

The Internet and Civil Society in Singapore

A Paper for the Global Partners Freedom of Expression Project
<http://www.freedomofexpression.org.uk>

November 2007

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Abstract: This paper provides an analysis of the social impact of the Internet in Singapore. Long characterised as authoritarian in popular culture, the Singaporean political context is actually far from straightforward. State-led industrial policy in favour of high-tech economic activities has created some opportunities for social change. At the same time, conflicts within society itself have limited any sudden moves towards a more liberal politics. Many of these pre-existing conflicts have spilled over onto the minimally-regulated realms of the Internet, which in turn has accentuated the multi-dimensional nature of social struggle in Singapore. These developments have overshadowed the Internet's ability to unite previously marginalised individuals across geographies. Such a situation is likely to pose little threat to the continuation of state-led development in Singapore, even as the state continues to offer a wider variety of channels through which social dissent can be articulated.

Keywords: Singapore; politics; society; internet; authoritarianism

1. Introduction

Aside from the usual tiresome stereotypes of a clean, green city famous for prohibiting the sale and import of chewing gum, there are at least two general things agreed about Singapore. The first is that its government presides over a highly-regulated and censorious society. The second is that Singapore also has one of the most technologically advanced and networked societies in the world. What has been a lot harder to establish, however, is the relationship between these two facts. In a previous study of the internet in Singapore, Rodan (1998) raised the following questions: can access to the Internet be effectively regulated, or will it lead to more democratic freedom? To what extent is the control of the Internet a technical issue, rather than a socio-political one? Does an increased plurality of views through the Internet ultimately lead to concrete action for change? Singapore's social and technological situation makes it the ideal candidate for discussing and reviewing these questions. In order to provide answers, an overview of the current situation must be tied into its underlying causes. This paper therefore takes the view that an in-depth understanding of the social history and political economy of Singapore is crucial to shedding light on the contemporary social impact of the Internet.

There is arguably no other state in the world that can currently match Singapore's record for political stability. Formerly a British colony, and now one of the original four 'Asian tigers',¹ the island-state houses a diverse population of at least four

¹ Taiwan, Singapore, Hong Kong and South Korea were given the nicknames of 'Asian Tigers' because their astounding high economic growth rates between the early 1960s and 1990s

million residents from various ethno-linguistic backgrounds. It retains and utilises the formal trappings of a Westminster parliamentary institution for public debate. But this belies the fact that the country is a de facto one-party state.² The People's Action Party (PAP) has been in continuous power since 1959, holding relatively smooth and peaceful elections at regular intervals. In the most recent general election in May 2006, the PAP won 82 out of 84 parliamentary seats, bringing home 66.6 per cent of the popular vote. The political hegemony of the PAP rests on a number of key historical factors: a relatively small geographical area to govern, sound economic policy-making, a persuasive nation-building ideology and a managerial capacity to govern the population through an array of increasingly sophisticated political instruments. This has already been discussed at length elsewhere (for example, see Chan 1976, Chua 1995, George 2007, Mauzy and Milne 2002, Rodan 1989). My main purpose here is to draw out the key points that will help to explain the current impact of the Internet on Singapore society.

2. Background history

By the time the PAP came into power in the late 1950s, both geography and the colonial legacy had already left Singapore with a particular set of circumstances. Located at the crossroads of Southeast Asia, the island-state was primarily designated as a trading post within the British colonial empire, with its industrial manufacturing sector left undeveloped (Lim 2002: 275). The domestic industrial asset-owning class was therefore politically very weak, leaving ample opportunity for the ascendant PAP-dominated government to take the reins and coordinate industrial activity for rapid economic development. Faced with the pressures of mass unemployment, housing shortages, impending British military withdrawal and other geo-political issues of the time, state elites shrewdly took advantage of favourable global economic trends. An export-oriented industrialisation model geared at 'seducing' foreign multinational investment was adopted (Rodan 1989: 64). This developmentalist model remains the major underlying driver for many government economic initiatives, including the current build-up of casino-based resorts and biotechnology industries, in which the entrepreneurial role of the domestic asset-owning class remains secondary to the importance of foreign capital (Pereira 2007).

The fierce struggle for domestic power prior to independence left the PAP government with a deep intolerance for left-wing political opposition and social organisations which did not see eye-to-eye with the PAP's policies (Rodan 1989: 68). In order to create the social discipline thought necessary to attract foreign capital, the government embarked on a series of policies to enlarge the role of the state in everyday affairs. A comprehensive national ideology based on the ideas of imminent crisis and survival was propagated (Chan 1971, Brown 1984). State discourse stressed unquestioning obedience to a number of key themes: an illiberal version of multiculturalism, internationally-oriented meritocracy, social discipline, nation-building, and most importantly, the 'pragmatic' acceptance of rapid change as inevitable, rather than as a political outcome. In effect, the state had substituted itself for society in

allowed them to catch up with the earlier developed countries in terms of material standards of living.

² For the lack of a better single word to describe this unique state of affairs in Singapore, the terms 'state', 'government' and 'PAP' are used interchangeably in this paper to reflect the long-standing fusion between the three political bodies.

defining societal goals.

