

Information Technology as a Tool for Control in Singapore

By James Gomez

Singapore has often been mentioned as a successful model of industrial and technological development, which over a relatively short space of time has resulted in a considerable improvement in the standard of living of the population. This has not, however, happened without a price being paid, as many commentators have observed. Amongst other concerns are the restrictions that have been placed on civil liberties, particularly on rights to freedom of speech and access to government information. In this area, the situation in Singapore – and, to a lesser degree, Malaysia – presents a stark contrast to that of the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia.

In his contribution, James Gomez shows that in Singapore, contrary to the norm, a highly developed IT and telecommunications network has not led to greater freedom of information. The government has managed to limit the opportunities that the Internet offers for exchange of views and information nationally and internationally, and has also created various difficulties for individuals trying to create personal websites.

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There is perhaps no arena more suited to freewheeling discussions and unfettered discourse than the Internet. In many countries, the Net has been used to provide information that would otherwise be unavailable to the locals and has even contributed to the downfall of some repressive governments. In Singapore, which has the most extensive information infrastructure in Southeast Asia – if not the world – many people have revelled in the wealth of data that can be found on the Net and the usefulness of such in their daily lives. Yet unlike in other countries, the Internet has yet to become a tool to help bring about political reforms in the tiny city-state of Singapore. More than anything, in fact, the People's Action Party (PAP), which has ruled Singapore for more than 40 years now, has turned information technology into a tool for control.

This has become more so since 11 September, which triggered calls by re-

gimes around the world for greater surveillance of the Internet as part of global counter-terrorist measures. International authorities believe those behind the 9-11 attacks in the United States had successfully used the Net to help plan and coordinate their activities, as well as to propagate their cause. Southeast Asian governments thus speak even more frequently of cybersecurity and cyberthreats even as they enact new national security laws that allow the state to intrude in many areas of privacy.

That the PAP put the Net under tighter control after 11 September did not come as a surprise to Singaporeans. A month before, the government had already begun imposing added restrictions on Net usage as part of its preparations for the general elections. And years before that, the PAP government had already been quick to suppress any use of information technology (IT) for political ends. Thus, even though the government has provided the infrastructure for widespread Internet use, Singaporeans remain nervous and wary of using the Net to widen their democratic space, thereby limiting its potential for political liberalisation. To be sure, technology's democratic features come alive only when people are willing to use it for such purposes, and only when they are able to believe that any gains they make far outweigh the risks they will have to face in doing so. In Singapore, however, years of strict regulations and punitive actions taken by the PAP against political opponents and critics, including members of civil society and academics, have made self-censorship almost a reflex reaction.

This is the issue that observers and commentators must grapple with when they evaluate new communication technologies and politics in Singapore where advances in IT, infrastructural reach and a highly literate population have not been matched by expansion of political participation. Here is a country that prides itself on being technologically savvy but continues to be governed by a hegemonic regime that places restrictions on technology for use in communication whenever it feels its political position threatened. The ruling party claims it wants to run a government in which the people contribute to policy formulation, but it has made this hard to achieve, partly by its tightening grip on what could be a powerful democratic tool.

**Centralising power
and increasing
control**

Singapore used to be part of the Federation of Malaysia. Yet even when the PAP under Lee Kuan Yew managed self-government in 1959 and began to take political action against its opponents, there was free flow of information and no sign of any move towards centralised control.

When independence was achieved in 1965, the Barisan Socialis, a pro-communist party, split from the PAP, abandoned Parliament and took its struggle to the streets. This move paved the way for the PAP to take effective control of the country and clean up the political landscape through arrests and detentions and consolidation of power.

The mid-1960s to the 1990s saw the government under the PAP encroaching into every sector. In politics, it brought the grassroots organisations under its ambit and consolidated the political elite. A PAP MP or party member is at the apex of such grassroots structures, thus cementing the link between the party and mass-based organisations.

