

## **Online activism: Sleepy in S'pore**

Island state not as advanced as neighbour, says academic

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It is not often that Singapore comes across as the sleepy fishing village compared to the advanced buzzing metropolis of Malaysia.

It may sound even more counter-intuitive when the analogy is used to describe the cyberspace experience of both countries.

But when it comes to one aspect of the Internet landscape, one Singaporean academic suggests no less.

Former journalist Cherian George believes that, in the domain of cyber activism, the Republic is a poor cousin to its neighbour.

"Singapore to this day, 10 years after the Internet became public, does not have a single professionally-run, stand-alone website delivering local news," he said on Wednesday at the launch of his book, Contentious Journalism and the Internet. "Malaysia has several more well-organised activist sites on the Internet than Singapore."

He calls it a "penetration/participation paradox", given the online opportunities available to Singaporeans.

However, for all the hype about the Internet, Dr George is convinced neither online access nor media laws, which are similar across the Causeway, can account for the differences in both countries.

The answers can only be found in the offline world and in the old-fashioned political terrain.

"(Firstly), the existence of social networks and activism outside of the Internet is far more advanced in Malaysia than in Singapore. Secondly, the reformasi factor: The fact that there was a form of political awakening in Malaysia which didn't take place in Singapore around the time the Internet arrived," he said.

For those reasons, online newspapers like Malaysiakini and Harakah have survived all this while in Malaysia.

There is another factor, though, why the popularity of alternative media in Singapore trails its Malaysian counterpart.

"The local media have been at least able to do a professional enough job such that, by and large, they remain relevant to readers. If that were not the case, I have no doubt that large numbers of the public would migrate to alternative media," he told Today.

Nonetheless, the presence of alternative media worldwide has highlighted how "the mainstream has in certain systemic ways failed to deliver on its promise for democratic communication", he said, citing how mainstream media is prisoner to the market and to organisational hierarchy.

"You'll find (alternative) groups that are, I think, rightly troubled by this idea that objectivity is all. Some of these groups say it is better to be biased than pretend to be objective and in fact subject yourselves to agendas from outside," he added.

In Singapore, Dr George highlights the online journalistic activism of Think Centre and Sintercom's harnessing of the virtual community as the "flickering reminders of alternative possibilities".

While the impact of these groups on formal matters such as elections, voting and institutions may be marginal and indirect, Dr George believes they have allowed for self-expression, the sharing of ideas and socio-political commentary.

"At the very least, (the groups) have been a democratic experience for the practitioners themselves, who are able to express themselves in a way that was hitherto not possible," he said.