The state also took concrete measures to restructure society through a barrage of old and new institutional initiatives.³ Militant trade unions were crippled and replaced with a more obedient umbrella body, while grassroots community centres had their organisations restructured and co-opted by the state. Government attempted to influence every aspect of life, from private sexual behaviour to higher education, religion, ethnicity, language, the mass media and cultural production. Such circumstances were detrimental to any civil society organisations seeking to challenge state doctrine, since 'any group or interest which spoke about restricting the new nation-state's power could be suspected of betrayal' (Kaviraj and Khilnani 2001: 314). With freedom of speech curtailed, criticism addressed to the government was whittled down to mainly technocratic issues of gaps in service delivery strategies (Chan 1975). In exchange for compliance, the PAP-government reinforced national security, provided sufficient public housing and modernised the health, infrastructure and education services. While these measures have helped to uphold the material basis of its hegemony, they also created social dissent due to the perceived lack of freedom of expression and the government's chosen emphasis on a 'style of modernisation . . . seen as culturally and spiritually impoverishing [and] elite-oriented' (George 2005: 906).

During the 1980s, some key social changes occurred within the Singapore polity. Successive decades of rapid economic growth heralded the emergence of a large professional middle class based in the technical and managerial sectors. This led to a large amount of speculation and debate about the potential of this new social group to act as a dissenting voice for civic reform (for example, see Brown and Jones 1994, Chalmers 1992, Chua 1994, Rodan 1992, Chong 2005). At the same time, widening income inequalities were adding an additional layer of social differentiation to a population already characterised by a diverse mosaic of ethnic, religious, linguistic and gendered groups. These changes resulted in declining PAP electoral performances in the 1980s and early 1990s. The second and current third generation of PAP stalwarts subsequently made more of an effort to dab at the festering wound of growing income disparities, as well as attempt to project a socially progressive image that broke with the authoritarian machismo characterised by Lee Kuan Yew's first-generation premiership. A slew of policies designed to encourage more alternative input and take into account a greater diversity of viewpoints were put into action. These included a stream of face-to-face 'dialogue sessions' across Singapore's constituencies, new feedback channels and the creation of the Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) Scheme. The NMP Scheme was aimed at introducing a greater mixture of elite non-PAP viewpoints into Parliament without bolstering the strength of elected opposition parties already present.

As social groups grew more confident and articulate, nascent civil society

³ A partial list of these legislative and institutional measures include the Employment Act, the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act, the Internal Security Act, the Societies Act, Newspapers and Printing Presses Act, Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, Political Donations Act, Public Entertainments Act, Residents' Committee, Citizens' Consultative Committees, Social Development Unit, Shared Values White Paper, the S21 Initiative as well as more recent policies intended to regulate the usage of new communications technology. See Gomez 2005 for a full summary of measures.

organisations created and led by private sector professionals sought to offer an alternative take on public policy. These included ethnic-based self-help organisations, environmental conservationists, women's interest groups, and from the 1990s onwards, freedom of expression advocacy groups. In an attempt to head off these developments, the state tried to manage the transition to a more liberal, diverse society through eloquent rhetoric. In speeches to the middle classes, government leaders began to champion a limited pluralist ideology that sought to rechannel individual initiatives into decidedly 'non-political' social welfare activities (Yeo 1991). In effect, the public was 'granted permission' to take more socially responsible voluntary action and critique government policy, provided they avoided broaching policy regarding sensitive racial/religious issues and did not question the competency and moral authority of government (*Straits Times*, 5 October 2000, Lee 2004, Lee 2005b). This proved much trickier to follow in practice than in theory, since many of the socio-economic problems thought to be facing society were deeply intertwined with the very issues deemed out-of-bounds to public commentary and involvement in the first place. Most individuals and social groups have thus decided to engage the state in a non-confrontational manner. This translates into trying to make the best of opportunities when collaborating with various government bodies for mutual benefit, whilst keeping a low profile when their interests no longer coincide (Chong 2005, Hobson 2005).

For the government, limited pluralism has appeared to have paid off to some extent. Incorporating more professionals and ordinary citizens into the state's decision-making processes has assisted in reducing potential opposition and alienation. Nevertheless, as we shall see later on, the PAP's efforts to co-opt a broader swathe of society have inadvertently helped to deepen participatory democracy. There is now a larger variety of opportunities through which key interest group issues can be credibly discussed within civil society and pushed all the way up into Parliament.

At the same time, the Singapore government has been kept busy confronting some fundamental economic issues. By the 1980s, economic growth and its accompanying cost inflation had made Singapore a relatively expensive place to do business in. With their cheaper wage rates and lower land rentals, Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand were attracting large amounts of foreign investment. These factors prompted the state to re-orientate economic strategy towards technology-intensive service and manufacturing activities (Baber 2002: 292, Rodan 1992: 371). Meanwhile, the rise of personal computers as the gateway to an 'informational economy' (Castells 1996) also provided a stellar opportunity for the state to pull ahead of its neighbours. Demonstrating its usual penchant for efficiency, the government spearheaded a coordinated strategy to build a physical and social foundation on which a nation-wide IT culture could flourish within a relatively short period of time (Baber 2002: 292, Lee 2005a: 76, Lim 2002: 278, Rodan 1998: 69-71).

By 2006, the Infocomm Development Authority (IDA) of Singapore was reporting that 78 per cent of all households had at least one home computer (IDA 2006a). Singapore was also the world leader in the World Economic Forum's 2004-2005 Global Information Technology Report, for readiness and usage of infocomm in business, government and society, placing it ahead of USA and Japan (IDA 2006b). There is little doubt that IT permeates Singaporean society today: the figures speak for themselves (also see Table 1).

