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**BLOGOSPHERIC PRESSURES IN SINGAPORE:
INTERNET DISCOURSES AND
THE 2006 GENERAL ELECTION**

Working Paper No.150

August 2008

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National Library of Australia.
ISSN: 1037-4612



ABSTRACT

Singapore's technological prowess as one of the most networked city, society and nation is reflected in most statistical data. Indeed, Singapore is relentless in its pursuit of making technological and Internet history/ies. In its latest *Intelligent Nation 2015 (iN2015)* master plan, Singapore plans to integrate all aspects of info-communications into a single ultra-fast broadband platform that will be capable of delivering ultra-fast Internet. This paper provides a brief update on the extent of technological and Internet deployment. More importantly, it looks at how the Internet has further developed by analysing the events surrounding the 2006 General Elections in Singapore. Each election in Singapore is arguably a key regulatory milestone for the Internet because new rules are either invoked via new or revised legislation or new warnings issued to keep a lid on the effectiveness of new technologies. While Singapore has undoubtedly made 'history' in its regulatory approaches and strategies in managing the liberatory impulses, with outright censorship of racial, religious and pornographic – and, since 11 September 2001 (9/11), terrorist-related – websites making headlines around the world, it has also been able to score impressively in the technological competencies of its citizens. In the discussion that follows, we examine the current state of the Singaporean blogosphere and considers if the regulatory landscape has been altered following pressures brought about by blogs and other alternative websites. It argues that the implementation of both overt and subtle controls of alternative political websites as well as heavy-handed actions by the authorities to rein in on errant Internet users and bloggers, along with the occasional talking-down of the significance of the Singaporean blogosphere, have accentuated the ambivalence that the Internet in Singapore has (re)presented.^{1, 2}

INTRODUCTION: FROM ‘INTELLIGENT ISLAND’ TO ‘INTELLIGENT NATION’

One important test case for understanding the relationship of information and communication technologies and democratization is Singapore. This city-state stands out internationally in two regards. First, the country’s leaders exert a level of social and political control that is unique among wealthy nations. And second, those same leaders are engaged in one of the most far-reaching attempts to infuse information technology in society and make their nation an ‘intelligent island’ (Warschauer 2001: 305).

With first-world infrastructure and a highly-educated and technologically-savvy workforce, Singapore is widely acknowledged as one of the most networked societies in the world, both metaphorically and technically. Although it was the second country in Southeast Asia, after Malaysia, to offer public Internet access in July 1994, once the decision was made to adopt and embrace the Internet, diffusion and penetration of the new technology was swift and unmistakable (Ang 2007: 19). Since then, Singapore has been relentless in its pursuit of making technological and Internet history. In March 1995, Singapore became the first country in the world to host a national website, the Singapore Infomap (<http://www.sg>) (Lee and Birch 2000). By 1999, Singapore had become the first country in the world to have virtually all homes and businesses connected to an island-wide hybrid fibre-optic cable network (Mahizhan and Yap 2000).

At the dawn of the new millennium, Singapore attained the status of the ‘Intelligent Island’, a term originally coined by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 1990 in a televised programme featuring Singapore’s bold information technology (IT) developments (Lee and Birch 2000: 151). This network was the realisation of a cornerstone master plan, entitled *A Vision of an Intelligent Island: IT 2000 Report*, to create a nationwide information infrastructure (NCB 1992: 19). The *IT2000 Report* was successfully implemented – albeit with some cost overruns and heavy criticisms about the absence of content to put on the network – not just in material terms, but also in ideological terms since Singaporeans are by and large convinced that rapid adoption and mastery of technology are necessary for the country to achieve sustained economic growth in the twenty-first century (Lee 2005a: 76).³

By 2015, as part of its latest *Intelligent Nation 2015 (iN2015)* master plan launched in June 2006, Singapore plans to integrate all aspects of info-communications into a single ultra-fast broadband platform that will be capable of delivering speeds of up to 1Gbps (IDA 2006b). In typical Singapore style, this network is not only slated to be

one of the best in the world (if not *the* very best), but the social, cultural and political targets are ambitious and telling. According to the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore (IDA), the government agency responsible for regulating the telecommunications and info-communications (or ‘infocomm’ for short) industry and rolling out the *iN2015* master plan (IDA 2006b):

- Singapore to be No. 1 in the world in harnessing infocomm to add value to the economy and society.
- Achieve a two-fold increase in value-added⁴ of the infocomm industry to S\$26 billion.
- See a three-fold increase in infocomm expert revenue to S\$60 billion.
- Create 80,000 additional jobs.
- Have at least 90 per cent of homes using broadband.
- Ensure 100 per cent computer ownership for all homes with school-going children.

