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ONLINE MEDIA AND CIVIL SOCIETY IN THE 'NEW' SINGAPORE

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Introduction

In January 2004, shortly after Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) Lee Hsien Loong, the son of Singapore's elder statesman Lee Kuan Yew, was officially declared Singapore's next premier, he delivered a speech on the future of politics and society in Singapore at the 35th anniversary dinner of the elite Harvard Club of Singapore. In a speech intended to set out how he planned to run the country as Prime Minister, a position he was sworn into on 12 August 2004, DPM Lee laid down his protocol for government-people interaction, and the limits of political discourses, by declaring that Singapore "must open up further" by promoting "further civic participation" (Lee 2004a). In a typically Singaporean fashion, DPM Lee offered five broad 'suggestions' on how to promote civic participation and build a more 'civic society' in Singapore: guidelines for public consultations on new policies or regulations, more space for rigorous and robust debate, an emphasis on action above words, a constructive and "non-crusading" media and a government that continues to lead the way even as it becomes more open to views (Lee 2004a).

The use of the term 'civic' – instead of the historically and globally-circulated 'civil' – to describe society-at-large and citizens' participation in public life is deliberate, designed to forestall the potentially destabilising 'politicking' practices that civil society has come to represent in most liberal democratic societies (Lee 2002a: 102). As Singaporean academic Chua Beng-Huat elucidates:

[Civic society] is preferred by the government for its emphasis on the "civic responsibilities" of citizens as opposed to that of the 'rights' of citizenship emphasized in the conventional understanding of the concepts of "civil society". This shift is consistent with the [Singapore government's] language of politics (Chua 2000: 63).

Under these terms, the media and journalism in Singapore can be said to play a government-sanctioned 'civic' role, which is to inform and educate the public on government policies, and thus contribute to nation-building (see *inter alia*: Tan, 1990; Birch, 1993; Lee 2002b, Leo and Lee 2004).

In attempting to detail the terms of political engagement under his rule, the prime minister-designate issued a reminder to the media not to indulge in what he calls "crusading journalism" (Lee 2004a). DPM Lee used his speech to make it clear that although political boundaries may occasionally shift a little, his ascension to Prime Ministership would not result in major changes, especially in the way the media and civil society are managed in Singapore. Although the DPM did not specify what he meant by

‘crusading journalism’, he explained in his speech that the media in Singapore “is a different model from the US media, which uses its powerful position to set the national agenda” (Lee 2004a). One could thus infer that ‘crusading journalism’ is reporting in the media that does not conform to the ‘national’ agenda as determined, and dictated, by the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) government. This position is of course not new, well known to those familiar with the *modus operandi* of media (and) politics in Singapore.

The fact that Lee spoke about the political risks of ‘crusading journalism’ suggests that alternative and online new organs continue to pose a threat to the hegemony of mainstream news in Singapore. Given that the contemporary mainstream media scene in Singapore is largely duopolised by two government-controlled media heavyweights, the Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) and the Media Corporation of Singapore (MediaCorp), and closely managed by the PAP government under the ambit of the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA) (George 2002: 173), it is quite clear that practical applications of ‘crusading journalism’ can only be found in alternative media websites. By critically analysing a selection of such websites and uncovering their agendas, both purported and implied, this paper seeks to examine the viability of these sites to provide a more democratic media space in a politically-constraining and auto-regulated socio-cultural climate (see Lee 2000b). While few scholarly pieces have been written about the political subservience of journalists, as well as the corresponding lack of independent or investigative journalism, in Singapore (see George 2002; 2003; 2004), even fewer have been written about how these independently operated online news sites, often operating as civil society champions, break the rules of media and political conformity in Singapore. This paper contends that ‘crusading journalism’ in Singapore is presently occupied by such alternative or marginal online websites, and it is only by going online that one may be able to creatively and critically discuss about the mediated politics of journalism and civil society in Singapore.

