Politics, the Net and Gender in Singapore

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Abstract

This article explores the connections between the internet, politics and gender in Singapore, a nation which has one of the highest rates of computer use and internet connectivity in the world. It examines the nature and effectiveness of government regulation of access to the web, and the effects of Singaporeans' avid adoption of the internet on the conduct of politics in the island state. Despite the generally authoritarian approach of the government to the media and the imposition of some controls over the net, the internet has provided the means for the development of an alternative political discourse, challenging to both the one-party state and the patriarchal society. While acknowledging the problems of restrictive defamation laws and other official controls, as well as the issue of self-censorship by users, it is argued that the internet shows strong potential for contributing to the democratization of Singaporean politics and to raising the profile of issues of gender relations and gender equity.

Keywords: internet, politics, Singapore, gender, democracy

Introduction

Singapore is generally acknowledged to be one of the most technologically advanced and highly networked societies in the world, with intentions to develop information and communications technologies even further over the next decade.

This article examines the interrelationships between the internet, politics and gender in Singapore. It begins by outlining the context, documenting the swift adoption of the internet by the population, especially by young Singaporeans.

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Attempts by the Singaporean government to regulate its use, especially in political contexts, are canvassed. Despite some regulation imposed by government and self-censorship by users, the internet has played an increasingly prominent role in recent political activity in the island state. Within this context it is shown that the use of modern communications technologies has allowed gender issues to be given a higher political profile in Singapore. Examples of e-activism, especially by women, are discussed. The article addresses the question of whether increasing use of the net as a technique of political activity can contribute to democratization and, more generally, to an opening up of Singaporean society, particularly regarding matters of gender relations. It is argued that, despite the hazards of official regulation and self-censorship, the internet offers significant potential for fostering democratic freedom and promoting social and gender equity.

1. Adoption of the Internet

The advent of the internet in Singapore can be dated to 1994, when a public internet service was launched. By 1995 2.8% of the population were internet users. This grew rapidly to 32.4% in the five years to 2000, at which time Singapore was ranked 18th in the world with a total of 1,200,000 users. By 2002 Singapore had passed the milestone of 50% of the population online. In September 2005 there were 2,421,800 internet users out of a population of 4,425,720. There are over 60 personal computers in use per 100 people (Global Virtual University, 2006). In addition to personal computers, the internet became accessible from the growing number of cyber cafes that sprang up across the city. The government also established internet clubs at several state-sponsored community centres. Significantly, Singapore was an early adopter of broadband technology. Benefiting from strong cooperation between government and industry, there are now hundreds of broadband access points in Singapore – in homes, offices, educational institutions and internet cafes.

Therefore Singapore is characterized by a high rate of internet connectivity, especially compared to most other nations in the Asian region. In 2005 Singapore was listed first among a short-list of the 'five most wired nations in the world,' taking into account such variables as internet connections, the e-business climate, technology infrastructure and the policy environment (Rane, 2005).

A survey in 2001 found that computer ownership and access to the internet was much the same across the three main ethnic groups in multiethnic Singapore – the Chinese, Malays and Indians (Dawson, 2001).

42% of internet users in Singapore are female, so there is a gender divide, though not an especially marked one. However, it is worth noting that there is a significant generation divide in active use of the internet, with only about 46% of adults online compared to 71% of local Singaporean students (Kuo, 2002). Moreover, compared to the older generation, Singaporean youth also make more extensive and sophisticated use of a range of internet functions, including downloading movies, music and graphics, online gaming and other multi-media tools. As in other countries, considerable media attention has been given to the phenomenon of internet addiction, an affliction said to be suffered especially by Singaporean youth.

2. Regulation of the Net: A Brief History

By the 1990s, when the internet arrived in Singapore, the government of Singapore had already established a formidable reputation for strict censorship of traditional print and broadcast media (George, 2000). How, then, would it greet the advent of the new information and communications technology? One commentator rightly described the internet as 'a nightmare scenario of every government censor' because it has 'no physical existence and recognizes no national barriers' (Cole, 1996: p. 8). Would the Singaporean government attempt to exert the same degree of control over the internet as it had succeeded in imposing on other media? And what effective means were at its disposal?