These figures are impressive by any measure, but judging by the way in which the *IT2000* plan was carried out through the 1990s, what is perhaps more impressive is the obsessive manner which the Singapore government is expected to employ to get the job done (just as it had done in the past). On the surface, and looking at the targets cited above, *iN2015* appears to be nothing more than an upgraded *IT2000* plan catering for the digital demands of the twenty-first century. There are, however, differences in the way terms like ‘technology’ and ‘intelligence’ are presented as critical human enablers – hence the shift from ‘intelligent island’ to ‘intelligent nation’ in the naming of the *iN2015* master plan, where the ‘nation’ (N) is deliberately emphasised. As the *iN2015* Report notes:

The [iN2015] Committee recognises that infocomm alone will not be sufficient to transform the country’s economic sectors. Neither will infocomm on its own change mindsets on how integration can yield benefits, how new opportunities can be realised by accessing international markets, or the extent to which service quality can be raised in an industry. However, infocomm can be a critical enabler to achieving all of these. [...] Apart from boosting Singapore’s economic competitiveness, infocomm will be used to enrich the lives of every individual here [i.e. in the nation of Singapore] (IDA 2006: 8-9).

The emphases on ‘mindsets’ and the ‘individual’ thus enable the IDA and the government to sidestep potential criticisms about poor content development and broader management of the project.

Even prior to the unveiling of the *iN2015* plan, the Singapore government's pro-technology mentality and general success in promoting high computer and Internet use has been consistently reflected in most statistical data. A monograph published in 2002 by the Singapore Internet Project (SIP) Team on the *Internet in Singapore* reaffirmed Singapore's high level of IT use and status as a technological society. It reported then that about 46% of adults, age 18 and up, were active users of the Internet.⁵ The number is markedly higher for local Singaporean students, many of whom are being IT-trained and exposed from early childhood, with Internet penetration at 71% and rising (Kuo et al. 2002: 100). Even 'non-users' – defined in the SIP 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. As Barry has pointed out, while citizens of a technological society are expected to have 'a certain knowledge of technology, and to make choices on the basis of this knowledge', not everyone will be 'willing or able to meet these expectations' (2001: 29). At the very minimum, it is crucial that such people do not become hindrances to the 'technologizing' process of turning computers and the Internet into essential tools for the conduct of everyday life. Singapore appears to have done remarkably well in this regard, so much so that the government has come to define the 'digital divide' as 'the gap between those who are Internet savvy and those who are not' (George 2003: 6).

The supposed digital gap in Singapore has been narrowed in recent times. According to the *Annual Survey On Infocomm Usage in Households and By Individuals in 2006* released by the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore (IDA) in March 2007, 78% of households in Singapore had at least one computer (with 38% having two or more computers), almost 9 out of 10 households with school-going children had home computers, and 71% of all homes had Internet access (IDA 2007). By 2006, broadband penetration among households with Internet access had reached 69.2%, with the remaining 32.8% accessing the Internet via dial-up (Ang 2007: 21). By May 2007, total Internet subscription stood at 2,318,300, which is more than 60% of the total population of Singapore (ibid.). Since 2001, Singapore has been deemed to be more connected than developed countries like the United States, Australia and Britain (Lee 2005a). In addition, Singapore boasts a fixed line telephony penetration rate of 98.4% and mobile phone penetration at 103.4% in 2006 (Ang 2007: 21).

To better appreciate the significance of the 2002 SIP study as well as surveys that followed – and will follow in the future – the notion of 'Internet use' needs to be put into

perspective. The SIP team identified 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 searches were by far the most popular Internet activities, followed by entertainment and online discussions. E-commerce activities, most commonly carried out in online shopping and browsing for goods and services, were not as popular due largely to concerns about transactional security and privacy protection (Kuo et al. 2002: 103-4), although it should be noted that 30% of Internet users identified themselves as online shoppers in 2006 (IDA 2007). Nevertheless, closer analysis of these figures suggests, among other things, that apart from the ‘vogueish’ aspects of Internet and new media consumption (e.g. blogging, online gaming and mobile phone downloads and other functions), the depth of cutting-edge or innovative uses of the Internet in Singapore remains relatively weak at present.⁶ Although Internet use is comparatively high, Internet expertise is limited to emailing, messaging, blogging and other somewhat elementary personal and commercial functions (although there is much to glean and extract when it comes to the analyses of blogs, which is what the latter parts of this paper will do). At the ‘youth market’ level, ‘sophisticated use’ tends towards what I would describe as ‘gadgetry-driven’ consumption, with the downloading of music, movies, graphics, interactive online gaming and other multi-media tools as the key applications (Lee 2005a).

The relatively slow take-up of basic e-commerce and new media activities in Singapore contradicts the expressed goal of the government for Singaporeans to embrace new technologies for economic growth. 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 civic and political empowerment (Kuo et al. 2002: 111). According to the SIP researchers, the percentages of users who believe that the Internet enables increased engagement on government policies and political issues is extremely low at less than 20%. In other words, the vast majority of Singaporeans do not consider the Internet to be useful for political engagement and civic participation. On one level, public disinterest in political uses of the Internet could be attributed to the PAP government’s intolerance of political dissent and the ongoing presence of OB (out-of-bounds) markers⁷, along with other ambiguous rules circumscribing political participation both offline as well as online (Lee 2005a and 2005b). Indeed, virtually all offline rules aimed at managing social and political dissent in Singapore have been gradually extended to include the Internet and other communication technologies from 1994 (when public Internet was made available)

– and continues to be ‘updated’ to cater to (read: control) the current era of social networking and the blogosphere.