Mainstream Online Media

Although Singapore’s economy is characterised by free market and enterprise association, with global competitiveness the key objective, the mainstream media are largely quarantined from genuine competition.¹ With all free-to-air television and radio channels, and licensed mainstream newspapers, dominated by the two players, recent attempts by the Singapore government to ‘liberalise’ the media sector – and thus prepare the industry

for global expansion – by introducing competition between these two players have been nothing short of feeble (Leo and Lee 2004: 206-7). In November 2003, both Lee Boon Yang, the incumbent Information and Communications Minister, and then Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew lamented that media liberalisation in Singapore has largely failed. Based on the sizeable losses that both players have sustained over the three-year period since the introduction of ‘soft competition’ in April 2000, both ministers concluded that a monopolistic set-up was more realistic for Singapore, though they stopped short of endorsing such an anti-democratic move (Lee 2003).

Although both SPH and MediaCorp dismissed the possibility of a merger at the time, it was publicly announced on 17 September 2004 that mass-market television and free newspaper operations in Singapore would be rationalised in a move “to stem losses and enhance shareholder value” (Chua 2004: 1). Under the so-called ‘merger’ agreement, MediaCorp would regain its monopoly on broadcasting under a new entity called MediaCorp TV Holdings, which will be 20% owned by SPH. In the free newspaper scene, the publication of SPH’s tabloid (*Streets*) will continue, but its operations will be taken over by MediaCorp Press, which will be 40% owned by SPH and the remaining 60% by MediaCorp. Although Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong dismissed suggestions that the government had orchestrated the merger, calling it an “adjustment” to market situation (Teo 2004: 8), the pre-ordained outcome was always intended to reaffirm the duopolistic structure of mainstream media in Singapore – at least in appearance and in corporate terms. Journalistic practices, however, remain largely monopolistic as they are, in the words of former *Straits Times* journalist Cherian George, “subordinate to a common purpose, of which the government is the ultimate oracle” (George 2002: 175).

DPM Lee’s portentous warning to Singaporeans about “crusading journalism” is interesting given that no ‘straight-thinking’ mainstream journalist in Singapore would dare venture into the territory of such politically-dubious reporting. Even mainstream international media, especially those reporting on Singapore, are well aware of the dangers of crossing the ‘political line’. Many would prefer to comply with the country’s strict media laws and censorship codes to avoid being censured or arraigned on charges of libel or malicious reporting. After all, publications that have had their circulation punitively restricted or banned in Singapore over the past two decades include: *Far Eastern Economic Review*, *The Economist*, *The Asian Wall Street Journal* and *Asiaweek*. Editors and journalists of the following foreign publications have been successfully sued in the

Singapore courts for writing or publishing defamatory or libellous articles: *Newsweek*, *Reuters*, *The Times* (London), *The Star* (Malaysia), *Time*, *International Herald Tribune*, and *Bloomberg* (see Lee 2002b: 14-15). As Eric Ellis explains:

Where [international media] are all vulnerable to Singapore 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 [...] to cut circulation, advertising and profits are threatened (Ellis 2002: 9).

International media have thus prudently chosen to avoid engaging in ‘crusading journalism’.

Although new players have entered (and left) the journalistic fray over the past three decades, and new technologies have reshaped its frontier, the dominance of PAP’s rule has ensured that its political ideologies steer the winds of reportage in Singapore (George 2003: 173). The government remains acutely aware of the political variability that such developments could bring, despite attempts made to ‘liberalise’ the media sector with the corporatisation of broadcasting in Singapore in 1994, followed by a brief dalliance with pseudo-competition from 2000 to 2004. Although it subscribes to the belief that rapid adoption and mastery of new technologies is essential for Singapore’s economic viability, the PAP administrators knew, from the early days of the Internet, that it had to prepare itself for Internet-based political challenges by creating and capturing new media spaces online.