Perhaps surprisingly, from the early days of public internet access, the Singaporean government proclaimed that it did not intend to 'over-regulate' the internet. Significantly, awareness of the economic potential of the internet induced the authorities to opt for a 'lighter' touch in managing the new technology. The government recognized that the internet would be a key tool for transforming Singapore into an internationally competitive information hub, a strategy they identified as the basis for economic growth in the 21st century. There was also another factor at work. The initial response of the Singapore authorities to the arrival of the internet was indicated by comments made by Lee Kuan Yew, then Senior Minister following his resignation as Prime Minister in 1990. Lee expressed the opinion that the 'top three to five percent of a society can handle this free-for-all, this clash of ideas;' on the other hand, for the majority of the population such access to diverse ideas would be socially and politically destabilising (Gardels, 1996).

This was a reflection of Lee's intellectual elitism, which had already been clearly expressed on other political issues as well (Doran, 1996: p. 157). At first, then, the Singaporean government took the position that access to the internet would be restricted to a social elite and that its political impact would therefore be contained.

From 1995 the Singapore Broadcasting Authority (SBA) was empowered to regulate internet content and manage Singapore's internet policy. In 2003 this task was transferred to the Media Development Authority (MDA) following the legislation of the Media Development Authority of Singapore Act. The approach of the MDA to internet regulation continued the 'light touch' and 'maximum flexibility' approach previously pursued by the SBA:

MDA fully supports the development of the Internet and oversees the regulation of Internet content in Singapore. In regulating the Internet, MDA adopts a balanced and light-touch approach to ensure that minimum standards are set for the responsible use of the Internet while giving maximum flexibility to the industry players to operate. MDA also encourages industry self-regulation and public education efforts to complement its light-touch regulatory approach (MDA, 2006). According to the authorities, the internet is lightly regulated to protect national unity and social values by means of the prohibition of offensive content, especially pornography and material which might incite ethnic or religious conflict.

Under Singapore's Broadcasting Act, internet services are provided by three major Internet Service Providers (ISPs): SingTel's SingNet, StarHub and Pacific Internet. These ISPs are subject to regulation by the Media Development Authority to block websites containing material that might be a threat to public security, national defence, racial and religious harmony and public morality. Under the Broadcasting Act, ISPs and those with websites posting political or religious content are required to register with the MDA under a class licence scheme. Both service and content providers must comply with an Internet Code of Practice.

From the beginning government controls over the internet concentrated on curbing the proliferation of pornography. In 1998 the SBA announced that a list had been compiled of 100 mainly pornographic websites, access to which would be blocked via the proxy servers of the three main government-controlled public Internet Service Providers. The list itself was not made public. This move gained publicity all over the world as it was the first example of official block censorship of the internet.

Rejecting widespread criticism of the policy as authoritarian, the SBA justified the ban as an effort to align internet content with the moral core of Singapore's 'Asian values.'

It is notable that despite these early efforts to monitor subscribers' access to pornographic materials, access to a wide range of political sources was not restricted. These included, for instance, reports from Amnesty International that were critical of the human rights record of the Singaporean government, and similar critical reports from the U.S. Department of State on human rights issues in Singapore. Soon the discussion group, soc.culture.singapore, emerged as of most concern to the government. This was an unmoderated discussion group, whose content was at times critical of government policies (Tan 1996). Yet the government did not attempt to block access, instead preferring to engage with criticism via the internet itself. Members of the ruling party, the People's Action Party (PAP), stressed the need for it to enter the fray and combat misinformation on the net about government policies. In particular, the PAP's youth branch, Young PAP, became regular contributors on soc.culture.singapore in the government interest.

In 2001 another popular discussion group, Sintercom, became the centre of regulatory attention. This group was founded in 1994 and soon became a focus for the growing civil society discourse in Singapore, which urged the government to allow the population greater freedom of expression. The website attracted candid commentary from both local and overseas Singaporeans on social and political issues in the city-state. In 2001 Tan Chong Kee, the founder and webmaster of the site, was suddenly served notice that he would have to seek registration for Sintercom as an internet site 'engaged in the propagation, promotion or discussion of political or religious issues relating to Singapore on the World Wide Web through the Internet.' Clause 4 of the Broadcasting (Class Licence) Notification requires the registration of all websites seeking to promote political or religious causes.

A month later Tan Chong Kee announced that the website would shut down, although he stated that this decision was not made as a result of SBA regulation.

There have been instances in Singapore of official intrusion and surveillance over individuals' use of the internet. In 1994 scans of users' email accounts were conducted on two occasions.