On another level, while such negative perceptions of the Internet’s civic and political role suggest that there are limits to how the Internet can be used to effect social or political change in Singapore, proponents of civil society and political opposition figures refuse to dismiss the political possibilities of the Internet in Singapore (Lee 2005b; see also Gomez 2000 and 2002), believing that technology is value neutral and can therefore ‘provide ways of avoiding political disagreements’ (Barry 2001: 8). This belief buys in to a determinist perspective of the Internet which argues that the introduction of the Internet, with its decentred mode of communication, would inevitably democratise government (Warschauer 2001: 305). At the same time and in contrast, the Singaporean authorities appear to adopt a more instrumental view of technology (Feenberg 1991) with the belief that the Internet and all new technologies can not only be tamed and controlled, they can even be used to increase and strengthen centralised control (Warschauer 2001: 305).

Singapore is particularly interesting in that its instrumental perspective has not quite undermined its pro-development mentality, with its fast-growing online infrastructure and continued ability to regulate the Internet for its own ends and purposes testament to its ability to manage – for better or worse – what Castells has referred to as the contradiction between *the net* and *the self* (Castells 1996 and 2000). Warschauer (2001: 310) prefers to see this contradiction in Singapore as ‘an ambivalence in technology’, describing Singapore’s impact on uses of technology vis-à-vis technology’s impact on the development of Singapore as ‘existing in ecological symbiosis’. Strangely enough, because of this ambivalence, it is not possible to make complete sense of the place and history of the Internet by analysing the technological infrastructure, perpetual and ongoing technological developments, Internet penetration and other statistical data emanating from Singapore. In short, numbers can lie. What is needed instead is a more nuanced approach, one that takes into account various online developments and the state’s responses to a range of online events and discourses from the beginning of public Internet in 1994 to the current era that is most prominently led by the prevalence of personal weblogs.

In a nutshell, this paper looks at how the Internet has developed by analysing the events surrounding the 2006 General Elections in Singapore. Each election in Singapore is arguably a key regulatory milestone for the Internet because new rules are either

invoked via new or revised legislation or new warnings are issued to keep a lid on the effectiveness of utilising new media technologies. Herein lies the ambivalence that Singapore has become famous/notorious for: while Singapore has undoubtedly made 'history' in its regulatory approaches and strategies in managing the liberatory impulses, with outright censorship of racial, religious and pornographic – and, since 11 September 2001 (9/11), terrorist-related – websites making headlines around the world, it has also been able to score impressively in the technological competencies of its citizens (as illustrated earlier in the paper). In the discussion that follows, we examine the current state of the Singaporean blogosphere, considering in the process whether the regulatory landscape has been altered following the explosion of blogs and other alternative sites. It concludes that the implementation of both overt and subtle controls of alternative political websites as well as heavy-handed actions by the authorities to rein in errant Internet users and bloggers, along with the occasional talking-down/dismissal of the significance of the Singaporean blogosphere, have accentuated the ambivalence that the Internet in Singapore has presented, and will continue to present.

THE 2006 GENERAL ELECTION AND BEYOND

The Government has to adapt to the digital age... We will use the new media – multimedia, podcasts, vodcasts – all these things which you get in the Internet or somebody sends to you by e-mail... So we have to update, we have to try these out and we have to move with the times, and when our laws have to change, like our laws governing podcasts during elections or our laws on political videos, these are things which we have to update as we go along. (Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, 2006a)

From its humble beginnings as a simplified web publishing tool used initially for online journals, the blog has progressively become a force to be reckoned with in a globalised world: providing alternative news and marginal perspectives on watershed events such as the second Gulf War from 2003, and gradually gaining acceptance as part of the international mainstream media (McIntosh 2005). Blogs in Singapore, in contrast, gained prominence and exposure only in recent times, both as a response to, as well as a result of, regulatory obstacles placed upon the media and online discourses more broadly (Lee 2005b). However, recent events pointed to the need to reassess the Singaporean blogosphere in light of its increasing levels of sophistication, the transforming dynamics between the state and the media, and the government's desire to maintain a high degree of ambivalence with regard to regulating the Internet. Among these events, the 2006

Singapore General Election represented a historical marker that signalled a major shift in the development, regulation and practice of blogging in Singapore. The election ushered in a new public concern over the rationality – understood in both senses as the motivation and legitimacy or validity – of blogging in Singapore.

Since the advent of the Web 2.0 phenomenon and notably after the 2006 General Election, the Singaporean blogosphere has rapidly gained legitimacy and currency in discussions and debates within popular, state and academic circles as a possible alternative site for public participation and information. In keeping with its promise of a ‘lighter touch’ in regulating the Internet (versus more traditional media), the Singapore government allowed blogs to flourish during and after the election despite a ban on ‘explicit political content’ and a requirement for politically-inclined blog(ger)s to be registered (Lee, H.L. 2006a; *The Straits Times* 4 Apr 2006). Although the Singapore government issued a ban on online electioneering, including blogs that persistently discussed politics, many bloggers disregarded this *carte blanche* condition and blogged about the election regardless. The government, to its credit, did not enforce the ban too stringently, perhaps recognising the futility of doing so and to avoid discrediting itself. Since then, the Singaporean blogosphere has undergone many developments that call for a reassessment of earlier observations by those following the dynamics, politics and impact of blogging in Singapore (see for example: Koh, Lim, Ng, Detenber and Cenite 2005; Kwan 2005; Rodan 2006; The OpenNet Initiative 2005).