From the mid-1990s, mainstream online journalism in Singapore has been dominated by the *AsiaOne* (www.asiaone.com.sg) and *Channel NewsAsia.com* (www.channelnewsasia.com) web portals. Congruent with its traditional duopolistic media structure, the former portal is owned by SPH, the city-state’s dominant newspaper publisher, whilst the latter is part of MediaCorp News, the regional broadcasting arm of Singapore’s national broadcaster MediaCorp. As state-sanctioned news outlets, *AsiaOne* and *Channel NewsAsia.com* are part of the government’s ‘psychological defence’ stratagem to occupy important news spaces in Singapore to reiterate the governmental status quo. It aims through these news outlets to build ‘soft power’ resources to propagate Singapore news globally, with one of its key target audience being the ever-increasing pool of Singaporeans residing overseas. Although both portals command high online readerships, measured in Internet terms by the number of ‘hits’ or ‘eyeballs’, alternative journalism sites which aim to counteract the hegemony of mainstream media continue to

exist, even thrive, on the Internet.² As many researchers have observed, the Internet continues to be seen as the primary tool for political activism, social dissent and civil society in most parts of Asia.³ Although dissent via the Internet is mild and limited – or for the pessimist, non-existent – in Singapore, due to the government’s successful regulatory controls over electronic media (Lee 2002b), the Internet remains the primary ‘port of call’ for Singaporeans seeking alternative views, as well as for those seeking to vent their social or political frustrations. In this regard, alternative media websites play the role of modern-day coffee houses, or a ‘public sphere’ which operates as the groundswell for civil society.

Launched in 1995, the *AsiaOne* online news portal was the first publicly accessible mainstream online news site to be set up in Singapore. *AsiaOne* carries the ‘interactive’ versions of Singapore’s flagship English-language newspaper, *The Straits Times*, along with core national dailies including *The Business Times*, *The Shipping Times*, *Berita Harian* (Malay language), *Lianhe Zaobao* (Chinese language), and *Tamil Murasu* (Tamil language). The portal also includes versions of midday tabloids such as *The New Paper* and *Streets*. The second mainstream news portal is MediaCorp’s *Channel NewsAsia.com*, which utilises the resources of the twenty-hour news channel *Channel NewsAsia*, established in Singapore as a free-to-air channel in March 1999 and is currently beamed via satellite to many parts of Asia. Interactively-enhanced versions of its regional news reports are also available on the website.⁴ In addition, links to the online edition of *Today*, the company’s staple narrow-sheet, are provided along with headlines from its radio channel *News Radio 93.8FM*. More than just the provision of general news, both *AsiaOne* and *Channel NewsAsia* also offer a range of ‘lifestyle’ services ranging from career information, travel services, to community forums.

Although online versions of established newspapers around the world, such as *The Wall Street Journal*, have moved towards charging users for online readership and associated services to cover the high cost of web maintenance, the two mainstream online journalism sites in Singapore remained predominantly free-of-charge until April 2005 when *The Straits Times Interactive* moved to introduce paid subscription for full access to its news reports (Brown 2003: 54). SPH has however decided to provide key news free-of-charge via both the *AsiaOne* portal and *The Straits Times Interactive* site, a decision that fits in well with the Singapore government’s ‘psychological defence’ strategy to ensure that all Singaporeans – whether domiciled in Singapore or overseas – are able to keep abreast of ‘home’ news and government policies through a ‘licensed’ media source.

‘Psychological defence’ – part of a five-pronged ‘Total Defence’ strategy that includes: military defence, civil defence, economic defence and social defence – is essentially about persuading Singaporeans to feel proud of their country and to defend it in times of crises (see: www.totaldefence.org.sg). The availability of ‘reliable’ online news can thus be interpreted as a pro-active measure to anchor Singaporeans, especially those based offshore, to Singapore – if not physically, then ideologically. This is what DPM Lee was probably alluding to when he reiterated that the media should “play a constructive role in nation building” (Lee 2004a).

Whilst the craft of journalism is typically predicated upon the principle of objectivity, the ideals of ‘objectivity’ can be arbitrary (Conley 2002). In Singapore, journalists reporting for the mainstream media often accept information provided by government sources as authoritative and credible. By negating their interpretative roles, journalists in Singapore become channels for the transmission of government messages to the public. Although many Singaporeans are aware of the political biases of local media outlets, however subtle these may be, they are not likely to lodge complaints or speak out against them. In a politically-apatetic and non-consultative society like Singapore, many believe that it is more prudent to remain silent and docile (Lee 2002a: 103). But as a maturing society with rising affluence, it is widely expected that middle-class Singaporeans, many who are highly-educated and globally-mobile, will begin to demand greater political voice and transparency (Lee 2002a: 101). Not willing to accept ‘government news’ as absolute truths, many Singaporeans have begun to source for more varied news angles and perspectives by going online (George 2002: 184). Unlike mainstream media sites which reproduce, to a large extent, the print or broadcast versions of local news, alternative sites which operate predominantly online tend to be more varied and, as George (2003: 4) has described, often more “contentious”. Alternative online media, which is the subject of the next section, may perhaps bear the marks of an independent civic or civil society.