3. The 'light touch' approach to the Internet

It is against this backdrop of changing norms that control of the Internet and its potential for concrete action leading to change can be better understood. The keyword here is ambiguity. To a great extent, the opening up of the online world in Singapore has helped to reduce business transaction costs. State support for public access to the Internet also supports the view that the ruling party is truly serious about deepening democracy, judging by the rapid blossoming of 'coffeeshop' forums and discussion groups devoted to information sharing and articulation of alternative viewpoints. Much of this can be credited to the government's adoption of a 'light touch' approach to the Internet. A 2005 study by the Open Net Initiative (ONI) highlights two key aspects of this strategy. First, state censorship of Internet sites was found by ONI to be extremely minimal. Out of 1,632 tested sites, only eight were prohibited due to explicit sexual content, illegal drug usage and religious extremism. The Media Development Authority of Singapore (MDA) claims to block a 'symbolic' list of 100 sites with objectionable content, yet only seven of these were actually found to be banned (ONI 2005). Second, the legal and regulatory framework is designed to give industry players 'maximum flexibility' of use, alongside the promotion of 'self-regulation and public education'. Part of this is achieved through an Internet Code of Practice that restricts the online circulation of ambiguously defined 'prohibited material'. This is complemented by an Internet-specific class license scheme that holds all major Internet service providers and individual users legally responsible for the posting of political/religious content.⁴

When internet access was first made available to consumers through the government-linked SingNet monopoly in the early 1990s, attempts were made to regulate online usage through direct technological interference. Illegal file scans on user e-mail accounts were conducted several times, ostensibly to uncover pornographic files and viruses. On at least one occasion, the subsequent public outcry led to a public apology from SingNet. The government followed up with a promise to establish guidelines on safeguarding user privacy (Lee 2005a: 85). Some writers have chosen to interpret such episodes as parts of a deliberate state-sponsored strategy to create a climate of fear and self-censorship (Lee 2005a, Rodan 1998). But one could also view these incidents as the clumsy first steps of regulatory bodies who lacked the experience necessary to effectively navigate the unfamiliar territory of a revolutionary new medium.

To date, online media still faces less stringent legislation than traditional media. This does not deny the fact that select individuals have occasionally been threatened and even punished with jail terms and fines under the Sedition Act for online posting of inflammatory ethno-religious content.⁵ Such incidents naturally became the subject of much debate on the internet. One prominent blogger has agreed in principle with the immorality of the crime, but disagrees with the awkward nature of its penalty (Au 2007b). In October 2007 (two years after the above-mentioned punishment), existing Penal Code legislation was recalibrated and more nuanced laws introduced, targeting

⁴ See the Broadcasting (Class License) Notification 2001, <http://www.mda.gov.sg/wms.file/mobj/mobj.487.ClassLicense.pdf>

⁵ Please refer to the Calibrated Coercion website (<http://calibratedcoercion.wordpress.com/case-files/>) for an ongoing database project that has been set up by two local academics to document all Singapore government interventions in Internet communication.

racist online activity and transnational internet crime with greater accuracy.⁶ '[T]he Singapore government', George (2007: 140) says, 'appears to have committed itself to the principle of strategic self-restraint, calibrating its coercion to get the job done with as little force as necessary.' With hindsight, it is apparent that 'strategic self-restraint' is more of an ongoing, constantly evolving process than a fixed policy. The decision to regulate the internet through traditional 'non technological measures' (ONI 2005), instead of through online censorship, is a negotiated outcome based on past policy-making exercises. The state currently finds the latter strategy much more intrusive, unpopular and difficult to enforce than the former.

4. Competing in the realm of ideas: hits and misses

Singapore's increasingly Internet-savvy society has prompted government bodies and state-affiliated media institutions to come up with their own initiatives to check possible sources of alienation and opposition. Baber (2002: 294) convincingly documents how the spontaneous rise of virtual speakers' corners on the Internet finally led to the government setting up an actual Speaker's Corner at Hong Lim Park in September 2000, despite resistance from the state just a few weeks before. Critics may point out that lack of interest in the current physical Corner is evidence of yet another red herring thrown out by the PAP to appease freedom of speech activists, but even so, the Corner's presence is also a reminder that circles within the ruling party place a premium on being seen as responsive to the diverse and changing demands of its constituents.

Mainstream media in Singapore are effectively guided by the state without being nationalised or physically brutalised. According to George (2007: 135ff), this has happened because of the ruling party's expert use of 'creative legislation', as well as its keen political nose for regulating the media through a deliberate balance of interests. Mainstream media in Singapore are accountable to not just the ruling party's political interests, but also the profit-making imperative of publishers and shareholders, the professional needs of staff journalists, as well as public demands for a credible press. The Internet's presence has complicated these trends even further. Newspaper editors thus attempt to satisfy all of these demands to a certain extent. In turn, this has created some limited opportunities for greater freedom of expression. Collaborations between mainstream media and Singapore's elite group of socio-political bloggers are producing mixed results.

Lee Kin Mun, more popularly known by his blogger pseudonym Mrbrown (<http://www.mrbrown.com>), is a locally-based freelance writer who rose to fame through at least ten years of online presence, podcasts and wry commentary on social issues that seized the popular imagination. This places his website in the same tradition of local online political satire such as Talking Cock (<http://www.talkingcock.com>). As part of a blatant attempt to co-opt the one of the Internet's most popular alternative broadcasters, Lee was given his own column in *Today*, a popular tabloid that has an estimated readership exceeding half a million. In an editorial piece entitled 'S'poreans are fed, up with progress!', he tried to test the boundaries of freedom of speech through his humorous but persistent jibes at the

⁶ See "Summary of Key Amendments to the Penal Code, especially Sections 108B, 298 and 298A: (<http://www.getformesingapore.com/homepage2007/summaryofkeyamendmentstothepeنالcode.htm>)

government's foundation of political legitimacy: the ability to ensure sufficient economic benefits for all citizens (*Today*, 30 June 2006). In a widely publicised move, *Today* axed Lee's column after the press secretary to the Ministry of the Information, Communications and Arts (MICA) sharply rebutted Lee. In MICA's statement, Lee was accused of having launched a 'diatribe' which 'distort[ed] the truth' (*Today*, 3 July 2006). The press secretary then took the opportunity to remind both news editors and readers that newspapers should never 'undermine the Government's standing with the electorate' (ibid). In the ministry's view, Lee had basically thumbed his nose at the nation-building role that the government had advocated for local media since at least the early 1970s (see Appendix A). After the incident, Lee continued to broadcast on a wide range of contentious social issues through his usual online channels.

