

Digital Dilemmas

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The rapidly expanding use of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in Singapore is proving to be both a boon and a bane to the Government. As it creates and expands a digital world to benefit Singaporeans in the economic domain, the Government also faces a series of dilemmas in the political and social domains.

When the Internet was beginning to spread around the world in the late 1980s, there was an unfettered enthusiasm for the power of the microchip and the digital bits as weapons of digital freedom. In 1989, the then President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, was inspired to say, "Technology will make it increasingly difficult for the state to control the information its people receive. ... The Goliath of totalitarianism will be brought down by the David of the microchip."

Within a decade, the world learnt differently. In 1999, Stanford academic Lawrence Lessig concluded in his book *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*, "Governments (democratic and authoritarian alike) can most certainly regulate the Internet, both by controlling its underlying code and by shaping the legal environment in which it operates."

Today, many governments, both liberal and illiberal, are struggling to cope with the ever increasing impact of ICTs in the digital world. The problems are compounded by the fact that these new technologies not only cross political borders like the old ones but, unlike the old ones, remain tenaciously resistant to the control of either individual nation states or even a collection of them.

Part of the problem lies in the fact that no single government or any private corporation can completely control the Internet, nor does it operate under any single authority. This is an unprecedented and unique phenomenon in communication technologies. Another aspect of the problem is that there is no common set of norms or laws that govern the Internet across the

globe. Above all, nation states only act in the best interests of their own and even in collective action there must be a coincidence of self interests. In the case of the Internet and its content, there is no consensus on a number of issues of what constitutes the collective interest.

This state of fragmented interests and disconnected jurisdictions has given the Internet a special role both within and outside national boundaries – a role that poses dilemmas of accessibility, accountability and control to all governments. No government is fully satisfied with the state of affairs as it is, nor is it able to come up with an alternative that is acceptable to most if not all. Thus most governments are still grappling with the dilemmas of the digital world.

One critical site of this continuing struggle is the sphere of the mass media. The PAP Government has never subscribed to the conception of the media as the Fourth Estate. In its view, the media is and must be subject to the control of the elected government which alone is the final arbiter of what is good and bad for the country and its people. The Singapore mass media, both private and public organizations, have operated under this principle for almost four decades. Foreign media which circulate in Singapore also have to observe special rules in terms of coverage of Singapore issues.

However, with the advent of the Internet in the early 1990s and its wide use by the population within a decade, the equation of power and control between the government and mass media has begun to unravel. The Internet and its various manifestations such as emails, newsgroups, websites, and blogs have begun to challenge the notion of ultimate or total control by the state.

The Internet has now become a mass media tool within Singapore as indeed it has in many other parts of the world. Singaporeans no longer need to rely on the traditional mass media for reaching out to large audiences. They are now in a position to communicate with thousands or millions of others in and out of Singapore without much direct or preventive control. However, they do need to comply with certain legal limitations on what they can communicate over the Internet or through other technologies such as mobile phones or personal digital assistants (PDAs). In this new situation, the citizen now has the power to reach out to many others and vice versa without the intermediation of the traditional mass media and their controllers.

However, Singapore is not alone in this battle. Many governments determined to control the Internet continue to deploy more and more resources. On the other side, freedom seekers continue to undermine or circumvent government control. No government has managed to control the Internet completely. And no amount of liberal force has kept any national system completely free. Tensions between the censor and the censored continue. As of now, government control is not as effective as authoritarian states would like them to be nor as liberal as evangelists of liberating technologies hoped for. The battle continues between the state and the detractor. And the jury is still out on who – the Goliath or the David – will eventually win in the digital world.