credible voices, well-reasoned arguments in a marketplace of ideas," he said.

Some analysts also noted that they have already noticed a shift in the tone of discussions.

Said Asst Prof Liew: "From what I have observed this year, the fault lines may no longer be between pro- and anti-government netizens. Rather, the online debates would be more theme-based, such as on welfare, immigration and sexual morality."

For laws to deal with harassment

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