Alternative Online Media

The government’s grand proclamation in 1992 that Singapore would become the ‘intelligent island-state’ of the Asia-Pacific region by 2000 led many Singaporeans to readily embrace new media technologies (Lee 2002b: 7). With 99% of households and businesses connected to a nationwide broadband network and more than 66% of the

population computer-literate, Singaporeans are deemed more tech-savvy than Americans, Britons or Australians (*ST Interactive* 24 Jan 2004). Not only are Singaporeans known to be one of the most ardent Internet users in the world, a recently published survey even found ‘non-users’ of the Internet in Singapore to be supportive of Internet use and development (Kuo et al. 2002). In addition, with few regulatory restraints compared to offline media, the ‘openness’ of the Internet has enabled individuals and groups to set up websites to publicise their own interests and agendas. As George notes:

Singaporeans who use the Internet as a medium of mass communication have created a bewildering spectrum of websites and mailing lists. They range from individuals drawing ego gratifications from placing personal home pages in cyberspace, to government departments and corporations pursuing publicity and profits (George 2003: 4).

This unlegislated shift in media regime has also led to a mushrooming of alternative online media on Singapore, what George refers to as “politically contentious journalism”, or media that “challenges dominant ideologies and attempts to democratise public discourse” (George 2003: 1), a description that appears to mirror the “crusading journalism” discourse articulated by Lee Hsien Loong (Lee 2004a). For a society that is marked by public order and peace, the advent of online ‘contentious’ media or ‘crusading’ journalism means that the Internet can potentially become a site of ‘disorder’ for Singapore media.

In 1994, before the mass availability of the user-friendly World Wide Web browser, the online bulletin board *soc.culture.singapore* surfaced as the first alternative website dedicated to open discussions on Singapore politics and current affairs. Although *soc.culture.singapore* caused a stir, it was the Singapore Internet Community (Sintercom) website, launched in October 1994, which popularised alternative online journalism in Singapore. Although somewhat amateurish in its presentation, Sintercom carried a wide array of ‘contentious’ journalistic reports, including a summary of ‘hot topics’ extracted from the *soc.culture.singapore* forum that tend to be political in nature, an electronic bulletin board to garner feedback from readers, commentaries on national issues, and publication of well-written letters to the press that had either been rejected or strategically edited by *The Straits Times* (George 2002: 189). Within a short time, Sintercom gained popular appeal and was regarded as the “beacon of civil society” in Singapore (Sivakkumaran 2001).

Sintercom was radical not only because it was the first news site aimed at engaging Singaporeans in an alternative fashion, it was also the first group to take advantage of the

Internet to test political boundaries and circumvent both legal and socio-cultural obstacles (George 2002: 188). However, Sintercom unwittingly became a regulatory ‘guinea pig’ for the government as it could witness, in real terms, the political threat of an un(der)regulated Internet. As a consequence, from 1996, the authorities introduced a raft of self-regulatory guidelines to ensure that online ‘prohibited material’ – 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” – were minimised or restricted (Lee 2002b: 11).⁵ Although such a definition of ‘prohibited material’ clearly leaves too much room for discretionary interpretation and should have been queried by the public, there was barely any discussion on the issue in Singapore. Instead, the move that sparked widespread interest – and fear – was a decision made in 1997 to block 100 pornographic sites via the proxy servers of mass Internet Service Providers (ISP) in Singapore (Lee and Birch 2000). To quell public disquiet, the government stressed that Singapore was fundamentally ‘technology-friendly’, and that the online censorship was a moral gesture and not politically-motivated (George 2003: 6; Tan 2003: 15).

