

THE BIG STORY

Three synthetic drugs to be banned

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SINGAPORE — The Central Narcotics Bureau is taking a pre-emptive strike against three synthetic drugs before their misuse picks up here or leads to a fatality.

From Monday, BZP (1-benzylpiperazine), TFMP (1-3-trifluoromethylphenyl piperazine) and mephedrone (4-methylmethcathinone) — which are abused as ecstasy substitutes abroad and have reportedly caused deaths — will be banned.

The three drugs — which are controlled drugs in some other countries including the United Kingdom, Denmark, Sweden and New Zealand — are not openly sold here but are known to be brought in while labelled under bath salts and plant fertilisers.

Consumption of the three drugs causes euphoria and heightens alertness when consumed. However, they could lead to side-effects such as seizures, psychosis, heart palpitations and nausea.

In some other countries, it is sold as plant food. CNB's consultations with the Trade and Industry Ministry, Agri-food and Veterinary Authority and the health authorities here confirmed that there was

no known legitimate use for these drugs in industry, research or medicine.

MediaCorp first reported in February that some party-goers in Singapore were consuming mephedrone, a controlled drug in countries including Denmark, China, Germany and Sweden. Drug abusers told MediaCorp then that they purchased their supplies off the Internet for about \$30 a gramme. Mephedrone sellers state on the packaging that the chemical is "not for human consumption" although it has no known use as a fertiliser for plants.

According to the CNB, there was no feedback that the abuse of these drugs was on the rise here, BZP and TFMP come under the piperazines family. A separate component within this family, which is found in products sold legally in pet shops here to de-worm dogs, will not be categorised as a Class A controlled drug under the Misuse of Drugs Act.

BZP and TFMP are sold in the black market in tablet form; mephedrone, in powder form. From Monday, anyone convicted of using them can be jailed up to 10 years, fined \$20,000 or both. Traffickers can be jailed between five and 20 years and given between five and 15 strokes of the cane.

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Mixed report

While the Internet's influence on overseas elections isn't

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SINGAPORE — Four years is by no means a long period in Singapore politics. But factor in the Internet's explosive growth, and the developments within this short space of time have been staggering.

In 2006, when the last General Election was held, Facebook or Twitter were unheard of — so too, the idea of a Cabinet Minister blogging. Today, social networking and microblogging sites are all the rage and at least four Cabinet members — including Manpower Minister Gan Kim Yong and Education Minister Ng Eng Hen — have blogs.

But even with the Government liberalising regulations on online elections advertising, Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts Lui Tuck Yew (picture) believes the Internet will play a limited role in the upcoming GE, which must be held by February 2012.

While the Internet's impact this time will be "more so than in 2006", he noted: "I don't think the reach of new media in our election is really going to be so significant." He offered this prediction to Weekend TODAY based on his assessment of recent elections overseas.

While some observers believe the Internet was a major factor in the 2008 Malaysia elections, which saw the opposition deny the Barisan Nasional a two-thirds majority for the first time since 1969, Mr Lui had a different opinion: "We ought to note that Internet penetration was really very low. What actually played a role was the re-transmission of SMS messages, people printing out stuff from the Internet and transmitting that in the good old fashioned way."

That same year, the United States saw Mr Barack Obama mount a hugely successful online campaign for the presidency. But Mr Lui credited his victory to a well-crafted outreach strategy of using the Internet to energise young voters in particular, while circumventing the US' vast geographical spread, rather than the influence of the Internet per se.

More recently, the new media's role was "quite subdued" in the United Kingdom general election in May, he noted.

NEW APPROACH TO MISINFORMATION

Where the Internet has made a difference, is in governance and how the authorities engage citizens. Apart from the Government feedback portal, Reach, various Ministries and statutory boards have made effective use of new media as an additional outreach tool, Mr Lui said.

"By and large, we have really evolved our practices and the recognition is that increasingly, we have to make sure some of these applications are available on mobile platforms."

He qualified that while feedback and views from new media are taken into account, "that cannot be the only source of input to our policy making ... because the participation in the new media, if you look at the demographics, tends

to be skewed". The Government has evolved its approach to dealing with misinformation online.

Mr Lui revealed, should it decide to address certain falsehoods perpetuated online, it will do so across multiple channels so the correct information "reaches as wide an audience as possible".

"The approach that we have taken is that where we need to correct some of that misinformation, we do so not only through the same new media channel, but we also try to bring in the mainstream media as well because the new media is such a morphous creature."