The Mrbrown incident suggests two things. First, risk-taking online niche broadcasters and mainstream news editors in collaborative relationships will continue to push the boundaries of expression in the mainstream media from time to time, even if this earns censure from the government. Newspapers may do so for a number of reasons, including the need to retain credibility and relevance for readers. Second, it shows that the government has drawn a line between what is appropriate in traditional media, and what is permitted on the Internet. MDA's 'light touch' policy is partly influenced by the perception that internet blogs and social network forums are still less influential than the mainstream media. This is similar to the way cinemas, subscription TV and free-to-air TV are subject to different censorship rules in Singapore (MDA 2007). But it remains to be seen if the 'light touch' policy will be upheld. Evolving technologies, such as Facebook, are threatening to combine with existing social activist networks to erode the ability of traditional media outlets to influence public opinion (especially during politically sensitive periods like general elections).

At the time this report was submitted, state rhetoric (e.g. Lee 2007) and policy-making⁷ suggest that the government will be reviewing its 'light touch' policy very soon. While public developments remain mostly in the speculative stages at present, they have been significant enough to prompt a series of intended face-to-face meetings by informed blogger-practitioners (*The Online Citizen*, 24 November 2007). For concerned bloggers, the issue here is not just about discussing whether tighter online censorship measures can actually work in the long run. It is also about whether the most influential bloggers, who are emerging as civil society stakeholders, will be able to contribute substantially to future reviews on the norms of online governance (*ST*, 27 November 2007). Or will their attempts at participation be perceived as being sidelined in favour of establishment figures yet again?

5. Mapping the social spaces of the Internet

A great deal of online social interaction has little to do with direct advocacy. How might such 'chatter' turn into 'championing' over time? A survey of the Internet by Ho, Baber and Khondker (2002) has drawn academic attention to the widening range of 'coffeeshop spaces' and other emerging 'sites of resistance' in Singapore's online world (for an updated list see Appendix B). These websites tend to fall into a mish-

⁷ Two new high-powered committees have been formed, ostensibly to study the social implications of the ever-changing digital media landscape. These include the Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society (AIMS), (<http://www.nrf.gov.sg/nrf/strategic.aspx?id=156>) and the Internet and Media Advisory Council (a reconstitution of two pre-existing committees).

mash of overlapping categories straddling politics, social welfare, religion and sexuality. Through cyberspace, some social groups have developed solidarities that would be denigrated by mainstream society or the government if widely exposed. For example, gay Singaporeans⁸ have been able to bypass societal stigma and geographical isolation by turning to the privacy of the web. Organisations can also organise meetings and discussions in cyberspace without having to apply for permission to hold a public assembly. The Internet's unique 'many-to-many' technology is a powerful tool that can sidestep existing laws and newer regulations in the hands of creative and dedicated individuals (Baber 2002: 294, George 2004: 521-522). But increased freedom of speech and association online comes with its own set of issues. Many outspoken individuals are not necessarily liberal or tolerant of other alternative viewpoints. As we saw earlier, the state has managed to curb the worst excesses of anti-social behaviour through legislative measures. But even without extremist views in the picture, we are still dealing with a large grey area where the effects of the Internet on political pluralism in Singapore are concerned. How this will pan out in the future is hard to say. It is fairly certain, though, that the social diversity of Singapore's population means that the ruling party must prioritize certain group solidarities over others at any one moment. 'The state is not a unitary monolith', write Koh and Ooi (2004: 186). 'Some state agencies may be more amenable to public engagement on policy issues than others.' As we shall see in the following case study, these differing priorities can create limited opportunities through which hegemony can be contested, both online and offline.

6. The campaign to repeal Section 377A of the Penal Code

The Singaporean social context that gays exist in is highly ambiguous. Local perceptions of the social status of gays have been divided and coloured by a number of state policies, including legislation that criminalises homosexual behaviour. This legislation finds its moralist apex in Section 377A of the Penal Code. A legacy of British colonial legislation and medieval Christian world-views (Chan 2003: 8), both Sections 377 (repealed since October 2007) and 377A were designed to outlaw certain private consensual sexual acts (see Appendix C). Section 377 prohibited sexual intercourse between men, women and animals that was 'against the order of nature', commonly interpreted in courts of law as fellatio and sodomy. On the other hand, Section 377A forbids any form of 'gross indecency' between men, including acts which do not involve penetration of any form. In theory, even holding hands in private can be construed as a jailable offence.

By 1993, activists within Singaporean gay sub-culture had developed an organisational base called People Like Us (PLU). Initially a discreet informal forum geared at information-sharing and mutual support, PLU had intentions to advocate and create more social awareness about gay issues amongst the general public. PLU thus made two attempts to apply for societal registration, first in 1997 and again in 2004.

⁸ For the sake of brevity, the term 'gay' is being used as a general descriptive noun for a diverse set of residents who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transsexual in orientation. In the Singapore context, 'gay' is considered by newspapers and gay men to be politically correct. In contrast, the term 'homosexual' has pejorative overtones associated with mental illness (*ST*, 2 November 2007). I have deliberately chosen to adopt the most politically correct terminology from the local context, in the hope that my stated intentions will make up for any differences in the interpretation of such terminology across nationalities and cultures.