The authorities justified this in terms of searching for pornographic materials or computer viruses. As a result of protests from users, the government promised that such searches would not be repeated. However, in 1999 SingNet again conducted unannounced scanning of subscribers' web accounts. SingNet later issued a public apology, and the government announced that regulations on scanning would be introduced to protect users' privacy. More recently MDA has assured the public that it does not conduct file searching or online surveillance. Nevertheless, such examples of intrusion undoubtedly worried and intimidated many Singaporeans.

In Singapore the police have broad powers in the area of use of computers and the internet. In 1998 the government passed two major pieces of legislation dealing with computers and the net. The Computer Misuse Act gave the police wide-ranging powers to intercept messages online. The second law dealt with e-commerce and allowed the police to seize and search computers. In the wake of the Twin Towers attacks and the initiation of the 'war on terror,' and the interception of a terrorist plot by Jemaah Islamiah (JI) in Singapore in 2002, an amendment to the Computer Misuse Act in 2003 enabled the Home Affairs minister to authorize surveillance of internet activity and allowed for pre-emptive arrests to be made before an offence is committed. These powers are in line with potentially oppressive legislative changes adopted in many Western countries under the rationale of combating terrorism. In Singapore the opposition has accused the government of making use of these laws to monitor the internet activity of political dissidents. In September 2005, three people were arrested and charged with sedition for posting racist comments on the internet; two were sentenced to imprisonment.

Nevertheless, no one has ever been charged with violating SBA's or MDA's internet policy guidelines. On the whole, the Singaporean government can be seen to have taken a hands-off approach to the internet. This was, without doubt, largely driven by economic ambitions to develop Singapore as a global city and information hub.

3. Virtual Freedom

Today the MDA states that only 100 websites are now blocked. The list of banned sites is not publicly available, but the authorities claim that they are mainly pornographic. One of the best-known of the proscribed sites is www.playboy.com.

Access to the internet in Singapore is now virtually free. This excludes the 100 officially blocked sites. Censorship of the internet, even according to its harshest critics, is now only half-hearted. An independent test carried out by OpenNet Initiative in 2004-05 found 'extremely minimal' filtering of internet content in Singapore. Out of 1,632 sites tested, only eight were blocked. Six of those were pornographic sites, one was concerned with the use of illegal drugs (marijuana), and one with intolerant religious views (evangelical Christianity); and even these sites were not consistently blocked (OpenNet Initiative, 2005: p. 3).

Furthermore, there is now available on the internet a user's how-to guide to 'Defeating Singapore Internet Censorship' (2006). The guide sets out a couple of easy steps involving the setting up of a new proxy server address outside of Singapore, and changing one's browser's proxy setup. The guide offers specific instructions on making these changes. According to the guide, circumventing the regulations is possible because the government-controlled exchange does not check which proxy is in use. Users are able to exploit this loophole to access whatever sites they wish.

This is not to say that there are no other, more subtle, forms of control over use of the internet. The threat of harsh defamation laws and harsh judgments meted out by the judiciary in Singapore, is one significant form of restriction. A recent example of the use of defamation laws to intimidate internet users was that of Jiahoa Chen, a Singaporean studying at the University of Illinois, who was forced to shut down his blog, hosted on the university's server, under threat of a defamation suit from the Agency for Science, Technology, and Research, a state-funded Singaporean organization (OpenNet Initiative, 2005: p. 7).

These sorts of threats often lead to self-censorship by internet users, a subtle but significant form of government control which is hard to prove or pin down. As the OpenNet Initiative concluded in its assessment of Singapore's internet freedom:

Singapore's Internet content regulation depends primarily on access controls (such as requiring political sites to register for a license) and legal pressures (such as defamation lawsuits and the threat of imprisonment) to prevent people from posting objectionable content rather than technological methods to block it.

Compared with other countries that implement mandatory filtering regimes that ONI has studied closely, Singapore's technical filtering system is one of the most limited (OpenNet Initiative, 2005: p. 3).

In comparison with China, for example, where the government exerts intense scrutiny over political activity and commentary on the net, the people of Singapore enjoy relative freedom of internet use. The Chinese government has enforced a national firewall to block access to prohibited websites, while all messages in on-line chat-rooms are strictly censored.

It is notable that, on the whole, the government of Singapore has been forced by the exigencies of intense global competition to move in the unaccustomed direction of de-regulation in order to ensure Singapore's growing predominance in the field of IT&T (Information Technology and Telecommunications). A parallel can be drawn between the government's lightening up on regulation of the internet and Singapore's historic commitment to free trade as a propellant of economic growth. In the early nineteenth century Thomas Stamford Raffles, acknowledged as the founder of Singapore as a British colony, implemented the policy of free trade at the port, in contrast to the monopolistic trading policies of Britain's commercial rivals in the region, the Dutch. This led to a massive blossoming of trade at the port, rapidly rising prosperity, and a fast escalation of population as immigrants, especially from China, were attracted to the colony.

