

**SPEECH BY DR LEE BOON YANG, MINISTER FOR INFORMATION,
COMMUNICATIONS AND THE ARTS, AT MEDIA CONFERENCE ON THE
GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS MADE BY AIMS , 09
JANUARY 2009, 9:30 AM AT MICA BUILDING**

1 In April 2007, the Government set up the Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society (AIMS) under the Chairmanship of Mr Cheong Yip Seng former Editor-in-Chief of English and Malay Newspapers Division, Singapore Press Holdings. The Council was tasked to study the implications of rapidly evolving new media technology on our society and recommend appropriate ways to address the impact by the Government.

2 AIMS has tapped on the experiences of other countries through study trips to the United States, Europe, the United Kingdom, Canada, Australia, China, Japan and South Korea. It has also sought views and ideas from a cross section of society through a six-week public consultation exercise.

3 AIMS has made recommendations in four key areas, namely, e-engagement, online political content, protection of minors, and intermediary immunity for online defamation.

4 New media has evolved at a rapid pace and is a complex subject. Hence it is not surprising that there were different and opposing views expressed, not just among AIMS members themselves, but also across the various groups that AIMS consulted. Even where there was consensus on a recommendation, there were different views on how the recommendation should be implemented.

5 MICA has studied the AIMS Report and we would like to announce the Government's response to the recommendations made by the Council.

6 The Government generally agrees with and accepts most of the AIMS' recommendations, although in some cases we have adopted a different approach towards specific measures and the pace of implementation.

Protection of minors

Inter-Ministry Taskforce to be set up

7 We share AIMS concern over the impact of harmful and undesirable online content on our young people. We agree that there is a need for a holistic and coordinated approach to deal with this problem. The Government will work closely with the people-private sectors and leverage existing efforts to protect minors undertaken by the Internet and Media Advisory Committee (INMAC) and community organisations. Within government, there is also scope for enhanced co-ordination across various agencies and provision of more resources to fund new initiatives and programmes for cyber wellness.

8 AIMS recommended the establishment of a coordinating agency for cyber wellness. We agree with the principle but instead of an agency, we will set up an **Inter-Ministry Taskforce On Cyber Wellness** to coordinate national efforts and to develop strategies and programmes for protecting the young. The Taskforce will work with industry and community partners. It will be chaired by the Deputy Secretaries from MICA and MOE. The Taskforce will be provided with appropriate resources for carrying out its mission.

Government will review symbolic ban of 100 websites

9 AIMS has recommended the symbolic ban on 100 websites promoting undesirable content to remain for now. The Government agrees with this recommendation. In line with the AIMS' recommendation, the Government will review and consider lifting the symbolic ban on 100 websites when programmes for the protection of the young and a culture of cyber wellness have been firmly established.

10 The blocking of harmful websites to protect children is not uncommon. Other countries such as the United Kingdom and Australia have also developed lists of blocked sites for the protection of the young. We will continue to study how other countries are addressing this pernicious problem.

Online Political Content

Liberalise the Films Act

11 The Government accepts the AIMS' recommendation to take a phased approach in liberalising the Films Act.

Certain party political films will be allowed

12 The Government will amend the Films Act to allow for certain types of party political films (PPFs). Films which are factual and objective, and do not dramatise and/or present a distorted picture will be allowed. PPFs that will be allowed under the amended Films Act will include factual documentaries and footages, recordings of actual events, and biographies or autobiographies.

13 The Government will also allow political parties and their candidates to use films allowed under the amended Films Act for Internet election advertising during election period. Such films could include those on their election candidates, campaign activities and election manifestos.

Independent advisory panel to be set up

14 In liberalising the Films Act, the Government also accepts the AIMS' recommendation to set up an independent advisory panel. The advisory panel will determine whether films are party political films and if they should be allowed under the amended Films Act.

15 This Advisory Panel will be chaired by Mr Richard Magnus, retired Senior District Judge and Chairman of the Casino Regulatory Authority.