The government’s demonstrated attempt to exercise political control over Internet content was unmistakable when it passed further regulations that required content providers with ‘political messages’ to register with the Internet regulator (George 2002: 189). Sintercom managed to sidestep this directive by convincing the authorities that it was not a political site, but a civic organisation. But in July 2001, notice was (again) issued to Tan Chong Kee, Sintercom’s founder, to register as a site “engaged in the propagation, promotion or discussion of political issues relating to Singapore” (Goh 2001). This time, Tan responded by announcing that the arbitrariness of regulatory terms, especially in the definition of “political issues”, meant that he had no choice but to shut down. He then lamented that civil society in Singapore was a “lost cause” (Tan 2001).⁶ Determined to control online material, especially those that could spark anti-government sentiments, the government passed fresh anti-electioneering laws prior to the General Elections that same year (Tan 2003: 15). As a pre-emptive measure, new communication tools like short messaging services (SMS) over mobile phones were also outlawed (Lee 2002b: 16).

In addition to regulatory measures, the government has also ‘authorised’ the Singapore police and other agencies to conduct regular checks on ISP accounts of public

users. Since 1994, the year internet subscription was introduced to the Singaporean public, several reports of police conducting mass scanning of subscribers' emails and Internet accounts have appeared in *The Straits Times* (Lee 2000b: 12-13). Although official explanations for these clandestine activities typically pertain to law enforcement and technical or systems security, the fear that Internet 'snooping' and general surveillance are common in Singapore makes it necessary for all Singaporeans, including journalists and civil society activists, to toe the official line by self-regulating and self-censoring (see Gomez 2000). The result is that any democratic space in Singapore, from which alternative online media can operate, has become diminished.

There is little doubt that regulatory measures, combined with policing actions that could be construed as scare tactics, have worked to rein in 'contentious' media or 'crusading' journalism. Although the Singapore government has a reputation for periodically refining media regulations to suit its own political agenda, and keep civil society under tight strictures (Rodan 2001: 26), alternative websites dedicated to 'contentious journalism' continue to appear – even flourish – on the Internet. As *The Straits Times* columnist Tan Tarn How reported, no less than three "underground political websites" were set up in Singapore within the first nine months of 2003 alone (Tan 2003: 15). These include: *The Optical* (an information and newsgroup website), *The Void Deck* (a news and commentary site), and *Singapore Review* (an email-based news service provider). Other alternative websites that have continued to survive despite ongoing political pressures include: *New Sintercom*, *Think Centre*, *Singapore Window*, *TalkingCock.com* and *Sammyboy*.

Although Tan criticises the lack of analytical content and journalistic professionalism on most of these websites, he acknowledges their growing popularity and potential impact on the media and civil society when he notes that:

Some [commentaries and writings] are ludicrous, but many are also intelligent and serious, evidently not just the musings of bored undergraduate geeks with no social life but people who seem to know what they are talking about. The websites are also becoming like Malaysiakini, Aliran and others across the Causeway, which have become the main vehicle for political opposition and dissident viewpoints (Tan 2003: 15).⁷

It is important to realise that these alternative websites continue to exist for various reasons. Most claim to promote civil society in Singapore, though some are overtly politically-contentious while others appear to serve as conduits for candid discussions.

Nevertheless, most editors protect themselves by operating under the cloak of anonymity, and many of these sites “inhabit a nebulous region of cyberspace without a fixed location” to avoid falling foul of Singapore laws (Tan 2001: 15). Indeed, none of the alternative sites referenced in this chapter have the geographical ‘sg’ suffix in their Internet addresses. Although it is technically possible for the authorities to track down the identities of editors/operators of these sites and shut them down, such draconian measures are unlikely as they would damage the government’s technology-friendly reputation, and flout its promise to regulate the Internet with a ‘light-touch’.

In addition, media rhetoric in Singapore leading to the long-awaited transfer of power from Goh Chok Tong to Lee Hsien Loong on 12 August 2004 had been about creating a ‘new’ Singapore marked by greater openness (see Leo and Lee 2004). As the new Prime Minister (PM) declared in his swearing-in speech:

We will continue to expand the space which Singaporeans have to live, laugh, to grow and be ourselves. Our people should feel free to express diverse views, pursue unconventional ideas, or simply be different. We should have the confidence to engage in robust debate, so as to understand our problems, conceive fresh solutions, and open up new spaces (Lee 2004b: 6).

