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New Regulatory Politics And Communication Technologies In Singapore

Singapore's status as one of the most networked society in the Asia-Pacific region is rarely disputed, though not much has been written critically about the city-state's approach towards the regulation of information/communication technologies. This paper seeks therefore to disambiguate the social, cultural, economic as well as the political imperatives of such regulatory practices in Singapore. It begins by looking at the development of Singapore's Internet and info-communications scene, with highlights of political responses to key occurrences over the past decade. Taking on board the discourse of auto-regulation – that regulating the Internet and new media in Singapore is mostly about ensuring an automatic functioning of power for political expedience and longevity – this paper offers new insights into the politics of new communication technologies in Singapore, from its humble beginnings of censorship, surveillance and 'sleaze' control (1990s) to recent attempts at restricting information via new legislations governing foreign media and the stifling of online political campaigning and debates (from 2001/02). This paper concludes by looking at aspects of electronic government (e-Government), suggesting how the offering of e-Citizen services are likely to tighten Internet control in the future. It argues that although electronic spaces for political engagement are and will be limited, one needs to make full use of them whilst they are still available.

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On 2 August 1999, Britain's largest selling tabloid *The Sun,* owned and operated by Rupert Murdoch's News Limited, published an editorial which encapsulates the hype that has emerged around the Internet since it became publicly available in the early to mid-1990s:

"The Internet is delivering power to the people. At last, the consumer is king. Communism has collapsed – but here is a force that is truly taking power from the few and transferring it to the many. It has happened in America. It will happen here [the UK]. Perfect information. Perfect democracy. Perfect competition.

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Choice for all" (*The Sun*, 2 August 1999; cited in Gibson & Ward, 2000b: 25).

The rapid expansion of digitalised and new communication technologies had been heralded as having significant implications for the improved functioning of democracy in general and politics in particular. As a technology designed and founded on liberal ideology and concepts of freedom of access and information, the advent of the Internet brought about much hope and "power to the people", many of whom were – and still are – becoming socially, economically and politically disenfranchised (see Lee & Birch, 2000).

Over the past decade, the opening up of electronic modes of communication – including electronic mails (emails), websites, mobile telephony and the ever-popular short messaging service (SMS), as well as the rise of Electronic Government (E-Government) services – have enabled citizens to become more involved in politics and public administration. With the ability to access wider information and the opening up of space for more voices, "technologies such as the Internet are seen as offering potential for bringing government closer to the people, making it more responsive and relevant" (Gibson & Ward, 2000a: 1). Or in the words of Chadwick (2001), with the Internet, governments around the world have begun to put on an "electronic face".

However, the blue-sky vision of *The Sun* editorial may have been somewhat premature. As Shapiro points out, the notion that the Internet is inherently democratising is a myth that needs to be debunked. Indeed, the 'electronic face' of technology and its design will be at the heart of various power struggles in the digital age (Shapiro, 1999: 14-5). As Shapiro warns:

"We should not be surprised to see governments and corporations trying to shape the code of the Net to preserve their authority or profitability. But code is not everything. Even if we could lock in the democratic features of the Internet, the ultimate political impact of [communication technologies] must be judged on more than design. We must also consider the way a technology is used and the social environment in which it is deployed" (Shapiro, 1999: 15).

Willy-nilly, the 'perfect competition' brought about by a supposedly 'perfect democracy' is starting to resemble a potent power struggle within the highly contentious sphere of politics. As in off-line or pre-Internet politics, this struggle is mostly about winning the hearts and minds of the citizen-electorate either directly and openly or in a subtle fashion. To succeed, governments around the world would need to be actively involved in shaping both the design as well as the social environment in which the Internet and

other new media technologies operate.

Taking on board Shapiro's advice, this paper sets out to consider the way (and ways) in which new communication technologies, led most prominently by the Internet, has been and can be used within the context of the city-state of Singapore. With labels such as 'police state' and 'nanny state' constantly heaped on it, Singapore is well known – or to be precise, notorious – for being a highly regulated society. With toilet-flushing and anti-spitting rules, as well as laws banning the sale and distribution of chewing gum, it is not too difficult to understand the rationale for the many not-too-pleasing descriptions of Singapore's social and cultural environment. Indeed, much has been said about how the Singapore polity resonates with a climate of fear, which gives rise to the prevalent practice of self-censorship (Gomez, 2000; Tremewan, 1994). Against such a backdrop, it would be interesting to see how different groups in Singapore employ the Internet and new media to find their voice and seek their desired ends, whether these are social or political. Equally, if not more interesting, are the ways in which the omnipresent People Action's Party (PAP) government responds.