Both applications and their subsequent appeals were roundly rejected by the Registrar of Societies. At the same time, the Internet was rapidly becoming the platform of choice for local gays who wanted to make social connections and organise gay-themed social events both locally and abroad, e.g. Fridae.com. While the World Wide Web exposed mainstream audiences to a plethora of discourses both for and against gay rights, some local fundamentalist religious groups also found that the internet could help to reinforce their own identity formation and homophobic views (for example, <http://catholicwriter.wordpress.com/>).

In January 2004, the Minister of State for Law announced that the government intended to decriminalise oral sex between males and females as part of an ongoing review of the Penal Code. The catalyst for this had been the highly embarrassing case of Annis Abdullah, sentenced to jail in November 2003 under section 377, for consensual oral sex with a sixteen year old girl (*ST*, 7 November 2003). Members of the public noted the incongruence between the basis of the sentence and the fact that strawberry-flavoured condoms, risqué magazines and self-help books on giving better fellatio had long been made widely available for purchase across the country (Au 2004). In an abrupt face-saving act, the Home Affairs and Law Ministries then issued a joint letter justifying Abdullah's jail sentence on the newly-altered grounds of "oral sex with an *underage* girl". Prosecution had apparently erred in determining the girl's age, which was revealed to be fifteen at the time of sexual activity (*ST*, 15 November 2003).⁹

At the time there was no word on whether 377A was to be revised as well. Cases like Annis Abdullah's had highlighted the danger that the gay community faced when legislative and ministerial authorities had the power to interpret ambiguously-worded laws as they saw fit. The gay lobby thus saw an urgent need to bring these laws up-to-date and redefine the boundaries of acceptable behaviour in contemporary society. Government pronouncements in the media also fuelled tentative hopes in the gay and progressive lobbies that such moves would occur (PLU 2007). In February 2003, then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said that the government would employ homosexuals in 'certain positions', as long as they declared their sexual orientation when applying. He acknowledged the need to attract foreign talent and retain economically valuable locals who were gay, while reiterating that homosexual acts would remain illegal (Goh 2003). In April 2007, the iconic Lee Kuan Yew himself admitted that it was becoming increasingly difficult to criminalise gay behaviour in the face of scientific evidence, international societal trends and the gay economic contribution to Singapore's economy. At the same time, he claimed he was no longer in charge of government policy (Au 2007a).

In November 2006 the consultation paper on amendments to the Penal Code was released to the public for feedback. It proposed repealing section 377 and tightening up legislation surrounding pedophilia, bestiality and necrophilia. There was no mention of any proposal to repeal 377A (MHA 2006). The gay lobby pointed out that these amendments were, amongst other things, highly discriminatory and inconsistent in nature, since private oral and anal sex acts between consenting

⁹ Ironically, it was also revealed in court that Abdullah had met and wooed the girl through an Internet Relay Chatroom (*ST* 2003a), one of the most stigmatised online spaces in popular culture. Who would have imagined that the humble online chatroom would inadvertently become the space that would reignite calls to decriminalise consensual oral sex?

heterosexual couples sixteen years and above would be legalised, while the same act between two men would remain illegal (PLU 2006). In the run-up to the tabling of the amendments in Parliament in late October 2007, arguments for and against the repeal of 377A grew increasingly frequent and vocal across traditional media carriers as well as online discussion spaces (for example, see *ST*, 4 May 2007, 7 July 2007).

By early October, an official two-part Internet campaign to repeal 377A (<http://www.repeal377A.com>) had been organised and launched through the creative efforts of key individuals, including George Hwang, a lawyer, and Stuart Koe, co-founder of Fridae.com. An open letter to the prime minister was endorsed online and submitted to the PM's office with over 8,000 virtual signatures. A separate petition to repeal the law was presented to Parliament on October 22 by NMP Siew Kum Hong. Both initiatives were made available for public endorsement at the campaign's website, but the second format had to be downloaded, printed, hand-signed and delivered to the NMP for tabling in Parliament. Despite the trickier logistical issues of the second format, over 2,100 signatures were eventually collected. Shortly after Repeal377A.com was set up, a short video clip featuring local actors and celebrities rapping to urge the Act's repeal was also posted to YouTube. The clip was subsequently circulated widely across online communities through viral marketing.¹⁰

Exactly a fortnight after Repeal377a.com went online, an anti-gay lobby group calling themselves 'The Majority' launched a counter-petition online (<http://www.keep377a.com>), which managed to garner over 15,000 virtual signatures in under 5 days. Other similar sites also came into being, such as <http://www.support377a.com> and <http://www.enshrine377a.blogspot.com> (the latter's anti-gay cause turned out to be a satirical hoax intended to ridicule the anti-gay lobby). In essence the vocal nature of the pro-gay lobby group had aroused the group solidarities of those who held strongly conservative views grounded in religion and traditional family values. By this time, the mainstream media and socio-political bloggers had long converged on both sides of the debate, their comments and criticisms adding to fuel to an already raging fire. For two days in Parliament, detailed arguments for both repealing and retaining the law were heard from both NMPs and PAP MPs alike.