Similarly, trade unions were brought under the control of the government through arrests, intimidation, legislation and politicking. The party was thus able to penetrate every workplace and maintain effective control over the workers and their grievances, and prevent any kind of political mobilisation. By introducing legislation and penalties, the party has also reduced the ability of local and foreign press to comment freely on local politics. Controls have effectively been placed on all aspects of information flow.

Within Parliament, freedom of speech was eroded by amendments to the Parliamentary Act of 1986. Using libel laws, the ruling government has brought numerous lawsuits against its political opponents, who have been detained without trial. Invariably, it is the 'moral angle', i.e. questioning of their moral character, that is used to put them down.

Legislation and rhetoric have also been used to keep distinct religious, social and cultural groups out of politics. This is to stop any alternative grassroots base from forming outside the government's controlled network. There have been attempts as well to foster a certain kind of political culture through ideological means. The idea of 'Asian values' was widely promoted to advocate non-adversarial politics and denounce liberal democracy as alien to Eastern culture.

What Singapore has then is an overarching regime that watches everything and overwhelms those who want to experiment. One result has been a prevalence of self-censorship, with people modifying their political opinions or refraining from expressing them altogether, especially when these are against the PAP. Self-censorship also operates through the censorship of others. Someone, for example, may call attention to another person or group expressing alternative political remarks or actions. Then follow alerts to colleagues, friends and family that something is amiss.

Still, in 1999, it seemed that measures towards central control were starting to take a different turn. This was when the government published the Singapore 21 Report as the codification of the people's aspirations for the millennium. Essentially, the theme was that everyone mattered. Yet while the Report proposed development and openness in many areas of the economy and society, it made no clear statement on politics. It also soon became apparent that attempts to liberalise structurally were almost simultaneously negated by the enactment of restraining measures.

So when the PAP government announced in 2002 that it was setting up the 'Remaking Singapore' and Economic Review Committees to review strategies in the 21st century, sceptics were many, and even included some members of these bodies. After all, experience has shown that changes that may eventually affect the PAP's stranglehold on power would always be rejected.

The intelligent island

There is no denying, however, that the PAP government has pulled out all the stops to wire up the entire country as a response to the IT revolution. Under the Singapore IT2000 Master Plan, the ruling party aims to transform the country into 'an intelligent island where IT is exploited to the fullest to enhance the quality of life of the population at home, work and play'. The PAP government's Singapore ONE network is nothing less than a national initiative to deliver 'a new level of interactive, multimedia applications and services to homes, businesses and schools throughout Singapore' (www.s-one.gov.sg).

In 1994, a new company called Singapore Cable Vision (SCV) took up the government's challenge to help transform the nation into an intelligent city and usher in a whole new information age. It built a hybrid-fibre coaxial network that made possible a convergence of the broadcast, IT and telecommunications industries. Today SCV offers high-speed Internet access through TV, PC, telecommuting, videoconferencing and telephony, among other services.

As a result of all these, the 1990s saw an explosion in the number of Internet users in the country. Despite the economic slowdown in the region following the Asian Crisis in 1997 and then the events of 11 September in 2001, Singapore continues to see a healthy Net growth. From 1988 to 2000, computer ownership among Singaporeans grew from 11 to 66.1 per cent. Half of Singaporean households now have Internet access (www.ida.gov.sg).

The National Internet Advisory Committee placed the number of Web users in 1999 at 800,000, but by the next year, the figure had risen to 2.2 million. There has also been a significant growth in the number of websites registered with the Singapore Network Information Centre, which administers the Internet domain name space for .sg top-level domain – from 900 sites in 1996 to more than 17,200 in early 2001 (www.sba.gov.sg). Broadband growth has been particularly robust, with the number of broadband users reaching 450,000 in 2001 (www.sba.gov.sg).

Aiding the rapid development of the information highway in Singapore is its high literacy rate. Most citizens hold average or above-average educational qualifications, which means they receive secondary or both secondary and tertiary education.

Singaporean Net users tend to fall within the age bracket of 20–40 years and are educated to post-secondary level. Often they live in the larger public housing units (flats with four or more rooms) or in private apartments, indicating their middle-class status (Survey on Infocomm Usage in Households 2000, www.ida.gov.sg).