Prior to the 2006 Election, public attention to blogs was comparatively insignificant, as the medium was still in its nascent stages and therefore lacking in popularity. Occasionally, major issues or scandals discussed in the blogosphere made it into the mainstream media, such as the abuse of public funds by the CEO of a charitable organisation (Lee and Wang 2005). But in 2005, the ‘danger’ of blogs and anonymity was suddenly highlighted as a US-based Singaporean student, Chen Jiahao (better known by his online alias ‘AcidFlask’), became the first blogger to be threatened with a defamation lawsuit by the Singapore government (Jeffery 2005). To many commentators, this was another instance of the curtailment of public and political space through the application of defamation laws and extant Internet regulations⁸, particularly as blogs were increasingly viewed as a potential new public sphere and the ‘last bastion of truly free expression’ in Singapore (Lee 2005b; see also Giam 2006b, Kwan 2005, McDermott 2007b, Rodan 2006, The OpenNet Initiative 2005 and others).

At that time, it was alleged that Chen had posted comments on his blog which damaged the reputation of the Singapore government's Agency for Science, Technology and Research (A*STAR) and its chairman Philip Yeo (Chang and Lwee 2005). A*STAR was at that time actively promoting Singapore's newly-established life sciences and global scientific hub status and soliciting top scientists to relocate to Singapore, and as such could ill afford bad press of any kind. In the face of repeated legal threats, Chen apologised unreservedly and proceeded further to shut down his blog on his own initiative, leaving the public ignorant and speculating over the precise nature of the libellous remarks.⁹ Although the charge was eventually dropped and all parties undertook not to repeat the libel, AcidFlask became an overnight martyr and cause célèbre for bloggers and Internet activists protesting against draconian defamation and censorship laws in Singapore. Even transnational human rights organisations Amnesty International and Reporters Without Borders weighed in on the incident, accusing the PAP government of restricting freedom of expression and abusing its citizens' rights to speak out (Reporters Without Borders 2005; *The Straits Times* 30 Mar 2007).

Hot on the heels of the AcidFlask saga was a series of other high-profile events, involving bloggers and the authorities, reported in the media which arguably would have played a part to set the seal on the general public's impression of the Singapore blogosphere. In May 2005, local filmmaker and 'incidental blogger' Martyn See was thrown into the spotlight after police questioned him over his controversial and subsequently banned film *Singapore Rebel* (Rodan 2006).¹⁰ Later that year, three bloggers were charged and sentenced under sedition laws – unexercised since 1966 – for posting racist remarks online (Chong 2005; *The Straits Times* 8 Oct 2005). Meanwhile, the mainstream media – unabashedly speaking for the authorities – began castigating the blogosphere, going as far as to call blogs an 'evil' worse than pornography, but stopped short of calling for a blanket ban on blogging (Skadian 2005; Tan 2005). Collectively, these incidents framed blogs in a negative light, with the government quick to broad-brush the blogosphere as 'anonymous,' 'dangerous,' and filled with 'half-truths and untruths' (Chia 2004; Lee, B.Y. 2006; Low 2005).

During the General Election in 2006, however, blogs began to generate a positive buzz as a result of the ban on online electioneering and a sizable population of Singaporean netizens flouted the warning by engaging in political blogging, although many did so cautiously and many more simply participated by posting their thoughts on someone else's original posting. This was seen most conspicuously on the blog of social-

activist Alex Au (2006) who defiantly uploaded his own reports and photos of election campaigning. His news-breaking pictures – which depicted innumerable masses of Singaporeans participating in opposition election rallies – caught the pro-government mainstream media flatfooted and forced them to publish reports on opposition activities in their media outlets. The amount of online activity in the election invoked many observers to call this, with tongue-in-cheek – Singapore’s first ‘internet election’ (Gomez 2006: 2). Subsequently, the government acknowledged after the conclusion of the election that it had to ‘update’ and ‘adapt to the digital age’ or risk political ossification (Lee, H.L. 2006b).

Later that year, *The Straits Times* launched its much vaunted web-platform for ‘citizen journalism’, STOMP (which stands for: Straits Times Online Mobile Print), which included a motley crew of celebrity bloggers who engage in social commentary.¹¹ Bloggers began in earnest to debate the necessity of self-regulation or a ‘blogger code of ethics’ as a safeguard against engaging in legally-naïve, libellous and irresponsible blogging. This was amid the increasing specialisation, aggregation and professionalisation of the Singaporean blogosphere. The People’s Action Party (PAP) government itself succumbed and ventured into the (hitherto condemned) virtual world with its members – most notably, Foreign Affairs Minister George Yeo – entering the public foray of the blogosphere. Opposition members and Nominated Members of Parliament (NMPs) took their cue and increased the intensity and audacity of their blog-posts – constantly pushing the boundaries of acceptable political discourse in Singapore.