PM Lee eventually announced in Parliament that the government had decided to play it safe and keep 377A for the time being. This was justified on the grounds that preserving racial and religious harmony had to come before sexual minority rights, even if this meant retaining a law that leaders claim will not be enforced proactively (*ST*, 24 October 2007). This naturally went down well with the vocal conservatives. Yet many saw the entire episode as a small but important concession to the gay lobby as well. Koe was reported to have said afterwards, “[w]e've started a dialogue which we don't intend to stop.” (ibid.) Ten years ago, a similar public debate about legalising gay behaviour would not have even been worth contemplation. The rapid fermentation of support for either side could not have been made possible earlier on without the Internet's unique ability to gather an energised audience within a relatively short period of time. That being said, the debate also exposed the diversity of viewpoints both external to the gay community, and within it as well. Shortly after the parliamentary debates ended, one self-declared gay man wrote in to *The Straits Times* Forum,

¹⁰ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mTGrzte9ZjQ&e>

declaring that "Singapore is a good place for a gay man to live in, as long as one understands the social contract involved...campaigning for gay rights is counter-productive and I am strongly against such action." (*ST*, 27 October 2007)

While the debate's most vocal proponents were temporarily basking in the public limelight, a separate but related development was quietly unfolding behind the scenes. Despite the retention of 377A, local gay-affirmative Christian civil society group Safehaven was awarded approval from MDA to stage a "HIV Outreach, Prevention and Empowerment (Hope) Concert" on 13 December 2007. The Hope Concert will be headlined by once-banned gay Christian pop duo, Jason and Marco. Two years ago, MDA had justified their rejection of a similar attempt by Safehaven to bring in the duo on the grounds that 'alternative lifestyles are against the public interest' (*Today*, 22 November 2007). Safehaven pushed the current concert past MDA on the basis that its key aim was greater public awareness of AIDs and HIV prevention. It also gave a concession to MDA by restricting entry only to those of 18 years and above. The reluctant turnaround in MDA's policy came after other ministries learnt that a quarter of all new HIV cases last year were contracted through homosexual activity. MICA and Ministry of Health officials have since been collaborating with civil society representatives from Action for Aids, Fridae.com, and Oogachaga, a local gay and lesbian affirmative counselling agency, in new initiatives to tackle the HIV epidemic issue. Taken together, the Hope Concert and 377A debate examples illustrate the haziness of 'legitimacy' in a society undergoing rapid change. Increasing awareness of salient issues posing a threat to national security, like HIV, can inadvertently become a rallying point for local civil society groups and state agencies alike, even when the formal laws and previous norms that underline these relations appear to indicate otherwise. Constant political renegotiation is not antithetical to political stability, and as these examples have shown, the former even serves to reinforce the latter.

7. Conclusion

The examples above represent tensions characterising rapid social change in Singapore. In essence, a particular configuration of socio-political processes and key creative individuals have exploited the synergies between online and offline worlds to influence the nature of social action. As Chong (2005:297) observes elsewhere,

society-state relations are neither completely hegemonic nor as deterministic as they are often made out to be . . . [b]y examining civil society groups as sets of interests with different, sometimes unstable, levels of legitimacy in the eyes of an authoritarian state, a more complex and dynamic picture of society-state relations [will] emerge.

Social action in contemporary Singapore involves a complicated dance between various government ministries, political leaders, social factions and civil society groups as they struggle to navigate the bumpy terrain of economic, religious, ethnic, linguistic and sexual differences. The variety of channels available for the expression of these interests have grown in tandem with the deft-handedness of various interest groups in using them. But behind the emergence of virtual communities lie long-term social trends that pre-date the Internet, even as the new technology creates possibilities never before thought possible.

For state policy-makers, the political scenarios associated with juggling the interests of different constituencies have gotten more elaborate. 'As civil society matures, the task of governance will no longer be about the simple-unidimensional pursuit of the good life. There will be multiple definitions of the good life and complex, competing demands on policy to meet those definitions.' (Koh and Ooi 2004: 184). This is not necessarily a bad thing for the PAP at all. First, politically motivated citizens are inadvertently trained in the cut-and-thrust of politics through the jockeying for power and influence within the Singapore polity. The ruling party cannot afford to lose these potential new parliamentary recruits by being seen as insensitive to their public demands. Second, as we saw earlier in the example of the 377A debate, state elites have actually found it to their advantage to permit more discussion and contention *between* different societal factions. The ruling party gains from stepping back and not always being seen as 'the proverbial "bad guy" or wet blanket' (Lee 2004). The implication is that blame for a lack of social progress, or its supposed ideological opposite, an excess of liberalism, can be directed inwards at society rather than outwards at the state.

Paradoxically then, the opening up of society has created opportunities for the government to reassert its moral and ideological authority as an arbitrator of societal norms and articulator of fundamental national interests: political stability and economic benefits for all. On the same day that PM Lee declared that the government could not afford to favour one constituency at the expense of another *vis-a-vis* the Section 377A debate, he also added: 'When it comes to issues like the economy, technology, education, we'd better stay ahead of the game . . . [a]nd when necessary in such issues, we will move even if the issue is unpopular or controversial.' (ST, 24 October 2007). The Internet's 'information revolution' has clearly opened up new public spaces for social action, which will no doubt continue to be utilised heavily in the years to come. But as long as Singapore's economy continues to remain healthy, and the personal political inclinations of state and ruling party leaders do not overly veer from established 'pragmatic' norms, we should expect change resulting from social activism—internet-based or otherwise—to remain incremental at best.

Table and Figures

Table 1. ICT Infrastructure Preparedness Indicators of Singapore and other Asian countries

Country		GDP per capita (PPP US \$) 2004	Adult Literacy (%15 years and older) 2004	Per 1,000 People		
				Telephone Main Lines (2004)	Mobile Phone Subscribers (2004)	Internet Users (2004)
Japan		29,251	99.0	460	716	587
South Korea		20,499	98.0	542	761	657
Hong Kong		30,822	94	549	1,184	506
China		5,896	90.9	241	258	73
Southeast Asia	Singapore	28,077	92.5	240	910	571
	Indonesia	3,609	90.4	46	138	67
	Malaysia	10,276	88.7	179	587	397
	Philippines	4,614	92.6	42	404	54
	Thailand	8,090	92.6	107	430	109
	Burma	1,027	89.9	8	2	1
	Vietnam	2,745	90.3	70	60	71
	Laos	1,954	68.7	13	35	4

Source: UNDP Human Development Report 2006.