While it is unlikely that the new premier had his mind on alternative media or crusading journalism when he articulated the above comments, it is likely that he would exercise a greater degree of tolerance for dissent, at least in the short term, to win popular support. It is nonetheless interesting to note, in analysing his speech, that some of the “unconventional ideas” and “new spaces” that allow Singaporeans to ‘live’, ‘laugh’ and ‘be themselves’ are already available – on online media! The next section will ‘go online’ to examine some of these sites, paying particular attention to the satirical and humorous *TalkingCock.com* which has captured the imaginations of many Singaporeans.

Online spaces to Live and Laugh: the case of *TalkingCock.com*

George argues for the inclusion of online media within journalistic discourse – as the fourth kind of journalism, after print, radio and television (Deuze 2003: 206) – as he sees alternative media as the “bearers of a genuine pedigree” of old-style partisan newspapers which predated the corporatisation and professionalisation of contemporary media (George 2004: 11-2). More significantly, alternative online media embodies “a radical critique of mainstream journalism” and offers a more democratic access to the public sphere (George 2004: 12). In this regard, alternative online media, especially those that

enable candid and open discussions, enhance the role of civil society by being ‘dialogic’ and ‘interactive’ (Deuze 2003: 207). But unlike commercial news corporations which can draw on vast resources to produce a remarkable breadth of story types – ranging from hard news, feature stories and columns to editorials and opinion pieces – alternative online media providers in Singapore tend to feature commentaries and stories that have been reported by the mainstream media. Their innovations lie neither in breaking news nor on-site reporting, but in the publication of unadulterated letters and articles from readers, or the use of satirical or subversive humour, to outwit the conventionality of mainstream media.

For instance, in lobbying for the rights of gays and lesbians, the website *Yawning Bread* shows how *The Straits Times* and *Today* (published by SPH and MediaCorp respectively) would publish letters dealing with homosexuality only after heavy editing (www.yawningbread.org). *Sammyboy*, another website which claims to circulate “Real Singapore News – Warts and All” by publishing “what the Straits Times leaves out”, blends political commentary with links to explicit pornography in an effort to undermine the government’s rigidity on censorship (www.sammyboy.com). Similarly, *The Void Deck* purports to publish “worthy news” on Singapore as well as points of view that cannot be found in ‘other’ media (www.thevoiddeck.org). As its ‘manifesto’ declares, using Singaporean lingo and ‘web-speak’:

[*The Void Deck*] is about the goings-on [*sic*] of the Internet regarding Singapore issues both close and not so close to our heart. [...] Think of us as a one-stop-shop. Just don’t think of us as a news website like *Channel NewsAsia*. We are not that kind of website. Therefore, please don’t expect us to do daily updates [because] worthy news doesn’t happen daily (www.thevoiddeck.org/manifesto.htm).

In comparing itself with mainstream media, *The Void Deck* seeks to portray itself as an independent news provider and political commentator by “once in a while pretending to be like *Straits Times* editors and write our own column articles” (www.thevoiddeck.org/manifesto.htm). These so-called “column articles”, written in colloquial *Singlish*, Singapore’s hybrid brand of English interspersed with Malay and other local dialects, are typically critical of day-to-day issues and changes in government policies. For example, the ‘editorial’ of 5 October 2004 complained about ever-increasing electricity rates with the statement: “Few months ago, Sg (Singapore) had a massive blackout [due to bad] service, and they have the nerve to increase the cost of power?” (www.thevoiddeck.org). Although such comments may appear mundane to most people,

attempts to link current affairs with recent and past occurrences have the effect of ensuring political accountability and contextualising issues to enhance public discussions.