Despite the somewhat restrictive socio-political environment in Singapore, its status as one of the most networked society in the Asia-Pacific region is rarely disputed. This paper begins by providing an update of Singapore as the 'intelligent' networked island, using both statistical and anecdotal data. It then goes on to discuss the policy discourse of auto-regulation advanced by this author – that regulating the Internet and new media in Singapore is mostly about ensuring a panoptical cum automatic functioning of power for political expedience and longevity (Lee 2001a,b; see also Lee & Birch, 2000). It will suggest that the politics of new communication technologies in Singapore is about the ongoing struggle for power and legitimacy to control information flows (à la Castells, 2000). From its humble beginnings of censorship, surveillance and 'sleaze' control (1990s) to recent attempts (in 2001 and 2002) at restricting free flows of information via new legislations governing foreign media and the stifling of online political campaigning and debates, the Singaporean authorities have sought to minimise spaces for political expressions via new communication technologies. Although there are clear resistances to such resurgences of hegemony, the increasingly global fears of terrorism, caused largely by events of 11 September 2001, has provided a strong rationale for the long-term sustenance of such authoritarian practices. By examining possible uses – and abuses – of the Internet in Singapore, this paper aims to make sense of new communication technologies and its relationship to

democracy and political engagement in Singapore and beyond.

The 'Intelligent' Island

Singapore is undoubtedly one of the most well connected societies not just within the Asia-Pacific region, but also globally. Since the start of the new millennium, Singapore has attained the status of 'intelligent island', with 99% of households and businesses in the Central Business District (CBD) effectively connected to a nationwide hybrid fibre-optic network. This network, the result of a master plan entitled *A Vision of an Intelligent Island: IT 2000 Report* (National Computer Board, 1992), not only enables the delivery of both cable and must-carry free-to-air television channels via the majority government-owned *Starhub Cable Vision* (SCV), it makes every home ready for *Singapore ONE*, Singapore's much-vaunted broadband interactive site which promises a host of digital and multimedia services, including ultra high-speed Internet access. The Singapore government's proclaimed aim is to turn the country into an information technology (IT) hub so that it can be transformed into a knowledge-based economy (Kuo et al, 2002). Through agencies like the Info-communication (Infocomm) Development Authority of Singapore (IDA) and the forthcoming Media Development Authority (MDA), the government is constantly implementing strategies to spread and speed-up the use of computers in everyday life (Kuo et al, 2002). It is believed that for Singapore to achieve economic growth in the 21st century, rapid adoption and mastery of technology is paramount (Rodan, 2000b).

Statistically, the use of IT in Singapore is most impressive, especially for a population numbering less than 4 million. According to a survey of 1,500 Singaporean households carried out by the IDA in 2000, 66% of the population are knowledgeable on the use of personal computers, 61% of households have at least one computer, while 50% of homes are connected to the Internet in one form or another (IDA, 2001). This suggests that Singapore is more connected than developed countries like the United States (42%), Australia (37%) and Britain (35%) (Dawson, 2001a). The survey also found Singapore to be an 'e-inclusive' society, with strong personal computer ownership and Internet access across Malay, Indian and Chinese – the three main races in multiracial Singapore – households (Dawson, 2001b). In September 2001, mobile telephony penetration rate in Singapore reached 76.7%, with a broadband audience exceeding 400,000 and rising exponentially (IDA 2001).

A 2002 monograph published by the Singapore Internet Project (SIP) Team on Internet in Singapore reaffirms Singapore's high level of IT use, with about 46% of adults, age 18 and above, active users of the Internet. The number is markedly higher for Singaporean

students, who are increasingly being IT-trained and exposed from day one, with Internet penetration at 71% and rising (Kuo. et al, 2002: 100). Even 'non-users' – defined in the report as people who do not access the Internet due to three key reasons: did not know how, no time and no interest – were found to be generally supportive of Internet use and development.

But in order to understand the significance of the SIP study, the notion of 'Internet use' needs to be put into perspective. The SIP team identifies the two main purposes of the Internet as "a source of information and as a tool for communication" (Kuo, et al, 2002: 8). The researchers found that emails and information search were by far the most popular Internet activities, followed by entertainment and online discussions. E-commerce activities, marked by online shopping and browsing for goods and services, were not popular due largely to concerns about security and privacy of information (Kuo, et al, 2002: 103-4). Closer analysis of these figures suggests, among other things, that the depth of technological know-how in Singapore remains fairly low. Although usage is relatively high, Internet 'expertise' is limited to emailing and other elementary personal and commercial functions. Sophisticated use comes in mainly at the 'youth market' level, with downloading of music, movies, graphics, online gaming and other multi-media tools the key applications.