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Appendix A

1. Extract from PM Lee Kuan Yew's Address to the General Assembly of the International Press Institute at Helsinki, Wednesday 9 June 1971, entitled: "The Mass Media and New Countries":

"I used to believe that when Singaporeans become more sophisticated, with higher standards of education, these problems will diminish. But watching Belfast, Brussels, and Montreal, rioting over religion and language, I wonder whether such phenomena can ever disappear . . . In such a situation, freedom of the press, freedom of the news media, must be subordinated to the overriding needs of the integrity of Singapore, and to the primacy of purpose of an elected government. The government has taken, and will from time to time have to take, firm measures, to ensure that, despite divisive forces of different cultural values and life styles, there is enough unity of purpose to carry the people of Singapore forward to higher standards of life, without which the mass media cannot thrive."

Source: <http://journalism.sg/lee-kuan-yews-1971-speech-on-the-press/> Last accessed on 2¹ November 2007.

2. Extract from Speech by Dr Lee Boon Yang, Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts, at the MICA Annual Press Cocktail Reception, 23 November 2007, 7.15pm at the Asian Civilisations Museum.

"The Singapore media has a heavy and responsible role in our nation building effort. Economic viability and social stability are vital for Singapore's continued progress and success. In a world where the borders are becoming increasingly porous and foreign influences, good and bad, are carried to our shores by the rising tide, we should not forsake what has worked well for us for the past four decades. When we have to grapple with the threat of self-radicalisation resulting from the spread of religious, extremism and terrorism ideology through the internet, we must not jettison the media's critical role in strengthening social cohesion and resilience."

Source: <http://app.sprinter.gov.sg/data/pr/20071123986.htm> Last accessed on 24 Nov 2007.

Appendix B

A truncated list of websites that were uncovered in the course of this paper's authorship.

(1) Local Internet Service Providers

SingNet - <http://www.singnet.com.sg/>
 Starhub - <http://www.starhub.com/>
 Pacific Internet - <http://www.pacific.net.sg/>

(2) Mainstream media with an online presence

Singapore Press Holdings Pte Ltd:
 Berita Harian - <http://cyberita.asia1.com.sg/>
 Lianhe Zaobao - <http://www.zaobao.com/>
 STOMP - <http://www.stomp.com.sg>
 Tamil Murasu - <http://tamilmurasu.tamil.sg/>
 The Business Times - <http://www.businesstimes.com.sg/>
 The (Electric) New Paper - <http://newpaper.asia1.com.sg/>
 The Straits Times - <http://www.straitstimes.com/>

Mediacorp Pte Ltd:
 Channel News Asia - <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/>
 Mediacorp Radio - <http://www.mediacorpradio.sg/>
 Today - <http://www.todayonline.com/>

(3) Civil Society Organisations

Action for Aids - <http://www.afa.org.sg/>
 Association of Muslim Professionals - <http://www.amp.org.sg/>
 Association of Women for Action and Research - <http://www.aware.org.sg/>
 Focus on the Family - <http://www.family.org.sg/>
 Free Community Church - <http://www.freecomchurch.org/>
 Green Volunteers Network - <http://www.gvn.com.sg/>
 Journalism.sg - <http://www.journalism.sg>
 Nature Society (Singapore) - <http://www.nss.org.sg/>
 People Like Us - <http://www.plu.sg>
 Safehaven (A Ministry of Free Community Church) - <http://www.oursafehaven.com/>
 Our Spaces - <http://www.ourspaces.com/main.html>
 Yawning Bread - www.yawningbread.org

(4) Anti-Censorship/Freedom of Speech

Calibrated Coercion - <http://calibratedcoercion.wordpress.com>
 James Gomez News - <http://www.jamesgomeznews.com/index.php>
 New Sintercom - <http://www.newsintercom.org/>
 Little Speck - <http://www.littlespeck.com>
 Singapore Angle - <http://www.singaporeangle.com/>
 Singapore Window - <http://www.singapore-window.org/>
 Talking Cock - <http://talkingcock.com/>
 The Online Citizen - <http://theonlinecitizen.com/>
 Think Centre - www.thinkcentre.org
 Tomorrow.sg - <http://www.tomorrow.sg/>

(5) Organised Opposition Political Parties

Singapore Democratic Party - <http://www.singaporedemocrat.org/>
 Singapore Democratic Alliance - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singapore_Democratic_Alliance
 Worker's Party of Singapore - <http://www.wp.sg/wordpress/index.php>
 Singapore People's Party - <http://www.spp.org.sg/>
 National Solidarity Party - <http://www.nsp.sg/>
 Malay National Organisation (PKMS) - <http://www.geocities.com/pkms218/>
 Role of internet in the last General Election (highly recommended) - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Singapore_general_election%2C_2006

(6) Alternative Sexuality Sites

Adlus - <http://www.adlus.org/index.html>
 As-Salam Singapore - <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/as-salam/>
 Cactus - <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/cactus-sg/>
 Fridae - <http://www.fridae.com/>
 Heartland - <http://www.heartlandsg.org/blog/>
 Herstory - <http://www.herstory.ws/>
 Oogachaga - <http://www.oogachaga.com/>
 Pelangi Pride Centre - <http://www.pelangipridecentre.org/index.htm>
 Plume - <http://plume.sg/>
 Queer Librarian - <http://thequeerlibrarian.blogspot.com/2007/06/welcome.html>
 Queercast - <http://queercast.net/show/>
 Repeal 377A - <http://www.repeal377a.com/>
 SAFE - <http://safesingapore.blogspot.com/>
 Sayoni - <http://sayoni.com/>
 SiGNel - <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/signel/>
 Two Queens Party - <http://www.twoqueensparty.com/>
 Trevvy/SG Boy - <http://www.trevvy.com/>
 Utopia - <http://www.utopia-asia.com/>
 Women's Nite - <http://women-snite.livejournal.com/>