But there is among most Singaporeans an unmistakable culture of and desire for continual education, which is supported by state policies aimed at technology training and bridging the digital divide. Community centres and other outreach institutions, for instance, offer cheap computer courses for adults.

All wired up

Apart from Internet connectivity, there is the high penetration of mobile phones and pagers. By late 2001, the number of mobile-phone users stood at 2.8 million (www.ida.gov.sg). The mobile phone penetration rate rose from 13.6 percent (400,000 subscribers) in 1997, when tracking of subscribers first commenced, to 69 percent (2.8 million subscribers) in November 2001 (Statistics for Telecom Services, www.ida.gov.sg).

This has resulted in a corresponding increase in the use of Short Messaging Services (SMS) or text messaging. Phone firms use SMS to send product and service promotions. Other businesses engage the services of broadcasting agents to do the same, while small firms use text to communicate directly with their customers. This increase in the usage of SMS is in part dictated by the lower mobile phone charges. It has also placed the country second only to the Philippines in terms of text usage, although SMS have not been used for political causes in Singapore as they have in the Philippines.

Taken together, the Internet, high connectivity, new telecommunication devices and enviable IT literacy have given people-to-people communication in Singapore a new momentum. At the same time, the development of the Internet into the choice medium for information dissemination has led to talk of e-government. In a report titled 'The Singapore e-government Action Plan', the government spelled out its objectives and budgeted '\$1.5 billion for infocomm initiatives in the public sector over the next three years'. Through this initiative, it stated, 'citizens will be able to access more and more public services, delivered online, any time, anywhere'. The report added: 'Systems and services must be delivered at "Internet speed" and continuously fine-tuned to respond to customer needs and feedback.'

Of several strategic programmes to achieve this vision, two aspects are relevant to access to information: the Electronic Services Delivery (ESD) and the Operational Efficiency Improvement (OEI). ESD is designed to gear all 'public services which are suitable for electronic delivery or can tap electronic channels to improve service delivery' to be re-engineered accordingly, while OEI is supposed to ensure that 'up-to-date hardware, work engines and data processing form the backbone of an efficient and effective public sector' (www.egov.gov.sg). So far, Singaporeans have been able to pay taxes online and download general data from the respective websites of government bodies.

But this wiring-up of government institutions and the bureaucracy has a two-tiered outcome. At one level, it allows information-sharing among state agencies and departments. Such sharing is done internally or within the ministries and departments themselves, as well as externally or between two or more agencies or departments.

At another level, IT has allowed such a coordinated approach to track citizens with greater efficiency and scrutiny. It can be said, for example, that a Singaporean is 'monitored' from birth, since each birth certificate comes with a number on it that is used eventually as the number on an Identification Card (IC). These ICs have bar codes, and all relevant information about the individual is stored on it, such as health records, driving offences and even records of checking books out of the library. With IT's arrival, the ICs have also become more integrated in the various state agencies. For example, if someone changes the residential address recorded on his or her IC, all major government agencies can be notified about the change simultaneously.

But to expect that IT would allow citizens similar ease in extracting infor-

mation – other than general data – from the government is not realistic in a nation without a law guaranteeing a free press and free expression. And much like its other legislation, Singapore's laws regarding the Net only hinder public access to information and promote a culture of non-disclosure.

These Internet laws came into force as early as 1996, under the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) Act (Cap. 297). Section 3–4, for instance, states: 'An Internet Content Provider shall deny access to material considered by the Authority to be prohibited material if directed to do so by the Authority.' Definitions of prohibited materials are mostly in the sphere of sexually explicit content. But Section 1(g) of prohibited materials also states that the tone of the factors to be taken account is 'whether the material glorifies, incites or endorses ethnic, racial or religious hatred, strife or intolerance'. These and the Act's other aspects thus require websites to register with the authorities if they contain material on sensitive subjects such as religion and politics.