While mainstream websites like *Asiaone* and *Channel NewsAsia.com* display their commercial imperatives by establishing navigational links mainly within their portals, most alternative websites tend to provide hyperlinks to other similar sites. George likens this to the formation of a social cum civil society network which brings together political parties, civic groups and individuals within “the same ideological boat” for the purposes of exchanging ideas and providing mutual moral support (George 2003: 7). *The Void Deck*, for example, hosts a column called “What others are saying” which provides links to noteworthy commentaries on other alternative websites (www.thevoiddeck.org). Likewise, *Singapore Window* features a compendium of news articles and commentaries on Singapore politics by established publications that are likely to be banned or unavailable in Singapore (www.singapore-window.org). Although there is little doubt that the presence of alternative online journalism in Singapore continues to counteract the hegemony of government-endorsed mainstream news, it is less certain if these unofficial sites can remain sustainable for the long haul. Averaging a mere 2,000 regular subscribers or viewers, the operators of newsgroup sites like *The Optical* and *Singapore Review* may, in due course, find it more pragmatic to exit the scene – in the same way the original *Sintercom* had succumbed (Lee 2002a: 112) – unless a successful formula to sustain readership and financial viability can be found (Chin 2003: 141).

Colin Goh, a former lawyer and cartoonist, appears to have found a workable formula when he created the alternative website *TalkingCock.com*, branded as “Singapore’s premier satirical humour website”, in 2000. The hybridised Singaporean term ‘talking-cock’, with its roots in the English phrase “cock and bull”, means ‘to spout nonsense’. In its Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) sub-page, the Editor-in-Chief – probably Goh, who is known on the irreverent site as ‘Big Cock’ – explains the mission of the site:

TalkingCock.com is a satirical feature site for Singaporeans, i.e. we write articles which poke fun at local events and happenings. However, it doesn’t mean we write just nonsense (funny though that may be). Satire is always rooted in reality. Which is why even though we are a humourous site, we try to adhere to professional journalistic principles. This helps us to avoid or lessen the impact of defamation suits from people with thin skins. Ultimately, what we want to do is build a community of Singaporeans with a sense of humour and who enjoy life in all its complexity (www.talkingcock.com; accessed: 20 Mar 2004).

By presenting itself as a purely satirical site, and concurrently issuing various disclaimers, *TalkingCock.com* sagaciously plays on legal ambiguities. This is intended, as the above quote explains, to minimise political risks and avoid lawsuits “from people with thin skins”, an oblique reference to politicians who are either litigious or overtly sensitive to criticisms. Although the claim of trying to “adhere to professional journalistic principles” is intended as a joke, *TalkingCock.com* should nonetheless be seen as a journalistic site that provides commentaries on everyday life in Singapore, albeit in a tongue-in-cheek manner not unlike *The Void Deck*. In other words, *TalkingCock.com* aims to create mediated spaces to make Singaporeans ‘live’ and ‘laugh’ at themselves – and, by sagacious extension, their politicians.

On 11 January 2004, *TalkingCock.com* posted a critique on DPM Lee’s model of ‘civic society’ and ‘constructive journalism’ five days after his speech to Singapore’s Harvard Club. Playfully entitled ‘Civil society groups debate debate rules’, the fictitious author Kway Kah Chng (or ‘chicken backside’) wrote about how an imaginary civic/civil society group ‘Singaporeans for Tolerant, Intelligent, Friendly Local Exchange and Debate’ (read: STIFLED) was denied a license to congregate because it were deemed to be acting “against the public interest”. The article also ‘debated’ on the meaning of ‘crusading journalism’ by citing a comment from an anonymous “person from the shadows”: “One could say the [mainstream] media already slants news coverage to campaign for the Gahmen’s [government’s] personal agendas”. In trying to simulate objectivity, it then declared that “the Singapore media is always unbiased [since] no reporter has ever been gagged or fired for not toeing the party line”. By adding humour, fictitious characters and fabricated events, *TalkingCock.com* delivers commentaries that are concomitantly ludicrous and cynical, a category that is grey enough to sidestep the shackles of media codes and political censorship. This potent formula, which combines satirical humour with astute political critique, has found favour with many Singaporeans, resulting in *TalkingCock.com* being labelled as *The Onion* of Singapore, and receiving positive profiles in international media including *Time* and *The Economist* magazines (Asohan 2003: 2; *The Economist* 24 May 2001).