The entrepreneurial spirit of free enterprise on which the colony was founded, and on which the Singaporean government prides itself, represents a significant economic force impelling it towards greater openness and freedom of exchange, on the web as elsewhere. The dilemma for the Singaporean government has been to balance their commitment to competitive capitalism against the desire to maintain their grip on extensive political controls.

4. E-Politics and the Net

A key question in the field of the political significance of increased internet usage is: does it lead to democratization? Before considering this question in relation to Singapore, it is necessary to give a brief overview of the nature of the political system.

Since achieving independence from British colonial rule in 1965, Singapore's political scene has been dominated by one political party, the People's Action Party (PAP). Within that party, one man – Lee Kuan Yew – has exerted an outstanding, and continuing, influence over the development of Singaporean politics. Lee was Prime Minister from 1965 to 1990 (actually from 1959 when Singapore became self-governing), then called Senior Minister after retiring as PM in 1990, until being renamed Minister Mentor in 2004. Despite some of the outward trappings of democracy, in reality Singaporean politics has been a one-party system during the whole period since independence.

There is a consensus among political scientists that, despite its system of regular elections, Singapore does not meet the criteria for democracy. The political scientist Robert Dahl has stated that democracy exists when all citizens have unimpaired opportunities to formulate their political preferences and to make their preferences known. For this to happen, there need to be a number of other guaranteed freedoms: such as the freedom to form and join organizations; freedom of expression; rights of political leaders to compete for support; alternative sources of information; eligibility for public office; and free and fair elections (Dahl, 1989: p. 221). In various ways the Singapore government does not allow its citizens these guarantees. For example, on the rights of political leaders to compete for support, some of the tactics which the PAP government has used have included a systematic process of suing political opponents for libel or defamation after the elections, and with assistance from the courts demanding huge payouts from them. There has also been a process of pursuing political opponents through their jobs, families, assets, and so on. Examples include the sacking of Chee Soon Juan, a leader of the opposition Singapore Democratic Party, from his position in the psychology department at the National University of Singapore. Chee was the Secretary-General of the Singapore Democratic Party. He joined the party in 1992; three months later he lost his job as a lecturer in psychology at the NUS.

Another tactic has been to make the deposits which candidates for election have to forfeit if they are unsuccessful very high. As can be imagined given the obstacles and risks, there have only been a handful of opposition candidates since the 1960s. Regarding alternative sources of information, the PAP government exerts close control over the *Straits Times* newspaper and the television stations.

Magazines and newspapers that they have considered subversive at various times, including such radical publications as *Time*, the *Asian Wall Street Journal*, the *Far Eastern Economic Review* and *Asiaweek*, have at times been banned or their circulation severely restricted (Seow, 1998). Because of the continuing high degree of control over the print media, Reporters Without Borders ranked Singapore 146th out of 168 countries in its annual Worldwide Press Freedom Index for 2006 (Reporters Without Borders, 2006). In addition to media controls, legislation, in particular the Internal Security Act, allows the government to detain people without a trial; this has also been used to silence political opposition. In various ways the other guarantees of freedom identified by Robert Dahl have been undercut by Singaporean government policies.

Even before the widespread adoption of the internet throughout the world, IT (Information Technology) was being heralded for its potential to undermine authoritarian political controls and facilitate democratization. One writer identified IT as 'the greatest democratizer the world has ever seen' (Pitroda, 1993: p. 66). Even media mogul Rupert Murdoch declared that 'advances in the technology of communications have proved an unambiguous threat to totalitarian regimes everywhere' (Karp, 1993: p. 72). Samuel Huntington also emphasized the role of global communications networks in promoting democratic advances in the late twentieth century (Huntington, 1991: pp. 102-103). Other commentators wrote that the internet would enable 'democracy of a more participatory nature than at any time since the ancient Greeks' (Westley and Zinman, 1996). By creating new methods of political organization, by broadening the scope of public political discourse and debate, by allowing access to news sources and information previously restricted, and by encouraging individual political expression, the internet can change the conduct of politics under repressive regimes.