Of course, though, in a country where most professionals, intellectuals and academics are linked closely to the state in one way or another, many find it hard to break out of the self-censorship mode and contribute actively and openly to supporting political pluralism through the use of IT. Only a few do, and they are usually independently employed. But even they find their attempts to use email or SMS to send out alternative political information thwarted, usually eliciting responses like 'Take me off your mailing list' or 'Don't send me any more messages'.

Going solo on the Net

The author's own experience in setting up a personal website is illustrative of the seeming omnipresence of the country's authorities, even in cyberspace. In August 2001, the author decided to set up an individual website and an accompanying mailing list. To this end, a personal database of about 2,000 addresses that arose from the author's first year as sole proprietor of the Think Centre – an NGO dedicated to promoting political awareness and freedom of expression – was set up with Yahoo eGroup as JamesGomezNews. After some technical adjustments, a single test and welcome message was sent to the list. Next, a personalised domain name, www.jamesgomeznews.com, was acquired.

Personal websites are at a very low stage of development in Singapore, with the few maintained by Singaporeans usually found at free web host servers and belonging to young people who post information about them-

selves and upload pictures of friends. A handful set up by more mature individuals may include some data regarding their respective families. But individual websites belonging to writers, artists and politicians are almost non-existent. The author's aim in setting up a personal website was to pioneer communications in this direction.

Within days of the author's acquisition of a domain name, however, the Minister of Home Affairs was bringing up in Parliament the matter of how this author was setting up a new website. This prompted the author to send an email to the ministry, seeking clarification on what the minister had meant by a 'new website', since there had yet to be a public announcement of any plans by the author to set up a website. At the time, only two other people had known of such plans: the author's publicist and a website designer, neither of whom had any contact with each other. All the author had done at that stage was to set up the mailing list at yahoogroups and send out a welcome message. In effect, the mailing list was yet to be put to use.

The response from the Ministry of Home Affairs to the author's email query was quite interesting. The reply came in the form of a statement, which said that what the minister was referring to was the mailing list. It said the list showed why legislation was needed to control it. The statement, signed by a civil servant, also suggested that the mailing list had somehow been misappropriated from the Think Centre, hinting at some kind of wrongdoing. The civil servant referred to numbers, noting, 'JamesGomezNews, for instance, was only created on 2 Aug 2001 but almost immediately claimed a mailing list of 2,251 members'.

The author's publicist replied, 'It seems interesting to note that the desk officers of the Ministry of Home Affairs are keeping abreast of James Gomez's activities. Could it be possible that this new law be called the "James Gomez' law"?''

Details of this exchange were reported in the local press and had the bonus outcome of more people signing up for the JamesGomezNews mailing list!

In the meantime, the author offered ministry officials full access to the mailing list so that they could dissect and examine what they thought was wrong. He also invited them to discuss the issue of the mailing list and the accompanying legislation that the government was at that time introducing to control it. The Ministry of Home Affairs, however, did not take up the offer.

But the mailing list would be withdrawn from public domain later, when the PAP introduced regulations for mass emailing. Keeping it there would have left the author vulnerable to attack, given the ambiguity in what were then the latest in Singapore's regulations for the Net.

It is still not clear to what extent the PAP government will legislate to include individual and private communication as political campaign tools. But it is almost predictable that the civil servants given the task of policing the Net would be the first to appropriate information on personal websites to determine the boundaries of usage. And they would be likely once again to make a clinical distinction between communication and political communication. That would be the telling-point in the development of people-to-people communication in Singapore.

Electing to shut up

Despite all the obstacles put in its way, though, the Internet has managed to sow the seed of transparency in Singapore and has been used to highlight several kinds of issues. A new space has become available where government discrepancies and lapses, complaints against it and alternative viewpoints can be made public. These have not, to say the least, amused the authorities, who have made their displeasure known in various ways to those deemed to be crossing the line. Citizens are also constantly reminded that the Ministry of Home Affairs has the capacity to scan email accounts and polices every area of space for political expression.

By the time terrorists were crashing planes into the Pentagon and the World Trade Towers an ocean away, the PAP, as part of its preparations for a sure-fire victory at an upcoming general election, had already introduced even more legislation to curb political activities on the Internet. The events of 11 September, however, apparently provided a good excuse for an even stronger clampdown.