(7) PAP Sites and Affiliates

Infocommunications Development Authority of Singapore - <http://www.ida.gov.sg/>
 Media Development Authority of Singapore - <http://www.mda.gov.sg>
 National Trades Union Congress of Singapore - <http://www.ntucworld.org.sg/>
 P65 Blog - <http://www.p65.sg/>
 People's Action Party - www.pap.org.sg
 People's Association - www.pa.org.sg
 REACH (formerly the Feedback Unit)- <http://www.reach.gov.sg>
 Singapore Government Information - <http://www.gov.sg/>
 SPRINTER - <http://www.sprinter.gov.sg/>
 Young PAP - <http://youngpapblog.blogspot.com/>

(8) Singapore Forums

Hardware Zone Current Affairs - <http://forums.hardwarezone.com/forumdisplay.php?f=17>
 Red Bean Forum - <http://www.redbeanforum.com>
 Roman Catholic Forums - <http://catholic.sgforums.com/>
 Sammyboy Coffeeshop Forums - <http://forums.delphiforums.com/sammyboymod/start>
 SG Forums Speakers' Corner - <http://politics.sgforums.com/>
 Soc.Culture.S'pore -

<http://groups.google.com/group/soc.culture.singapore/topics?hl=en>

S'pore Issues -

<http://www.findsingapore.net/forum/viewforum.php?f=2&sid=c4b8ce92202deaa19ab00a7f3189aa2f>

Young Pap Forum - <http://www.youngpap.org.sg/phpbb/>

(9) Socio-political Blogs

A Singapore Odyssey - <http://melvintansg.blogspot.com/>

Asia Youth Media - <http://sinazen.com/home>

Balderdash - <http://gssq.blogspot.com/>

Catholic Writings - <http://catholicwriter.wordpress.com/>

Dansong - <http://dansong.blogspot.com/>

Diary of a Singaporean Mind - <http://singaporemind.blogspot.com/>

Disgruntled Singaporeans - <http://disgruntledsporean.blogspot.com/>

Hear ye! Hear ye! - <http://aaron-ng.info/blog/>

Heavenly Sword - <http://heavenly-sword.blogspot.com/>

I-Speak (inactive since Feb 2007 but still worth reading) - <http://i-speak.blogdrive.com/>

J.B. Jeyaretnam's Blog - <http://blog.jbjeya.org/>

Mollymeek - <http://mollymeek.livejournal.com/>

Mr Wang Says So - <http://mrwangsaysso.blogspot.com/>

Mr Brown - <http://www.mrbrown.com/>

My Singapore News - <http://mysingaporenews.blogspot.com/>

NofearSingapore - <http://nofearsingapore.blogspot.com/>

Post Hoc, Ergo Propter Hoc - <http://noself.blogspot.com/>

Ringisei - <http://ringisei.wordpress.com/>

Singabloodypore - <http://singabloodypore.rsfblog.org/>

Singaland - <http://singaland.blogspot.com/>

Singapore Alternatives - <http://singaporealternatives.blogspot.com/>

Singapore Election Watch - <http://singaporeelection.blogspot.com/>

Singapore Kopi Tok - <http://singaporekopitok.blogspot.com/>

Singapore Patriot - <http://singaporepatriot.blogspot.com/>

Singapore Politics - <http://singaporegovt.blogspot.com/>

Singapore Rebel - <http://singaporerebel.blogspot.com/>

Singapore: New Media, Politics and the Law - <http://singaporemedia.blogspot.com/>

Sze Meng - <http://szemeng.blogspot.com/>

The Anti Neo-Democracy Theorist - <http://antineodem.wordpress.com/>

The Kentang - <http://thekentang.blogspot.com/>

The Kway Teow Man - <http://kwayteowman.blogspot.com/>

The Legal Janitor - <http://shianux.jiyuuu.org/>

The Moley Prophet - <http://sovietmole.com/>

The Police State - <http://thepolicestate.blogspot.com/>

The Young Republic - <http://youngrepublic.blogspot.com/>

Winter is Coming - <http://nedstark.wordpress.com/>

Words of the Lionheart - <http://leounheort.blogspot.com/>

Xeno Boy - <http://xenoboysg.blogspot.com/>

Zuco's Blog - <http://blog.gerek.org/zuco.php>

(10) Blogs of Professional Politicians and their Fans

Yaw Shin Leong (WP) <http://yawshinleong.blogspot.com/>

Beyond SG (for George Yeo of PAP) - <http://beyondsg.typepad.com/>

A Writers' Blog (for George Yeo of PAP) - <http://ephraim.blogspot.com/>

Siew Kum Hong (NMP) - <http://siewkumhong.blogspot.com/>
Abdul Salim (WP) - <http://salemboy81.blogs.friendster.com/>
Hammersphere (WP) - <http://hammersphere.wordpress.com/>

Appendix C

Penal Code (Cap. 224, 1985 Rev. Ed. Sing.)

Section 377 - Unnatural offences

Whoever has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animals, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 10 years, and shall also be liable to fine.

Explanation: Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section.

Section 377A - Outrages on decency

Any male person, who in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years.