

# Reporters Without Borders

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Asia - Singapore

Internet targeted

## Government subjects news websites to licencing requirement

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Reporters Without Borders is appalled to learn that Singapore's leading news websites will have to apply to the city-state's Media Development Authority (MDA) for a publishing licence.

According to the MDA, which regulates the media, news websites with a Singaporean IP address and more than 50,000 visitors a month will have to obtain a licence from 1 June in order to continue operating.

"While it is understandable that radio and TV stations should be licenced, because of the limited number of broadcast channels and the need to regulate frequencies, imposing a licencing system on news websites is utterly absurd and cannot be justified by a need for a 'more consistent regulatory framework,' [as the MDA has suggested](#)," Reporters Without Borders said.

"This measure violates the principle of media freedom enshrined in article 19 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which functions as an international standard for 160 countries even if Singapore has not signed it. The criteria used to define which sites need licenses are also highly questionable and are indicative of a desire to exercise prior control over news and information.

"The authorities are almost certainly trying to increase their ability to censor websites that cover local events and have a significant impact on public opinion. Making these sites deposit a 'performance' bond will probably also lead to self-censorship, especially by sites that do not charge and whose income barely covers their operating costs."

Reporters Without Borders added: "We urge the Media Development Authority to rescind this measure, which runs counter to the principles of freedom of information, freedom of the media and freedom of expression."

News websites are currently registered automatically under the Broadcasting Act, which will have to be amended to take account of the new regulations.

Under the new rules, news websites that post more than one article a week on Singapore and have more than 50,000 unique Singaporean visitors a month over a period of two months will need an individual licence whose conditions include "a performance bond" of 50,000 Singaporean dollars (39,500 US dollars).

Sites will be regarded as "news websites" if they post political, social or economic content, or any other content about Singapore, in any language and regardless of whether or not they charge for content.

For the time being, the licencing requirement is limited to "local" sites under Singaporean jurisdiction. Ten sites are already known to be affected – the local version of Yahoo! (sg.news.yahoo.com) and nine sites owned by Singapore Press Holdings or Mediacorp. "Local" is understood to mean sites with the Singaporean country domain name ".sg" even if they are owned by foreign companies.

Communication and information minister Yaacob Ibrahim said the Broadcasting Act would be amended by next year to include news websites based abroad that target the Singaporean market. Each licence will be issued for a year, at the end of which the MDA will decide whether it should be renewed.

Licensed sites will be required to remove "prohibited content" such as articles "undermining racial or religious harmony" with 24 hours of being notified by the authorities. The MDA insists that the existing news content guidelines have not been changed. Nonetheless, the deadline for removing prohibited content is new.

Singapore is ranked 149th out of 179 countries in the [2013 Reporters Without Borders press freedom index](#).

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