In August 2001, Parliament had legislated amendments to the Parliamentary Elections Act (PEA) to regulate political parties, candidates and groups hosting websites that discuss local politics and requiring them to register with the SBA. The amendments regulate any material thought to promote any candidate or party, even if it does not mention them by name. The producer of any election advertising in print or online is required to be identified, as well as the person for whom the advertising is being done. Moreover, opinion polls in the days leading up to elections and exit polls before the release of election results cannot be published. The penalties

awaiting those violating these regulations include a fine and a jail term of up to a year.

The latest Net regulations also hold website owners and editors accountable for what surfers post on the online fora. Given the nature of the Net, most postings cannot be controlled. In Singapore, these are also often anonymous. But these considerations were apparently lost on those who drew up the PEA amendments. In truth, there is no guarantee of freedom from prosecution even if, in an entire year, there was only one posting that contravened the law.

In addition, non-party political websites are now effectively prevented from monitoring the campaign or covering the election. This is because of the extremely broad rule in the PEA amendments that such websites are prohibited from carrying information that ‘constitute campaigning for any political party or candidate’. Also covered by this prohibition are mailing lists and SMS. According to the Parliamentary Elections Act, “publish” means make available to the general public, or any section thereof, in whatever form and by whatever means, including broadcasting (by wireless telegraphy or otherwise) and transmitting on what is commonly known as the Internet....’ (Parliamentary Elections Act, Chapter 218)

In the run-up to passing the amendments, one website, Sintercom, was asked to register; it refused, and instead decided to cease operations. After the passage of the PEA additions, the Think Centre, which maintains a website, withdrew its online forum in protest. It said it disagreed with the amendments, which had been brought before Parliament without consulting all groups concerned.

But that may have made the Centre a more noticeable blip in the election department’s radar. The ambiguity and restrictiveness of the legislation had resulted in non-party political sites like the Think Centre having to guess which articles the department would frown on. The Centre chose to remove hyperlinks to sites campaigning for a political candidate or party. But later the elections department threatened the Centre and several opposition political parties with legal action if they did not remove articles that could be construed as ‘election advertising’ from their respective websites. And days after receiving its first faxed admonition from the department, the Think Centre received another letter threatening prosecution for the non-removal of an article written by a Singapore Democratic Party youth wing member.

The second letter at the very least shows the amount of resources and the level of scrutiny that the PAP directs, through the civil service, towards website monitoring. Yet it should be noted as well that in many countries, putting up election watch reports, analysis and general reportage by web portals are the norm. In Singapore, this has been made illegal.

The case of the 'madman'

Just how serious the PAP was in ensuring a decisive victory in the 3 November 2001 polls, or how it dealt with those that got in its way, could not have escaped Robert Ho Chong, a retired journalist. But the 51-year-old, who used to work for the Singapore Press Holdings, somehow still thought it was worth posting on the Net the allegation that ruling party stalwarts led by Premier Goh Chok Tong and Deputy Premier Lee Hsien Loong had broken the law in the 1997 elections by visiting polling places without authority. 'Thus', wrote Ho, 'I would encourage all good Singaporeans, who feel indignant about this breach of the law and the subsequent obstruction of justice, to break the same law'.

The police found Ho's opinion piece on 24 October 2001, five days after he had posted it from home at an Internet newsgroup (soc.culture.singapore) and a website (Singaporeans for Democracy). On 16 November, they arrested Ho for allegedly posting inflammatory articles online during the election period. The authorities said what Ho had done could be classified as an attempt to incite violence or disobedience to the law that could lead to a breach of peace. He was then remanded to the Singapore Institute of Mental Health. The next month, Ho was acquitted after a psychiatric report said he was suffering from paranoia and would need long-term treatment.

Ho's case was a very public demonstration of how psychiatric facilities could be used to detain suspects. It also marked the first time Singapore had someone charged criminally for sending an email and posting a story at a website.