Retain section 35 of the Films Act

16 The Government accepts the AIMS' recommendation to retain section 35 of the Films Act in order to deal with harmful videos such as the "Fitna" video. Such videos or films are clearly against public interest.

Extend positive list for Internet Election Advertising

17 The Government accepts the AIMS' recommendation to extend the positive list for Internet election advertising. It will allow election candidates and their political parties and agents to use podcasts, vodcasts, blogs and other new media tools for Internet election advertising during elections. Examples include producing podcasts or vodcasts to promote the election candidates or the election manifestos as well as on election rally speeches, the party's press conferences and constituency tours. However, films that are not allowed under the amended Films Act will continue to be disallowed.

18 The Government will also allow individuals to participate in Internet election advertising. Individuals will be able to participate by blogging or posting election materials. However, there should be some safeguards to try to maintain accountability and responsibility. This is an area which requires further study.

Remove registration requirement for individuals, bodies of persons and political parties

19 AIMS has recommended the removal of the registration requirement. After careful study, the Government has decided to retain the registration

requirement for websites of political parties as well as for individuals or bodies of persons who provide any programme for the propagation, promotion or discussion of political or religious issues on the Internet. This is to maintain a higher level of responsibility and accountability of those behind such websites. We note that during the public consultation, a small number of people had supported the registration requirement to ensure responsibility and credibility.

20 I would like to point out that registration does not in any way discourage diverse and robust views which are prevalent online. Political parties which have registered their websites continue to discuss national policies and issues freely and critically on their websites.

Retain Class Licence Scheme

21 The Government accepts the AIMS' recommendation to retain the Class Licence Scheme as AIMS has acknowledged the benefits of the scheme as a light-touch regulatory policy.

E-engagement

22 The Government agrees with AIMS that there should be more e-engagement between itself and the citizens. We note that AIMS advocated an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary approach. Government agencies will embark on e-engagement with citizens on policy and national issues through public consultations and forum discussions on the REACH portal. We have decided to e-engage through REACH as this platform has an established online presence and has been pioneering the use of multiple new media technologies to reach out to Singaporeans for online feedback, consultation and engagement. Government agencies would also find it beneficial to ride on the experiences of REACH as they learn to e-engage. With experience and growing capabilities, we will explore other avenues for e-engagement.

23 Government agencies will also reply to online letters carried in the online letter forums of the local mainstream media. Not all letters posted to the online forums will get a response. The need for a reply will have to be assessed by the agency concerned.

Giving more space for civil servants to voice opinions

24 AIMS has recommended that the Instruction Manual be amended to allow civil servants to voice their personal opinions on government policy. The Government has decided that it will not do so as allowing civil servants to publicly express their private views on government policy would compromise the performance of their duty by undermining discipline and trust within the civil service.

25 The current civil service rules regarding communicating their personal views in public are not different from what many big organisations such as MNCs or other governments would require of their staff.

Intermediary immunity for online defamation

26 The Government agrees with AIMS on the need for greater legal certainty regarding the liability of online intermediaries for defamatory content published online. The issue of online defamation is a complex one. AIMS has proposed a “take down, put back” approach. This has not been tried or enacted as law in other countries. We will need to study the implications and practicality of this approach and other measures to address the concerns of Internet intermediaries and content hosts before introducing an appropriate legislative measure.

Conclusion

27 In conclusion, the recommendations which have been accepted for implementation will go a long way towards widening the space for political debate and participation, strengthening Government-People engagement and ensuring that Singaporeans will be able to tap the full potential of new media to better our society while minimising the adverse impact.

28 I would like to congratulate Mr Cheong Yip Seng, Chairman of AIMS, and his Council Members for their excellent report and comprehensive review of the impact of new media. They have put in an enormous amount of time and energy in the study and report. They have made a major contribution to prepare Singapore for the era of the new media. I thank Mr Cheong and his Members for the good work they have done.