The slow take-up of basic e-commerce activities by Singaporeans contradicts the expressed goal of the government for Singaporeans to embrace new technologies. This anomaly can be explained by looking at another aspect of the SIP report: the perception that the Internet has not led to a stronger sense of political empowerment (Kuo, et al, 2002: 111). According to the researchers, the percentages of users who believe that the Internet enables increased engagement on government policies and political issues are low (at less than 20%). This dismal result suggests that there is little hope for political change to be effected by harnessing new communication technologies within the confines of Singapore. Yet if one considers the global potential of the Internet and the fact that the Internet is often the first port of call when seeking uncontrolled and 'truthful' information, it would be too simplistic to write off the political possibilities of the Internet in Singapore (Gomez, 2002). After all, the Internet is, by design and by the many codes and regulatory guidelines, always-already a site of struggle and contestation. The next section of this paper continues along this thread by looking at how the Internet has been regulated in Singapore since its inception. It also considers how Foucault's mode of governmentality via 'tactics' of regulation – what I have termed 'auto-regulation' (Lee,

2001a,b,c) – has been applied on the Internet and other new media technologies in Singapore (Foucault, 1977; 1978). By looking at the different responses to auto-regulation, we may understand how new communication technologies can be used – and abused – for social and political ends.

Internet Panopticon And Auto-Regulation

[T]he major effect of the "Panopticon" [is] to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power. So to arrange things that the surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action; that the perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary. […] It is an important mechanism, for it automizes and disindividualizes power (Foucault, 1977:201-2).

In recent years, the Singapore government has been actively promoting the attributes of creativity and innovation. The firm belief is that Singapore's future prosperity is tied to its success applying artistic creativity and scientific innovation in various entrepreneurial goals (MITA, 2000), most prominently seen in the government's aggressive attempts at turning Singapore into a biomedical hub as well as the nurturing of the arts and culture into 'creative industries' (Creative Industries Working Group, 2002). There are concerns, however, that an over-emphasis on a rigid and structured education system, along with a hitherto intolerant social, cultural and political censorship regime, has stifled the creativity and risk-taking initiatives of Singaporeans. At his annual National Rally Speech in 2002, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong signalled a possible directional change when he expressed a desire for various locales in Singapore to evolve into "little Bohemias" where people can "gather, soak in the ambience, and do their creative stuff" (Goh, 2002). Whilst the efforts are real, with the recent completion of Singapore's new world-class arts venue, 'Esplanade - Theatres By the Bay', a commanding proof of the government's commitment towards enhancing creativity, its long-term effectiveness remains questionable (Banks, 2002a: 3; Ong, 2002). Not least due to the fact that many of the tried-and-tested rules and regulations, often accompanied by harsh penalties, remain intact.

In April 2002, the Censorship Review Committee was re-convened by Acting Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts David Lim, to 'update' and 'refresh' censorship policies (Koh, 2002: 3; Tan, 2002). Minister Lim summarises the crux of the matter when he makes clear that "Singapore needs to be more playful, but that doesn't mean we're going to be naughty" (in Koh, 2002: 3). Minister Lim's remark bears deep semblance to a commonly quoted phrase articulated by his predecessor Minister George Yeo:

"Leave the windows open, but carry fly-swatters," which cautions Singaporeans who may mistakenly conclude that a loosening of cultural censorship implies socio-political liberty (cited in Lee & Birch, 2000: 164). While it appears – with this latest declaration – that not much will change in the short to medium term, censorship reviewers will be forced to consider the impact that the Internet has made to cultural norms in Singapore. As Banks (2002a: 3) articulates (in the context of the current censorship review):

"It remains to be seen whether the review is simply a recognition that the Internet now makes it extremely difficult for governments to regulate what its people read, see and hear and therefore need some tinkering – or is a genuine attempt to liberalise the law."

Certainly, there will be 'some tinkering' to censorship rules in the near future, but the extent to which is unlikely to be seen as 'liberal' in the true sense of the word. One needs to remember that censorship in Singapore is predicated upon the 'symbolic', that is, it signifies and affirms community values and political tolerance in Singapore (Lee & Birch, 2000: 150-1). Any attempt to liberalise censorship rules is likely to find widespread resistance in a society that professes moral and cultural conservatism, often to the point of emasculation (Banks, 2001: 5). This gives the authorities in Singapore a legitimate right to exercise 'thought' control, whether this is found in the management of 'sleazy' material and other undesirable practices or in the clamping down of oppositional political voices.

What most Singaporeans do not seem to realise is that in a climate of auto-regulation, where regulation is carried out 'automatically', both overtly and subtly at the same time, the preference to err on the conservative side gives the government and its statutory bodies immense power to craft new rules, laws and codes to tighten its already tremendous grip on social, cultural, ideological and political power (Lee, 2001c). Prominent Singaporean journalist Cherian George calls this consolidated power 'central control' (George, 2000; see also Ellis, 2001). Veritably, with auto-regulation, the government becomes the supervisory 'central tower' in Bentham's Panopticon, a privileged position from which to exercise surveillance on citizens as 'inmates' (Foucault, 1977).

The notion of 'auto-regulation' embodies the key elements of the Panopticon in that one does not know when the 'supervisor', as the extension of the authorities, is really watching. As a result, regulation appears to be carried out automatically and with machine-like precision. As Foucault (1977: 201) puts it, "[the]

architectural apparatus should be a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it; in short, that the inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers."