On 3 February 2007, Singapore’s ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) government revealed in the national press that it had begun a covert ‘counter-insurgency’ against what it perceived as a rash of imbalanced, anti-establishment criticism on the Internet (Li 2007). No less than two sub-committees – comprising four elected Members of Parliament (MPs) and at least twenty other party members – were reportedly set up to address this problem after the 2006 General Election. The election witnessed the largest online participation by the usually politically-apatetic Singaporean public since the previous election in 2001 due to the exponential growth of blogs, social networking sites and internet forums. What was significant about the rather indiscreet announcement – besides the use of the frighteningly telling word ‘insurgency’ directed at bloggers to imply the illegitimate and radical nature of online political discourse – was the remark made by MP Baey Yam Keng in defence of his party’s decision to go undercover: ‘The identity is not important. It is the message that is important’ (Li 2007). Members of the

PAP counter-movement were reported to be actively and anonymously rebutting anti-establishment opinions online. This is a marked shift in the PAP government's modus operandi which is more typically to adopt a morally higher ground and an open approach to rebutting criticism rather than resorting to such clandestine means. As one popular Singaporean blogger observed, 'It's very unlike the PAP to resort to anonymous postings' (Mr Wang 2007).

Apart from the scathing disparagement and comments made about the hypocrisy and irony of the state's use of covert propaganda in response to online criticism, some bloggers debated the implications for the blogosphere with regard to the new alleged credence afforded to anonymous commentary which nonetheless present cogent and legitimate arguments – since, they argue, 'identity' now matters less than the 'message' (Li 2007). Indeed, this about-turn and apparent shift in focus to the validity of a given 'message' by the PAP raises issues for the rationality and legitimacy of communicative action in the Singaporean blogosphere. Namely, should the PAP's de-emphasis of identity be taken as a genuine move towards dismantling the infamous political OB markers in favour of a more liberal, 'marketplace of ideas' mode of public discourse in Singapore? This is hardly the case as the Singapore government has repeatedly demonstrated little tolerance for free and open discourse, preferring instead for a highly pragmatic, economic results-driven ideology of 'good governance' (George 2000) that is supported by broader regulatory mechanisms. Indeed, the PAP continues to limit freedom of speech (e.g. topics pertaining to race, religion and politically-sensitive matters), insisting that only those who are elected into big 'P' Politics – ruling out non-politicians and the media – may debate politics in Singapore (Lee, B.Y. 2006).

Taken together, these developments stand in stark contrast to initial assessments of the fledgling medium by online commentators such as Steven McDermott (2005), who is behind the controversial blog *Singabloodypore* and who (in)famously coined the phrase 'the infantile blogosphere'. At present, online users and internet activists still view (albeit with less idealism) the blog as a bastion for free speech, media liberalisation and a challenge to the political status quo in Singapore (Lee 2005b: 26). The sharpest difference, however, may lie in the Singapore public and government's perceptions and attitude towards the blogosphere. Since the 2006 election, blogs are no longer fundamentally seen as a subversive element, but are accepted as part of the media and public landscape. However, the new catch cry is for an 'educated' and 'responsible' form

of blogging; one which follows certain norms and rules of socially acceptable, legitimate communication and conduct in the Singaporean context (Ang 2006; Gan 2006).

In 2007, two years after the original saga, the AcidFlask controversy re-emerged when *The Straits Times* reported a fresh round of online sparring between Chen and A*STAR's Philip Yeo (Sim 2007). This time, in response to public queries, A*STAR released the defamatory remarks, resulting in the transformation of public opinion and popular truth concerning the case. The tables were suddenly turned: A*STAR's heavy-handed actions became justified and Chen lost on moral grounds. The facts of the libel and A*STAR's rebuttal were, ironically, first published via a blog (Ng 2007) and many observers also noted that this was the first time a civil servant responded directly to counter criticisms and comments left by anonymous netizens.

On 30 March 2007, *The Straits Times* carried an article disclosing the full details of the defamatory comments, ensuring that the certainty and fact of the libel was beyond doubt (*The Straits Times* 30 Mar 2007). However, the editors went on further to delve into the subjective, greyer area of Chen's mind, purporting to tell the *truth* about his original motivations and inner thought processes. The newspaper included a graphic insert replicating a snapshot of Chen's original blog (before its closure) whilst providing a point-by-point semiotic/textual analysis of the allegedly subliminal messages and intentions behind his apology. Whether or not Chen intended to obfuscate his apology as suggested by the daily is moot since the issue is not about the accuracy of the newspaper's interpretation of Chen's motives. The point is that an extraordinary attention and effort was made by the state's flagship media to decipher the rationality of a blogger – on behalf of the authorities.

Likewise, after the conclusion of the 2006 General Election, the government provided its most explicit position to date on the regulation of new media when it publicly criticised and refuted an opinion piece 'S'poreans are fed, up with progress!' written by a well-known Singaporean blogger, and published in the mainstream tabloid *TODAY*, to express dissatisfaction over the rising cost of living in Singapore (Lee, K.M. 2006; McDermott 2007a). The blogger, Lee Kin Mun – better known by his online moniker 'mr brown' – became famous in Singapore after recording and uploading a series of satirical podcasts to poke fun at various events during the 2006 Election campaign. According to mrbrown's detractors, the offence was not simply that the article was laced with sarcasm and criticism levelled against the government; instead, it was because his comments appeared in the mainstream (and therefore, public) media rather

than being restricted to the confines of his private blog. It thus invited the following rebuttal from the government via the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA):

mr brown (sic) is entitled to his views. But opinions which are widely circulated in a regular column in a serious newspaper should meet higher standards...he should come out from behind his pseudonym to defend his views openly. It is not the role of journalists or newspapers in Singapore to champion issues, or campaign for or against the Government. If a columnist presents himself as a non-political observer, while exploiting his access to the mass media to undermine the Government's standing with the electorate, then he is no longer a constructive critic, but a partisan player in politics (Bhavani 2006).