Muslims lose a cybervoice

The 'madman' incident, however, would not be the last time someone would get into trouble in Singapore because of something he or she had said online. Since then, in fact, there has been even stricter policing of the Net, with authorities pointing to 11 September and the terrorist threat in Southeast Asia as the primary reason. After 9–11, members of Singapore's Muslim community also felt themselves being more closely scrutinised. By early 2002, 13 Muslim activists found themselves in detention without trial; as of the time of writing, 21 more have been hauled in by the Internal

Security Department, which alleges that the activists actually belong to the Jemaah Islamiah, a militant network that is said to be connected with Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda.

Following the first batch of arrests in December 2001, the local media used words such as 'terrorists', 'militants' and 'extremists' to describe those being held by the authorities. The Singaporean media reported everything that so-called 'intelligence sources' revealed without ever questioning such information. Until now, there has been no attempt by the PAP administration or the local media to try to understand the motives of those detained and review the necessary policies.

As it is, Muslims in Singapore often feel that their concerns are not given due consideration. They have also been told repeatedly that they are not trustworthy, and are slow and backward. It was thus almost expected that Fateha.com would step forward to give a voice to the island republic's Muslims who were feeling more and more under siege. At the time, the Fateha website was not even a year old, having been started only in June 2001 in response to the mainstream media's seeming lack of interest in Muslim concerns and issues.

Fateha.com, however, traces its origins to an email discussion group known as Cyber Ummah set up by the Muslim Scholars and Teachers Association of Singapore (also known as PERGAS). Apart from participating in the discussion group on various issues such as the Compulsory Education Act and its impact on *madrrasah* (Islamic schools), Fateha members were also campaigning actively for the use of headscarves by Muslim girls in national schools. This had been prohibited by the education ministry, the authorities arguing that for girls to wear the *hijab* in national schools would impede national integration. Such an argument interprets a parent's desire to send a daughter to school wearing a *hijab* as a deliberate act that threatens racial and religious harmony by placing a particular community's interests above national interests.

By early 2002, Fateha.com was tackling more controversial issues. For one, it asked that the detained Muslim activists be given their day in court once and for all. But it also expressed sympathy for bin Laden and opposed Singapore's support for the US-led war against terrorism.

It was only a short time before Fateha and its head, Zulfikar Mohamad Shariff, were being roundly criticised by the ruling PAP and its supporters, specifically for questioning the government's support for the US-led war.

Soon after, it was announced that Fateha's homepage was to be registered as a political website. It was also made public that the authorities had been closely monitoring Fateha for quite a while.

Seven Fateha members then made a noisy exit from the group (reportedly as a result of some pressure). They claimed that statements made by Zulfikar were political in nature and that they wanted no part of these. Zulfikar came under more heat, prompting him to resign as Fateha chief.

As these events were taking place, three Muslim Singaporean schoolgirls were suspended while another was withdrawn by her parents from her school. The issue for all four: their schools' refusal to let them wear their headscarves. The local media reported that Zulfikar was supporting the decision of the girls' parents to take the matter to court and that he was trying to engage a well-known Malaysian constitutional lawyer, Karpal Singh, as lead counsel to represent the parents and the students. PAP leaders reacted by saying foreigners should not be involved in the matter.

Karpal Singh applied to work as a 'lawyer and consultant on constitutional matters' in a Singapore law firm that had been handling the families' case. But the Ministry of Manpower rejected his applications for a work permit, saying it had 'grounds to conclude that his motive [was] to intervene in Singapore's internal affairs'. Some reports also maintained that the girls' parents were being intimidated to force them to withdraw their suit; one family has already moved to Australia.

While this was unfolding, the attorney general last June initiated a criminal defamation investigation against Fateha and Zulfikar over three articles posted on the Fateha website. Two of these were on Muslim affairs, one article entitled 'Is Yaacob Ibrahim a hypocrite?', to the Muslim affairs minister. The other was called, 'The real reason for forcing girls to remove *hijab*'. The third was a piece about the appointment of Ho Ching, wife of Deputy Premier Lee Hsien Loong, as head of the powerful state investment arm, Temasek Holdings.