In other words, auto-regulation works because it is a potent combination of all possible modes of regulation: application of legislations and regulations, state surveillance, direct policing, self-regulation, and so on. With modern technology, auto-regulation can be 'automised' and applied with even greater precision and subtlety (Foucault, 1977: 202).

Singapore's approach to managing the Internet has become in many ways an epitome of auto-regulation. As Gomez points out, political control through Internet monitoring is technically easier due to the ability to intercept electronic communication messages at the point of departure or reception (2002: 43). In Singapore, the fact that all local Internet Service Providers (ISPs) and broadband service providers are either government-owned or government-linked makes the business of electronic eavesdropping child's play. Indeed, one of the most pertinent points of auto-regulation in Singapore is that no new technology escapes the watchful eyes of the state police.

Even Singapore's official Internet content policy embodies aspects of auto-regulation. The Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) is empowered by its Act of 1995 to regulate Internet content. SBA's Internet policy comprises a set of Industry Guidelines on the Singapore Broadcasting Authority's Internet Policy (October 1997), an Internet Code of Practice (November 1997) and a Class Licence scheme (July 1996). These codes and guidelines combine to form the overall practice of Internet self-regulation in Singapore (Lee, 2001a,b,c). The Industry Guidelines explains the main features of SBA's Internet regulatory policies and spells the rules for ISPs as well as Internet Content Providers (ICPs). Although the Internet Code of Practice is highlighted within the Industry Guidelines, it is essentially a separate document specifying details of 'dos and don'ts'. In this document, 'prohibited material' is broadly defined as: "material that is objectionable on the grounds of public interest, public morality, public order, public security, national harmony, or is otherwise prohibited by applicable Singapore laws" (SBA, 1997b, item 4 [1]).

The obvious problem with this 'definition' is that is leaves too much room for (mis)interpretation. What at any time constitutes 'public' or 'public interest' is not – and probably can never be – clearly construed. As many critics have pointed out, policy and/or political terms in Singapore are not transparent (see Rodan, 2000a;

Lee & Birch, 2000; Yao, 1996). The deliberate employment of ambiguous and arbitrary legal terms, interpretable only by state officials, is one of the key foundations of auto-regulation. A blanket Class Licence scheme is then applied to all ISPs and ICPs so that all who put up any content on the web are 'automatically' licensed without the need to actually apply for one. The only exception is that any website seeking to promote political or religious causes must pre-register. Up to 2001, the political aspect of the Class Licence scheme was rarely invoked.

In July 2001, notice was issued to the popular *Sintercom* (which stands for 'Singapore Internet Community') website to register itself as an Internet site "engaged in the propagation, promotion or discussion of political issues relating to Singapore on the Internet" (Goh, 2001). At that time, this move was seen by critics as bizarre given that the independent website, founded in 1994 and perceived by many as the beacon of civil society in Singapore, had been previously exempted. Up to July 2001, *Sintercom* had been one of the most innovative non-governmental website, set up to encourage candid discussions of social, cultural and political life in Singapore for local and overseas Singaporeans. A month later, Tan Chong Kee, founder of *Sintercom,* announced that the website was to shut in end-August 2001. Tan put the blame squarely on the arbitrariness of political terms within the Class Licence policy, adding that he believed civil society to be a 'lost cause' in Singapore (Tan, 2001; Lee, 2002). Although Tan stressed that his decision had nothing to do with Sintercom's regulatory tussle with the authorities, it is apparent that SBA's Internet auto-regulatory framework has succeeded in crippling alternative and oppositional discourses. The automatic licensing approach of SBA's Class Licence policy instills a panoptic sense of power and fear, thus minimising the need for supervision or direct intimidation.

To date, Singapore's Internet industry players have not flouted any of SBA's Internet guidelines. While SBA claims that this is due to its transparent policies, it is apparent that the fine record of policy adherence owes a great deal to the application of auto-regulation at various times in Singapore's brief history of the Internet. In 1994, the year when public Internet access was first made available through *SingNet* (the ISP arm of local telecommunications conglomerate *SingTel*), at least two unauthorised scans – according to official explanations, to source for unlawful pornographic materials and viruses – were conducted on private users' email accounts. In November 1998, the local *Straits Times* daily reported that a section of the Singapore Police Force was set up to 'patrol the alleys of cyberspace' so as to keep

hackers and cyber-criminals at bay. And again in April 1999, SingNet was found to be conducting unauthorised scanning of its subscribers' web accounts, supposedly for deadly viruses. This latter case made the front-page news because the Ministry of Home Affairs, the parent ministry of the Singapore Police Force, was involved. *SingNet* had to issue a public apology – not on paper, but via mass e-mail (Lee, 2001a,b; Rodan, 2000a).