The PAP's castigation of mrbrown's comments was problematic on two counts: on one hand, the authorities read *into* his article a direct attack on the government's mandate to rule (which was really not apparent to anyone reading the opinion piece). While conveniently avoiding the issues and disregarding the views expressed in the article, his critic swooped on the motivation of its author, assuming to know his intentions by calling him a 'partisan player in politics' (Bhavani 2006). On the other hand, the government has always demonstrated a strong disdain for online anonymity and pseudonymity, questioning the validity and rationality of views on the 'faceless' Internet – a largely unregulated space which the ruling elites view as 'chaotic and disorganised, with many half-truths and untruths masquerading as fact' (Lee, B.Y. 2006). From this perspective, the PAP argues that it is in fact irrational to expect that every voice – especially anonymous ones – should be accorded the same privilege of an equal hearing in an environment where, for instance, 'terrorists' and 'paedophiles' can also operate (Lee, H.L. 2006a: 10). In a post 9/11 climate, this line of reasoning strikes an audible chord in the mostly conservative Singaporean psyche, as evinced by the widespread public support for strong media regulations that filter out the 'evils' of the Internet such as religious radicalism and child pornography (Chia 2006; Kwek 2007; Quah 2006).

The mrbrown episode gave the government another opportunity to reiterate – for the umpteenth time – that the legitimate role of Singaporean public discourse and the media is to contribute to nation building and social cohesion, and not to trespass into the political arena as an advocate of issues (see Chan 1994; and Lee, H.L. 2006a). The government's response also highlighted the fact that the medium is important in determining the legitimacy and regulatory applicability of all discourses. The point that the government succeeded in conveying to Singaporeans was that while comments made

on a blog would have been dismissed as ‘Internet chatter’ (Ho 2006), similar opinions expressed in the mainstream media have the potential for greater reach and impact, and as such more responsibility and restraint needs to be exercised (Bhavani 2006). A distinction was thus made between the blogosphere and the mainstream media. As would be expected in Singapore, Lee’s column was duly suspended and he was permanently removed from the newspaper’s guest columnist list - in what could be construed as a relatively light penalty.

Prior to the 2006 General Election, although media regulators and authorities generally left the blogosphere to its own devices (subject of course to pre-existing Internet codes, guidelines and warnings), when it came to the breaching of political boundaries (OB-markers), the response was swift and decisive. The PAP government’s approach towards dealing with blog(ger)s deemed to be seditious, at this stage of Singapore’s Internet history, was – reminiscent of Foucault’s (1977) description of the society of sovereignty, characterised by juridical power – to resort to regulation via available laws to rebuke and punish offenders. In this hostile auto-regulatory environment, it would have been difficult for Singaporeans to imagine blogs gaining legitimacy in the media and public sphere, let alone witnessing government ministers indulging in blogging or engaging bloggers online.

After the events of the election, however, the PAP government tacitly conceded that the potential of blogs and the Internet-led new media revolution meant that it too had to engage the online medium (Lee, H.L. 2006b; Lee 2005a and 2005b). Likewise, the mainstream media’s antagonistic position on blogs took a subtle turn, with journalists and editorials acknowledging that blogging is not mere Internet chatter and should thus be taken – and regulated – more seriously (Ho 2006). Soon after, either as a consequence of ongoing ‘blogospheric pressures’ or in correspondence with the state’s ‘about turn’, blogs rapidly became accepted as part of the media landscape, with many government agencies and politicians joining the fray. Along with this *de facto*, yet somewhat ‘official’, acknowledgement of the inevitable and eventual ‘mainstreaming’ of online discourses in Singapore came increased calls, led by the state and its media, to institute principles of responsible use and self-regulation for blog(ger)s.

The notion of a blogger code began to gain currency in the public and, more importantly, within the Internet community after the election in 2006. The debate over blogger ethics was resurrected in December 2006 when an opinion piece was written in *TODAY* newspaper by a corporate counsel – who was also a blogger – suggesting that it

was time that bloggers consciously regulated themselves (Yadav 2006). For a brief period, the Singaporean blogosphere was divided between those who were amenable to a blogger code of ethics and those who were adamantly opposed to it. Although the blogging community – being generally alternative and anti-establishment – was still largely opposed to regulation, as another reputable blogger pointed out, what was different this time was:

While most bloggers (including myself) are generally not in favour of the formation of such an association or any form of self-regulation from an external authority, there is one valid issue raised that we might need to look into. That issue is about *educating* the starting bloggers (the young, the brash and the reckless types) who might end up in getting themselves to trouble (Leong 2007, emphasis added)