By 2000 there were more than 80 Singaporean websites offering alternative sources of information and political views. Thus in Singapore 'the internet has been a boon to contentious journalism' which challenges the dominant consensus promoted by the mainstream media (George, 2006: p. 183). Internet sites that have allowed and encouraged alternative political commentary include Sintercom Forum, Singapore Forum, and Singapore Daily.

Another site that presents challenging political ideas is the Think Centre, which describes itself as 'an independent, multi-partisan, political non-government organization (NGO).'

Founded in 1999, Think Centre aims at critical examination of political issues, with an emphasis on fostering civil society, human rights and democracy. Under the banner heading 'Towards a Vibrant Political Society,' Think Centre has an explicit objective of fostering a sense of duty to participate in national political processes. Among its departments are Human Rights Watch, Media Watch, Policy Watch, Labour Watch, Election Watch and ASEAN Watch (Think Centre, 2006). One of its strongest recent campaigns has been to raise awareness on the issue of capital punishment in Singapore. In addition to maintaining the web site, the Think Centre organizes events such as forums, debates and conferences, and sponsors publications. A notable publication was *Internet Politics: Surveillance and Intimidation in Singapore* by James Gomez, the founder of Think Centre and a political activist. Despite his awareness of the range and intrusiveness of government controls, Gomez remains optimistic that the full political potential of the internet has not yet been tapped (Gomez, 2002: p. 92). He believes that that potential lies in fostering the development of civil society, raising public awareness of government policies and decision-making, and using the internet as a means of organising other political events and activities.

Gomez's optimism is supported by Eileena Lee, a Singaporean gay rights activist who has also made innovative use of the web in her political work. Assessing the political impact of the internet in Singapore, Lee emphasizes its liberatory effects on political discourse and suggests that it marks a watershed in Singapore's political development:

I think the internet is something that has done us a lot of good. It brought Singapore to a completely new era where people are able to choose for themselves to what they want to be exposed. We were previously exposed to only what the government deemed appropriate. Now, we have a population of people that is able to discern, rather than go by and agree perpetually with the government (Lee, 2006).

As Cherian George, a Singaporean public intellectual and journalist put it: 'Thanks partly to the internet but mainly to the irrepressible human spirit, there are now new options for self-expression, organization and mobilization' (George, 2006: p. 223).

Recognising the political challenge of the internet, the PAP government has attempted to clamp down on its use specifically during electoral campaigns. Before the 2001 parliamentary elections, the first elections since access to the net became widespread in Singapore, the government introduced rules to govern use of the net at election time. Though allowed to comment generally on political issues, website managers and bloggers were prohibited from endorsing any particular candidate. Publication of opinion polls during the lead-up to elections was also banned. However, the official sites of political parties could continue to engage directly in electoral campaigning. This represented a liberalization from government policy in the previous election, when political parties had been required to remove candidates' biodata and posters from their websites. Prior to the 2006 elections restrictions were extended to the newer technologies of podcasting and videocasting. In the previous general elections of 2001 the main opposition party, the Singapore Democratic Party, had made effective use of podcasting. Despite their continuing attempts to impose political controls, the government seems to be engaged in a game of catch-up, always a step behind the innovative use of the web by opposition political parties and bloggers. As a result of the elections in May 2006 the People's Action Party was returned to power, but suffered an eight percent decline in popularity.

5. E-Gender Politics: Women and the Net

Existing studies of the relationships between gender and the internet have considered such issues as the degree of participation of women in computer science as an occupational area; issues of gender differentials in access to computers and the internet; the gendered nature of information systems; issues associated with online sexual harassment and online pornography; and the more speculative realm of the impact of the internet on the constitution of personal identities. Several writers have argued that use of the internet opens up new possibilities for women to explore novel or multiple identities that would be impossible in more conventional formats. Stone (1995) and Turkle (1995), for example, examined how relatively fixed gender categories can become more flexible online and emphasized how the internet allows for experimentation with identities. In a similar vein, it has been argued that the internet can represent a 'transformative spatiality where gender categories become reconfigured' (Consalvo and Paasonen, 2002: p. 2).

An important contribution to debates in this field is a collection of articles edited by Mia Consalvo and Susanna Paasonen, *Women and Everyday Uses of the Internet: Agency and Identity* (2002).

The various contributors to the volume address the key issue of whether the internet reinforces and abets male social, economic and political power, or opens up possibilities for challenging entrenched male dominance. Johanna Dorer, for instance, maintains that men enjoy greater access to the internet as a result of both time and financial constraints limiting women's access; and thus 'the gender marking of technology has been unconditionally transferred to the Internet' (2002: p. 63). As noted above, the editors of the volume suggest a more positive assessment of the transformative potentials. These central issues of e-gender politics were also canvassed in the provocatively titled *Cyberghetto or Cybertopia? Race, Class, and Gender on the Internet* (Ebo, 1998).