Perhaps the most significant auto-regulatory tactic employed by the SBA since October 1997 – in conjunction with the unveiling of the aforementioned Internet Code of Practice – is the censoring of 100 pornographic sites via proxy servers of the three main ISPs operating in Singapore: *SingNet*, *Pacific Internet* and *Starhub*, all with deep government links (Lee & Birch, 2000). SBA's rationale for censoring these 100 smut sites is to exhibit a gesture of pastoral concern for the moral values of Singaporeans (Tan, 1997: 27). This strategy of 'gestural censorship' exemplifies auto-regulation par excellence as it works to not only draw public attention to its new guidelines, it also: "reaffirm[s] the means by which the government of Singapore is able to enact the ideology of … social control of the public sphere, demonstrating the means by which the habitus of controlled behaviour is still reinforced and able to be reinforced in Singapore" (Lee & Birch, 2000: 149).

The ability to block websites gives the impression that electronic 'snooping' is being performed by the authorities, so it becomes necessary for citizens to toe the official line by self-censoring (Gomez, 2000). Although SBA has repeatedly stated that it does not conduct online monitoring (see Lim, 2001), the fact that significant public attention were given to the scanning incidents – or 'scandals', as I have called them (Lee, 2001c) – are sufficient to warn users about the widespread power of auto-regulation. Whether or not actual file searching or surveillance is carried out becomes irrelevant in an auto-regulatory climate, the demonstration of a government's technical capability is far more potent and intimidating. Auto-regulation thus hinges on an ideology of control and surveillance with the sole aim of producing law-abiding, self-regulated and therefore, useful citizens – what Foucault refers to as 'docile bodies' (Foucault, 1977).

SBA has repeatedly emphasised that its Internet policy has been developed in consultation with the media and info-communications industry. This does not, however, negate dominant perceptions that a panoptic mode of surveillance continues to dominate in Singapore – if not physically, then ideologically. Auto-regulation works because the enclosed nature of a panoptic regulatory supervision "does not preclude a permanent presence from the outside" (Foucault, 1977:

207). As Foucault points out, the general public is always welcome to inspect the central Panopticon tower by scrutinising the guidelines/codes (by downloading them from E-Citizen or government websites) or by examining other functions of surveillance (by visiting and/or speaking to the authorities). But because auto-regulation is a widely dispersed function, with each individual playing a vital role – in self-regulation, self-censorship and the condoning or acceptance of rules that appear to promote public orderliness – it is almost impossible to find fault with it. As a consequence, the authorities can claim to be objective, consultative and transparent. The auto-regulatory role of surveillance and policing thus strengthens rather than weakens. Auto-regulation, like the Panopticon, becomes as Foucault notes: "a transparent building in which the exercise of power may be supervised by society as a whole" (Foucault, 1977: 207). What this also means is that the authorities are increasingly able to pre-empt and tighten the strictures of political control of new communication technologies in Singapore.

New Regulatory Politics

Singaporean gatekeepers have long been wary – even paranoid – of foreign media and international broadcasters engaging in Singapore's domestic politics (*The Straits Times Interactive,* 10 March 2001; see also Seow, 1998). This fear has been the driving force of foreign media censorship since the 1960s. In July 1986, the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act (NPPA), the key legislation governing publications in Singapore, was amended to enable the government to restrict sales of foreign publications deemed to be interfering with Singapore politics. Following the passage of this law, many foreign media were taken to task for their reports of unsavoury aspects of the PAP system (Chee, 2001: 173). Foreign publications falling victim to this new law included the *Far Eastern Economic Review, The Economist, The Asian Wall Street Journal* and *Asiaweek* (Seow, 1998: 148). In addition, in the past 30 years, global media players including *Newsweek, Reuters, The Times* (London), *The Star* (Malaysia), *Time,* and *International Herald Tribune* have had their editors and/or journalists hauled to court and sued heavily for publishing defamatory or libellous articles (Seow, 1998; Chee, 2001).

The muzzling of the foreign media was extended to the global broadcast media in April 2001. After a very brief debate in a one-party dominated Parliament, the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (Amendment) Bill 2001 was passed. Under this legislation, foreign broadcasters which meddle in 'domestic politics' – a term that only the Minister of Information,

Communication and the Arts is empowered by law to define – could be slapped with restrictions on the number of households which can receive their broadcasts through cable (operated by SCV); or worse, the broadcast channel could be 'blacked-out' altogether (*The Straits Times Interactive,* 23 April 2001). If such an action is effected, advertising and / or subscription revenue of the affected broadcaster will be severely affected. In his parliamentary speech on the new Bill, then Minister of Information and the Arts Lee Yock Suan revealed the Singapore government's clear grasp of the business of the media industry:

"This Bill makes it clear to foreign broadcasters that while they can sell their services to Singaporeans, they should not interfere with our domestic politics" (Lee, cited in Latif, 2001).