Conclusion: Online Media(tion)

To date, the success of *TalkingCock.com* is as inspiring as it can get for alternative online media in Singapore, though it is by no means reflective of the parlous state of civil society

in Singapore (Lee 2002a). Although the political courage and legal shrewdness of its founder-editor is a major factor for the website's thriving existence, its survival also has much to do with Goh's entrepreneurial skills. By linking *TalkingCock.com* to Amazon.com's 'Honor System' network, readers have the capacity to make direct and anonymous contributions to the site, thus bypassing restrictive rules governing social and political donations in Singapore. *TalkingCock.com* has also raised its profile by making a satirical film *TalkingCock: The Movie* (2000) and publishing *The Coxford Singlish Dictionary* (2002) to poke fun at the illegibility of *Singlish*. In 2003, Goh was 'elevated' to mainstream status when he took up an invitation to write a weekly column for Singapore's *Sunday Times* (*The Straits Times Interactive* 28 Sep 2003; www.straitstimes.com.sg). Goh has also been commissioned by MediaCorp to contribute to the popular 'Last Page' of its best-selling weekly entertainment magazine *8 Days*.

The 'mainstreaming' of Colin Goh's writings and talents may be interpreted as a process aimed at smoothening the 'contentious' and subversive edges of *TalkingCock.com*, but it also demonstrates that it is possible to operate, above board, a financially-viable and intellectually-stimulating alternative online journalism site in Singapore – although it should be noted that such unconventional ideas are rare. Such sites have the potential to create 'new' spaces to live and laugh, and reinvigorate civil society, though the extent to which they actually do is a moot point.

This paper has provided an assessment of the state online journalism in Singapore, with a focus on the approaches taken by key alternative news sites such as *The Void Deck* and *Talkingcock.com*. Despite the risks inherent in dispensing alternative news in a heavily-policed and over-regulated society like Singapore, the bold democratic aspirations of some Singaporeans – including the creators of these sites as well as their readers – have meant that many such websites have been able to continue to add diversity to the media scene in Singapore. However, the lingering presence of arbitrary political markers and occasional amendments to media rules, coupled with the fleeting nature of weblogs (or blogs) and websites, suggests that it is too early to conclude if alternative online media will continue to play the role of 'crusading journalism' in the future.

I would conclude by positing that while the authorities will continue to make it difficult for these alternative online media sites to function, by maintaining a tensed climate of fear, the Internet will remain the prime site for democratic articulations and civil society in Singapore. Differently put, one would still be going online, though the

form that such a democratic space will take is ‘open’ to further deliberation and development.

NOTES

¹ A new generic competition law to manage competition and fair trading is poised to be introduced in Singapore from late 2005 to 2006. However, it is expected that this competition law would exclude key sectors like telecommunications, electricity and the media on the rationale that these important industries are already regulated by their respective industry regulators (Lim and Wong, 2004).

² *AsiaOne* is one of the most heavily visited web portals in Asia. It commands a page-view of 180 million and attracts 3 million visitors per month (www.asiaone.com/html/aboutus.html).

³ See for example: Gan, Gomez and Johannan (2004).

⁴ A separate *Channel NewsAsia* Chinese language site, catering to the Mandarin-speaking Chinese market, is available at: www.cna.tv.

⁵ For further details on Singapore’s Internet regulations, see: Lee and Birch (2000) and Lee (2002b).

⁶ Sintercom was revived anonymously in 2002 and renamed ‘The New Sintercom’ (www.newsintercom.org).

⁷ Founded in 1998, *Malaysiakini* (or “Malaysia Now”) is widely regarded as the most influential alternative online journalism site in the Southeast Asian region. See Chin (2003), or visit www.malaysiakini.com, for more information. *Aliran*, based in Penang, is one of the oldest human rights non-governmental organisation in the region (George, 2003: 7-8).

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The Optical: groups.yahoo.com/group/TheOptical

The Straits Times Interactive: www.straitstimes.asiaone.com.sg

The Void Deck: www.thevoiddeck.org

Think Centre: www.thinkcentre.org

Today Online: www.todayonline.com.sg

Yawning Bread: www.yawningbread.org