There was a subtle shift in the discourse of blogging from one of judicial, punitive regulatory tactics to one of ‘education’ – or as Foucault (1977) would term it, ‘discipline’ – which is nevertheless an element of regulatory practice in Singapore (Lee 2005a). Concurrent with the debate over blogger ethics, bloggers were made increasingly aware of legal counsel in the form of websites and guidelines (as opposed to a code) which aim to help them manage their own risks of encountering defamation and committing libel. In addition to the events of the election (or those described in this paper thus far), this new impetus to govern the conduct of bloggers and educate them in the ‘legitimate’, ‘rational’ manner of blogging represents a transformation of both the development and the regulation of the Internet in Singapore. Indeed, after several reports of bloggers (especially AcidFlask and mrbrown) running afoul of the authorities, many concerned bloggers began to issue lengthy disclaimers in their blogs to absolve themselves from editorial and legal responsibilities. Moreover, freedom of speech on the Internet gave way to self-censorship as many bloggers explicitly and actively removed postings that could be (mis)construed as subversive or problematic. More savvy bloggers even began to abandon the use of pseudonyms or other cloaks of anonymity, and emulate professional journalistic practices by portraying their comments as objective, fair and neutral. Yet others assumed authoritative voices as professional lawyers, doctors or academics in their blogs, in the hope that their credibility would be foregrounded.

Collectively, these actions not only represent the escalation of Internet regulatory controls on the blogosphere, they also constitute grids of specification which impose various subjectivities onto bloggers – dividing them both from others and within themselves. Those who play by the rules and enforce self-regulation inadvertently

position themselves as more ‘rational’ than other bloggers who persist in their contentious or anonymous diatribes. Blogger Bernard Leong (2006) commented, with some irony, that the greatest implication of the PAP’s covert counter-insurgency movement was the potential fragmentation of the blogosphere, since it became more difficult to distinguish between anti-establishment, moderate and pro-establishment voices that hide behind anonymity.

CONCLUSION

Guided by a strong, capable government, Singapore has fully embraced technological modernization as a development tool. At the same time, it is widely considered to be one of the most sophisticated authoritarian systems in history. Attempting to steer a narrow path between these two policies, the government of Singapore has tried to expand the use of the Internet among its citizens, while retaining political control over this use by censoring service providers (Castells 2001: 164).

Most academic research on Singapore media and politics have taken on a pessimistic view of Internet liberalisation in the island-state, due to the continued survival and ability of the Singaporean state to apply hegemonic rule and disciplinary power over media and public discourses (Lee 2000, 2004, 2005a and 2005b; George 2003, 2005 and 2006). Terence Lee (2005a; see also Lee and Birch 2000) uses the term ‘auto-regulation’ to describe the automated, internalised and panoptic nature of regulatory power perfected by the government in the media and public sphere, ensuring their own self-censorship and ‘docility’. Cherian George (2005) argues that the media regulatory tactics used in the authoritarian city-state are more subtle than are usually perceived. He proposes the term ‘calibrated coercion’ to describe the carefully calculated, intelligent and nuanced nature of the power exercised by the government in achieving hegemony and maintaining the political status quo in the public and the media (ibid.). Similarly, long time Singapore observer Garry Rodan (1998) considers the various ‘soft’ powers of repression applied by the PAP through the surveillance and conditioning of the media and would-be offenders as the more effective mode of political control compared to outright oppression and persecution.

Both the Singapore government and the state-owned mainstream media regularly invoke notions of ‘accountability’, ‘rational arguments’, ‘responsibility’, ‘professionalism’, ‘a dispassionate treatment of politics’ *inter alia* to argue that parliament is the only legitimate site for political/public debate on matters of the state

(Lee, B.Y. 2006). The mainstream media – as the preferred representative of the Singaporean public sphere – is legitimate insofar as they responsibly and conscientiously report *about* politics rather than participate *in* politics. This effectively locates ‘irresponsible’, ‘subversive’ and ‘seditious’ blogs and other alternative websites that do not conform to these standards as existing outside the legitimate limits of the public sphere. This places blogs somewhat uneasily in the same category as prohibited material (such as pornographic, violent, cyber-terrorism and contrary websites) in the Internet domain as well as forms of expression (such as subversive theatrical performances, public protests and unlicensed speeches and others) in the offline world.

Manuel Castells, in the quote above, uses Singapore’s ambivalence towards technology and the online media to illustrate his point that the Internet is neither an instrument of freedom and democracy nor a weapon of one-sided control and domination (Castells 2001: 164). This in-between ‘narrow path’ is highly reflective of the political strategy of Internet auto-regulation that Singapore has been aiming to perfect (Lee 2005a). The discourse of the Internet – and by the same token, the regulations governing the medium – in Singapore is ambivalent in that it has been blatant yet subtle, open yet surreptitious, and concomitantly visible yet unverifiable. The criteria are really quite simple: the management of the Internet must seek to promote strong economic growth whilst keeping social dissent and contentious politics at bay. And it must embrace technological progress and development (most recently exhibited in the work-in-progress iN2015 Masterplan), whilst ensuring that its political control over the Internet remains as watertight as possible. As Singaporean media law academic Ang Peng Hwa has summarised:

The Singapore Government has categorically stated that its media will be different from those of other countries. However, Singapore is also commercially minded and keenly attuned to the *zeitgeist* of the commercial media world outside. This means that, insofar as the new media in particular are concerned, the government will continue to regulate them as far as possible without upsetting their commercial potential (Ang 1999: 114).