Indeed, the touchstone of all commercial media is the market and as such any decision on regulatory compliance would thus be market-dictated and targeted. Undoubtedly, Singaporean law and policy-makers understand – and apply – this knowledge only too well. As journalist Eric Ellis of *The Australian* notes more cogently:

"Where [global media players] are all vulnerable to Singapore [laws and] justice is that each has an economic interest in Singapore itself. The city-state might have a tiny population but it is a wealthy, English-speaking one. Foreign titles print in Singapore because it guarantees efficiency. So, if the Government chooses, as it has done, to cut Singapore circulation, advertising and profits are threatened" (Ellis, 2002: 9).

The government further demonstrated its auto-regulatory abilities in the new media arena by tackling an online publication in August 2002. On 4 August 2002, the international news agency *Bloomberg* published an article by its US-based columnist Patrick Smith that described as nepotism the appointment of Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's daughter-in-law, Ho Ching, as Executive Director of Temasek Holdings, the powerful government-owned corporation that controls most of the government-linked companies in Singapore (Ellis, 2002: 9; *The Straits Times Interactive,* 30 August 2002). This article was published electronically on *Bloomberg's* website and terminals, and appeared in print only in Malaysia's *The New Sunday Times* on 11 August 2002. Upon knowledge of a possible defamation suit, *Bloomberg* retracted its article, apologised unreservedly to the Senior Minister, the Prime Minister as well as his Deputy Lee Hsien Loong, and offered damages amounting to S$595,000. The apology and compensation was accepted and the case was settled in three weeks. *Bloomberg's* quick settlement demonstrated a pragmatic understanding of political constraints of both media operations and Internet use in Singapore, and that the Singaporean authorities have

no intention of relinquishing its auto-regulatory control in the digital era. If anything, one is likely to see a further fine-tuning of rules and regulations.

Commentators and critics on Singapore have variously argued that the real intention of restricting access to websites is ideological, a term used broadly to imply that the agenda is always political. On 8 June 2001, whilst launching the official website of the ruling People's Action Party (PAP), Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong announced that new regulations on how political parties may use the Internet at election time would be unveiled (Chua, 2001a: 3). It is interesting to note how the PAP government, being one of the most vociferous proponents of IT and the info-communications industry, had taken such a long time to show its 'electronic face' (see Chua, 2001b: 12). This 'face', however, is somewhat limited as the website is essentially an exercise in public relations, featuring interviews with party leaders, most of whom, as cabinet members, receive sufficient local media coverage anyway. Gomez argues that absence of a discussion forum, along with the disclaimers found in the 'Conditions of Access' page on the PAP website, reveals the inherent anxiety of the PAP leaders to be "out in the open and in an interactive domain policed by the very laws that it has introduced" (Gomez, 2002: 28). But for a party that has dominant control of the apparatuses of government, such rules can be easily circumvented or revamped to its advantage.

On 13 August 2001, in clear preparation for the 2001 General Elections held on 3 November 2001, the Singapore Parliament passed an amendment to the Parliamentary Elections Act to regulate Internet campaigning and advertising during election time. The new Bill is essentially an extension and refinement of SBA's Class Licence scheme. Instead of leaving content providers to self-regulate, the Parliamentary Elections Act defines specifically what is allowed on political party as well as non-partisan political websites that are already registered with SBA. As a pre-emptive measure, even new communication tools like mobile telephones, along with data and text functions like short messaging services (SMS), came under the purview of this new law.

According to Minister Lee Yock Suan, the Act is to "keep political campaigning serious and responsible," and it is to be perceived as a positive step forward in terms of "liberalising the use of Internet" and communication technologies for political advertising (Ng, 2001; Editorial, 2001; Lim, 2001). Typically, terms such as 'liberalising' and 'political' remain equivocal, but nonetheless constraining. The ambiguity of such laws are likely to prompt oppositional political figures as well as non-political

activists to auto-regulate their online as well as offline activities. What is most baffling is that the law was passed with the complete set of rules still in a work-in-progress stage. The Minister did however 'assure' the House that the full list of Internet features which would be allowed on these websites would be released before the election (*The Straits Times Interactive*, 14 August 2001).

The rules were unveiled and subsequently made effective on 17 October 2001, about two weeks before polling day. Opposition political parties, most of which are already under-staffed and short-handed, had to make the necessary adjustments to their websites within the short time frame, whilst having to campaign and canvass for votes. As Rodan (2001: 26) observes, "Political competition in Singapore operates within tight strictures. Periodic refinements are meant to keep it that way and take the risk out of elections for the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). […] Adjustments include fine-tuning controls over electronic media. The PAP is accustomed to conducting election campaigns with media that promotes rather than question or scrutinise its message. That is not about to dramatically change."