As noted earlier, there is a gender gap in use of the internet in Singapore, though it is more apparent in the older generation than among Singaporean youth. Nevertheless, the net has been readily adopted by a variety of women's groups to publicize and facilitate their activities. Notable websites of women's organizations include those of the Singapore Council of Women's Organizations, AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research), Singapore Association of Women Lawyers, and ENGENDER.

Many Singaporean women's organizations stay in close communication via the internet and other web-based activities. Some women's groups have their own websites, which in turn are linked to other feminist-oriented sites. For example, the web pages of the Singapore Council of Women's Organizations (SCWO), a national umbrella organization including about fifty women's groups with over 150,000 members, were hosted by Women-Connect-Asia, a women's network covering the Asia-Pacific region. Singaporean women activists are consequently able to gain access to a wide spectrum of feminist knowledge, conference outcomes, databases, campaign strategies, and so on (Doran and Jose, 2002: p. 228). Electronic communication has enabled women in Singapore to forge links with women's groups internationally, as well as to disseminate information among themselves virtually instantaneously and mobilize support quickly around specific issues, making the internet a powerful political tool (George and Martinez, 2004).

A significant website and forum for Singaporean women is RedQuEEn!, Singapore's first and largest e-group for homosexual women. It was founded by Eileena Lee, who is also an activist in many other organizations advocating gay rights.

Despite legal prohibitions against homosexuality, including the possibility of life imprisonment even for consenting sex between adults in private, the law is not often policed and has not been enforced for years. Lee reports that 'we've actually got a rather vibrant social scene for GLBTs [Gays, Lesbians, Bisexuals and the Transgendered]' (Lee, 2006). This is consistent with increasingly accommodating official attitudes to homosexuality in Singapore (Fairclough, 2004). There are now several other websites for lesbians, including Sayoni, a forum based in Singapore for Asian homosexual women. Computers and the internet have given gay Singaporean women the option of coming out virtually. For some this experience has also encouraged them to follow through with other forms of coming out, demonstrating the transformative personal and political potential of the net. This example illustrates how experimenting with different identities online can have real consequences, as pointed out in the work of Stone (1995), Turkle (1995) and Consalvo and Paasonen (2002).

6. Conclusion

Economic imperatives induced the Singaporean government to embrace internet technology in the mid-1990s, when the government committed itself to transforming Singapore into an information hub and implemented a comprehensive strategy for IT development, including massive public infrastructure investment. The internet was to be used as a developmental tool to promote strong economic growth. Looking to the future, the drive towards greater prosperity and competitiveness as a global city has placed information and communications technologies at the centre of official economic planning. Current policy on IT&T is embodied in a ten-year developmental plan inaugurated in 2006, dubbed 'Intelligent Nation 2015.' This masterplan aims to transform Singapore into a more prosperous, intelligent and wireless nation by doubling the contribution of the 'infocomm' industry to Gross Domestic Product, promoting deeper broadband penetration (to at least 90% of households) and investing dramatically in communications infrastructure (Infocomm Development Authority, 2006).

Certainly, there is a range of government controls constraining use of the internet in Singapore. Probably most effective has been the extension of pre-existing stringent defamation laws to content posted on the net, rather than the imposition of new regulatory regimes. Auto-regulation and self-censorship undoubtedly have significant intimidatory effects on internet users.

Nevertheless, despite the continuing impact of both formal and informal government controls over access to and use of the internet, the trajectory seems clear enough. Although the controls of the governing PAP over other media have been pervasive, in general its attempts to regulate the internet have been light-handed, rather half-hearted, and increasingly unsuccessful in containing the innovative strategies constantly being developed by cyber-dissidents. The changes have been driven in particular by the computer-savvy younger generation in Singapore; and they have opened up the way especially for women's organizations to raise the profile of gender issues in this patriarchal society. The structure of the world wide web appears to be analogous to Foucault's concept of the tentacles of power relationships running through society; but this analogy also draws attention to the possibilities for a micropolitics of resistance within the interstices, at an everyday individual and civil society level. The potential for the internet to allow widespread access to news and a diversity of views, and to create a space for a plurality of voices, suggests that in undemocratic Singapore under one-party rule it might well prove effective in promoting both democratic reform and greater gender equity.

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