With generational shifts and the increasing adoption of Internet and other infocomm services by Singaporeans, the Singapore government is keenly aware that it is impossible to maintain its monopolistic hold on the overall media sector. As we have argued in this paper, up to the General Election of 2006 it had tried its level best to fend off challenges to its power and authority by censorious means, albeit accompanied by

heavy-handed threats and other legislative means. But its pro-economic and pro-technological development stances – backed-up by its long history of massive public investment in infocomm and digital infrastructure – have meant that the ‘narrow path’ between determinism and instrumentalism, freedom and control, that Castells (2001) and others (e.g. Lee 2005a; Warschauer 2001) have charted, is poised to narrow further in the years ahead. There is little doubt that new blogs, critical websites, bold comments, postings, podcasts, vodcasts and other yet-to-be-named Internet-based services will continue to mushroom and challenge the status quo, whether accidentally or deliberately invoked. For the time being, the Internet in Singapore will remain ambivalent enough for users, especially bloggers who use the Internet to express themselves socially and politically, to continue to place technological and regulatory pressures on the authorities. The responses of the authorities to blogs and other Internet-based incidences in Singapore would in turn give us the best insight into the government’s regulatory mindset on online discourses in Singapore.

NOTES

¹ A version of this paper was first presented at the 'Internet Histories 2: Australia and the Asia-Pacific' workshop on 14 June 2008 at the State Library of Western Australia, Perth. Research for this paper was assisted by a 2007 Research Excellence Grant awarded by Murdoch University's Division of Arts. Please do not cite this paper without the authors' consent.

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³ The IT2000 master plan was not the first national IT plan in Singapore, but it was the most prominent insofar as servicing the broader public is concerned. It was preceded by the National Computerisation Plan (1980-1985) and the National IT Plan (1986-1990) (see Lee and Birch 2000; Ang 2007: 24).

⁴ According to the IDA press release (20 June 2006), 'value added of the infocomm industry [*sic*] refers to the contribution of the industry to the gross domestic product (GDP). Value add comprises the compensation of employees, operating surplus, the consumption of fixed capital and the excess of indirect taxes over subsidies' [as defined by the Singapore Department of Statistics] (IDA 2006b).

⁵ The SIP is part of a World Internet Project (WIP), coordinated jointly by research teams from the School of Communication Studies at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) and the Centre for Communication Policy, University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). Both teams have worked out general research frameworks and a platform for comparative research on how people utilise the Internet and how the interactive technology will impact individuals and societies within as well as across nations.

⁶ This critical analysis was not articulated by the SIP research team, probably due to the fact that the SIP was funded by the IDA and the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (the predecessor to the current Media Development Authority, or MDA), both of which are publicly-funded statutory boards under the direct purview of the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA).

⁷ OB-markers are known to golfing enthusiasts to be indicators of the boundaries of a particular course. In the Singaporean political context, they refer to limits on (acceptable) political participation which are wholly and exclusively defined at the discretion of the government. OB-markers often remain intentionally vague and unknown; the only way that their existence is discovered is retrospectively, after a trespass has been committed (George 2000). This invokes a chilling effect on public participation in domestic politics, as noted by Terence Lee (2002) and Garry Rodan (1996).

⁸ The use of defamation laws by the political elite to silence vocal critics is well-attested in Singapore (Gomez 2000). The arsenal of media policies and laws wielded by the government also provides a regulatory net with which to rein in 'problematic' elements of civil society such as Internet activism. A well-known example was Sintercom (Singapore Internet Community) – a website set up in the early days of the Internet for Singaporeans to engage in socio-political discussion. Sintercom was closed down in 2001, citing the vagueness of Singapore's media licensing policies which left its webmaster/founder vulnerable to possible legal infringements (Lee 2005a). The closure of Chen's blog in 2005 would have resonated well with the Sintercom case.

⁹ A very brief write-up on the Acidflask episode is available on www.wikipedia.com (accessed: 9 June 2008), believed to be written by Chen himself. However, as Chen is bounded by legal constraints, it does not give any significant information on the precise nature of his libellous remarks.

¹⁰ Martyn See's *Singapore Rebel* can be viewed in full on www.youtube.com (accessed: 9 June 2008).

¹¹ Media academic Cherian George (2006b), in a post entitled 'Is STOMP 'citizen journalism'?' on his own blog, questioned to what extent was this truly engaging the citizenry and representative of public

journalism. Or was it simply a publicity blitz to resuscitate the diminishing readership levels of the newspaper? STOMP was labelled a success story in 2007, but has been somewhat subdued for much of 2008. The present silence on STOMP activities in the mainstream media after the initial hype in 2006 (and 2007) speaks volumes in itself. The principal author of this paper, Terence Lee, was interviewed in a feature report on STOMP for an ABC Radio Australia production on 24 August 2007 (<http://www.radioaustralia.net.au/programguide/stories/200708/s2013864.htm>; accessed 10 June 2008).

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