If Rodan's words portend the future of politics in Singapore, what hope is there for genuine opposition to arise in Singapore? The work of Singaporean activist James Gomez – most conspicuously in the setting up of Think Centre, founded as a news events and publishing company devoted to raising awareness on political reform within Singapore and the region – suggests that there are yet frontiers of the Internet to exploit for the purposes of engaging Singaporeans (Gomez, 2000; see especially Chapter 1). Using the Internet to organise activities on the ground and openly publicising correspondences with the authorities, the Think Centre fast-forwarded 'e-politics' in Singapore in the sense that the authorities had less room to err in its decision and policy making processes. Accordingly in October 2001, the Think Centre was gazetted as a political society, with funding and other restrictions placed upon it. In his revealing book on Internet Politics in Singapore, Gomez (2002: 92) remains somewhat optimistic when he notes that: "Internet legislation in Singapore to date stands to cover websites and for election time covers political parties and organisations. It does not yet cover individuals and there has been no instance for the PAP to move against an individual."

If Gomez's intention was to alert individuals about the possible risk of overstepping political boundaries in private Internet postings, his response came shortly after. In July 2002, the police embarked on a criminal defamation investigation on Zulfikar Mohamad Shariff, the former chief of a Singaporean Muslim rights

activist website <*www.fateha.com*> who took the government to task in early 2002 on the rights of Muslim girls to wear their tudung (traditional headscarves) to schools. This racial cum religious encounter was particularly sensitive in the wake of the terror attacks on 11 September 2001 and the uncovering of the *Jemaah Islamiah* terrorist plot in Singapore in January 2002, but the investigation had a lot more to do with political annoyance than with social threat. As *The Straits Times* reported on 4 July 2002, Zulkifar was being investigated for three articles posted on the website questioning Muslim Affairs Minister Yaacob Ibrahim's standing as leader of the Malay/Muslim community and criticising Ho Ching's appointment as Executive Director of Temasek Holdings (as in the case of *Bloomberg*) (Osman, 2002a). The probes intensified the next day when the police impounded the computer of another man, Robert Ho, for two articles that appeared in June in soc.culture.singapore, a popular Internet newsgroup, that may have also criminally defamed government leaders and officials (Osman, 2002b).

Through this brief episode, the principle of auto-regulation was applied very swiftly, effectively warning would-be online offenders to watch their cyber-journeys and to avoid dabbling in political issues. Tan Tarn How, a veteran *Straits Times* journalist 'closed' the saga with a seemingly innocuous report that the Internet community was 'spooked' by these events, "with some users wondering if they would be targeted next" (Tan, 2002). The fear of falling victim to the widening electronic powers of the Singaporean authorities meant that individuals no longer had much laxity in the use of the Internet and other new media tools. Veritably, the task and function of auto-regulation is being rolled-out as rapidly as the uptake of new media technologies over the past decade. As the final section will suggest, the fast-developing array of electronic government (e-Government) services, exemplified more prominently by Singapore's e-Citizen portal website may set the scene for the restriction or gradual erosion of individual civil liberties along with political involvement and participation.

E-Governing The Future

The Singapore government's next phase of Internet development comes in the form of an electronic-government (e-Government) vision. Globally, the concept of E-Government appeared in the 1990s, but was put into practice only at the turn of the new millennium. E-Government was widely heralded as a tool that would bring about greater democracy with the enhancement of political participation and the ability of citizens

to vote online. Even so, most e-Government projects around the world are intended primarily to facilitate citizens' access to a great amount of diverse information put forth by government departments. Indeed, for the public, e-government means a simplification of their interaction with government via Internet connectivity; or in other words, a new way of governance (Netchaeva, 2002: 467).

In June 2000, the Singapore government made public its adoption of this new governance strategy when it announced a three-year S$1.5 billion E-Government Action Plan which seeks to "develop thought leadership on e-government; build new capabilities and new capacities; encourage the spread of electronic service delivery; innovate with info-comm[unication] technologies; and finally be responsive and proactive" (IDA, 2001: 36).

This cryptically crafted Action Plan effectively requires all civil servants and government administrators to fundamentally rethink all aspects of governance and consider how technology can be used to improve internal efficiency and improve governmental interaction with individuals and businesses (IDA, 2000: 36). The ability of any government to move towards e-Government, according to Norris (2001), is partly a demonstration of its technological prowess and partly a fine-tuning of its ability to meet the administrative needs of citizens. In this regard, Singapore has received numerous accolades for its impressive implementation of government services online. For example, in June 2002, Singapore was presented an Explorer Award in recognition of its innovative online public programmes by the prestigious E-Gov organisation based in the United States (*The Straits Times Interactive*, 26 June 2002). In addition, Singapore has been recognised for being the second most mature e-government location in a worldwide study done by consulting firm Accenture (IDA, 2001: 36).

At present, Singapore's E-Citizen portal, *<www.ecitizen.gov.sg>*, provides the best illustration of Singapore's successes in e-Government. Launched in April 1999, the e-Citizen website offers more than 180 e-services grouped in 16 online units based on categories that address family life, health, housing, education, employment, transport and other day to day issues (IDA, 2001). In 2001, close to one-third of Singaporean taxpayers filed their income tax returns online, a figure that is reportedly one of the highest in the world. By the end of 2002, about 95 per cent of all official services are expected to be available via eCitizen (Dawson, 2002).