The authorities seized a computer from Zulfikar's home and questioned him at the police station. Zulfikar then filed a countersuit for criminal defamation against Premier Goh, Deputy Premier Lee and Senior Parliamentary Secretary Yatiman Yusof.

Singapore laws say that those found guilty of criminal defamation stand to serve a maximum jail term of two years, a fine or both. According to the

police, though, Zulfikar's complaint against the three PAP politicians 'does not contain sufficient facts on which police can act'.

In contrast, investigations of Zulfikar are still in progress. The ex-Fateha chief has since fled to Australia. He was reported as saying, 'Looking at the history of the Singapore courts and the court chambers, I do not have that confidence that they are independent or can act fairly.'

Busting Bloomberg

Police have been mum on Zulfikar's case since he left Singapore. But the authorities remain relentless about going after perceived troublemakers in cyberspace.

In August 2002, for instance, news and information provider Bloomberg LP agreed to pay libel damages and costs totalling S\$595,000 (US\$340,000) to Singapore's top three government officials – Premier Goh, Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his son Deputy Premier Lee Hsien Loong – for a column that appeared in its online service. Bloomberg, a New York-based company that grew from an investment service to a global provider of financial news, had also apologised earlier for the piece written by part-time columnist Patrick Smith.

Much like Fateha, Smith had taken note of the appointment of Ho Ching as executive director of the state investment agency Temasek, highlighting her being the wife of the deputy premier – who also happened to be the finance minister and central bank head. In fact, Smith was merely echoing the sentiment on the ground, which leaned towards a more open process of appointment. Such sentiments, though, were absent in the mainstream media, which appear addicted to PAP-aligned journalism. Some journalists have also admitted in private that they have been given directions to portray issues from the ruling party's viewpoint, and that editors are usually swift in killing stories that authorities may deem offensive or questionable.

By publishing Smith's pieces on Ho Ching, Bloomberg brought the issue out in the open and made it a subject for public debate. That Bloomberg fell into the libel trap for doing so is typical of how Singapore's media, even the online media, can be 'unfree'. That it paid to get out of the trap is also an example of the electronic media's willingness to compromise the practice of journalism for global access.

Indeed, *The Australian* reported that Bloomberg Chief Editor Matthew Winkler wrote in a memo to his staff after the settlement that the furore

over the column put 'at risk' the welfare of Bloomberg's 180 employees in Singapore, its regional headquarters. He also expressed concern about losing Bloomberg's 3,000-odd Singapore customers.

PAP goes the Net

Singapore's ruling party has raised the stakes for those who wish to use the Net for the purposes for which it was envisaged: to champion free speech and free expression. And by making the operators of sites such as Think Centre and Fateha.com liable for political speech contained within their chat rooms and mailing lists, the government has essentially made equals of major media organs and smaller operators. Thus, those who do not have large corporate resources must now assume risks that are more at the level of groups or firms with such resources. This restricts the capacity of operators like Think Centre or Fateha to function freely. Unfortunately, even major players such as Bloomberg have proved to be unwilling to take on the PAP regime.

Personal websites remain an area of outreach that will take the use of communication technology in Singapore one step further. But recent developments only show the high levels of risks that individual operators of such sites would have to face and overcome. This has perpetrated a situation in which any free speech on the Net is almost always anonymous and restricted mainly to email discussion groups and at websites hosted overseas. By creating such an environment, Singapore runs the risks of pushing undesirable elements even further into cyberspace, as in the case of the Harimau organisation, which shares some of the objectives of the militant Jemaah Islamiah.

Consider what Harimau has posted on its website: an ad for young men to sign up for training as 'field operatives'. It wants physically fit men aged 19–35 for nine months of basic training before being 'assigned to Harimau linked groups located in various countries'. Agence France-Presse reported that Harimau.org has a registered address in Johor, the southern Malaysian state close to Singapore, but its email address is Indonesian.

Given the PAP's history of policy-making, the stage has been set for the restriction of cyberliberties. It is yet another chapter in the saga of Singapore as a police state, but this time with possibly disastrous consequences for Singaporeans.