According to the IDA, the aim is to streamline administration such that citizens would not need to visit government offices at all (IDA, 2001). As at November 2002, E-Citizen gets an average of 4.2

million hits a month, which works out to about one in two persons using e-Government services in Singapore (Dawson, 2002). The Singapore government is also actively developing a nationwide electronic business transaction system known as the 'Government Electronic Business' (GeBiz). When operational, GeBiz will link all government departments with its suppliers, thus streamlining the often-cumbersome processes of issuing purchase orders, tendering and procurement of goods and services (IDA, 2000,2001).

It is noteworthy that the IDA, the main driver of e-Government in Singapore, has termed the entire electronic project a democratic aspiration towards a "citizen-friendly state" (IDA, 2000). Whilst the ability to carry out necessary bureaucratic tasks and to access comprehensive information about government policies, white papers, official reports and other abstruse documents are moves towards greater transparency, one needs to consider the implications of auto-regulation in an increasingly networked environment. Clearly, electronic linkage of citizens to government offices would enable greater direct scrutiny, thus a (further) loss of privacy along with surveillance that is more precise than ever before. In addition, a truly representative democracy requires not just information, but also a two-way communication process at regular intervals, beyond mere election time (Norris, 2001: 129-30). In short, the 'citizen-friendly state' envisaged by the government has a greater potential to marginalise rather than engage people. As Norris (2001: 130) articulates:

"E-governance is open to criticism that [government] agencies have been more willing to carry out traditional functions via electronic means, rather than using digital technologies to reinvent how they conduct business, to reconnect with citizens as customers, and to strengthen public participation in government."

It is debatable whether greater public participation is the primary or ultimate goal of the Singapore government. After all, the government has always clung onto the belief that control must precede openness and transparency, and that any participation in political life must be done within the geopolitical arena of Parliament (see Lee, 2002). Although the Singaporean authorities have embraced e-Government in a seemingly enlightened manner, the principles of auto-regulation remains fully enforced. Government-endorsed channels of communication, most notably the Feedback Unit within the Prime Minister's Office, have tended to steer clear of the Internet. Even the forging of links with Singaporeans residing overseas, managed by quasi-government organisations such as the Singapore International Foundation (SIF), are often carried out physically rather than electronically. Prior to

a recent online discussion session with Minister David Lim on 16 October 2002, the SIF issued an email news release explaining that "online chats provide an important channel for the Singapore government and political leaders to explain and elaborate policies and plans for the Singapore populace, [and to] gain immediate feedback" (Singapore International Foundation, 2002).

As the world moves towards global online exchange and e-commerce, it is certain that more rules will be enacted to guard against uses and abuses of the Internet and other new media technologies. With fears of terrorism caused by the events of 11 September 2001, as well as online sabotages in various forms, an increased threat to global security is likely to enhance the regulatory role of authorities around the world. On 29 September 2001, the Singapore Government reversed its decision to allow overseas Singaporeans to vote at limited centres globally, despite an earlier amendment to the Parliamentary Elections Act which would have allowed the first-ever overseas voting, due to security concerns in the aftermath of the terror attacks (Fernandez, 2001). Critics saw this as a political tactic aimed at minimising the possibility of voters' backlash during uncertain times. But more importantly, this incident provided a case in point of how democracy can weaken rather than strengthen with advancements in technology, considering how overseas voting was to be a first of several steps towards the setting up of electronic voting facilities within Singapore and abroad.

Conclusion

The government's ambivalence towards the Internet and new communication technologies is reflective of the political tactic and strategy of auto-regulation. It is, for one, blatant yet subtle; it is open yet surreptitious. It promotes strong economic growth whilst keeping social and political dissent at bay. It appears to embrace technological development, whilst making sure that its control over technology remains watertight. With the gradual and further tightening of political rules and legislations governing media and communications, the policing discourse of auto-regulation looks set to intensify as Singapore and the rest of the world move towards e-commerce and e-government. As Foucault puts it, "surveillance is permanent in its effects, even if it is discontinuous in its action" (Foucault, 1977: 201).

For the time being, there are yet possibilities via the Internet – although somewhat limited due to a refinement and enactment of new rules every now and again – to engage citizens and to challenge the social, cultural and political status quo, whether individually or collectively. There is no doubt, however, that an auto-regulated application of political expedience in the way electronic spaces are

used today will have significant ramifications on the political and technological future of Singapore. How this future pans out would depend largely on the extent to which the government is prepared to review its role as arbiter in and of all issues, as well as the extent to which Singaporeans are prepared to embrace the causes of socio-political justice – not for economic or political gains, but for its own sake. Both scenarios, I suspect, would take a fair amount of time to materialise, if at all. ■

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