Previously, the Government had made a clear distinction between online and traditional media platforms by correcting the misinformation at source. Weekend TODAY understands circumstances have yet to call for the new approach to be fully invoked.

He takes comfort from the fact — culled from Mica's internal surveys and corroborated by independent external surveys — that Singaporeans, by and large, are discerning and 'look at a variety of news sources'.

At the same time, the Government has to continue to educate the public to become "more discerning in terms of separating truths from untruths, news from views". Mr Lui reiterated that there was "much good about" the Internet but certain parts of it "can be a cesspool of misinformation and negativity".

With his job requiring him to be well informed of news and views both within and outside of Singapore's borders, Mr Lui shared how he relies on a variety of news sources on the new and traditional media platforms.

He takes comfort from the fact — culled from Mica's internal surveys and corroborated by independent external surveys — that Singaporeans, by and large, are discerning and "look at a variety of news sources".

"When they go to the new media, they are interested in the views. Sometimes they find it amusing but where they need to corroborate the information, we have even had views in the new media which say: 'Let's wait until the mainstream media reports it.'"

He reiterated the need for the traditional media to continue to reflect mainstream views.

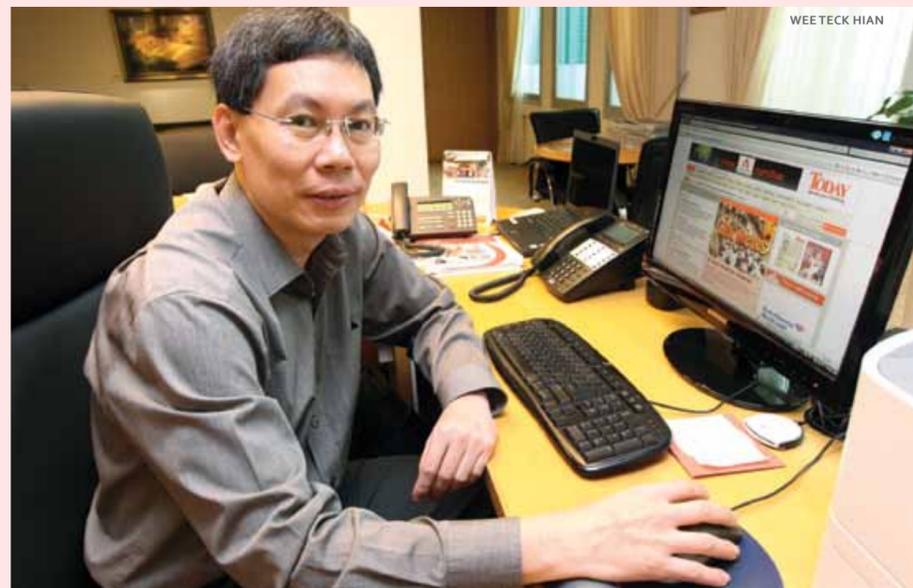
"That is part and parcel of the credibility that it strives for," he said. "The traditional media needs to have the pulse of the situation, it needs to understand the aspirations and the concerns of the different communities. It must also understand what our national interests are and how it can play a supporting role in ensuring these interests are not eroded."

If anything, the rising popularity of the Internet has increased the responsibility of the traditional media "to educate and not just to reinforce — like the new media tends to do — our own biases and perceptions and mindsets".

THE BIG STORY

card for the new media

as great as some may think, it has made a huge difference in how the authorities engage citizens



WEE TECK HIAN

'Newspapers, journalists must rise to Internet challenge'

SINGAPORE — The storm that has engulfed even some of the world's most prestigious newspapers has yet to fully hit Singapore. Part of the reason why newspapers in the West were hit so badly by the rise of the Internet, Mr Lui Tuck Yew believes, was that they had gone down the slippery slope of "narrowcasting" even as they tried to stem the outflow of advertising revenue to the new media.

Western news organisations have evolved historically to cater to niche audiences, and this practice has "become more visible ... over the years", said the Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts.

"In a number of countries, the newspapers have mirrored the new media to the extent that you can describe it almost as narrowcasting. They cater to people of a certain political orientation, they cater to people who have a particular set of interests — so the audience base is a very fragmented one."

He added: "It is hard to separate cause from effect ... My personal view is that it is a downwards spiral."

In contrast, Mr Lui said, Singapore's mainstream media are "broad-based, reaching as much of the population as possible".

That, in tandem with Asia's economic rise and the general public's trust in newspapers here, means the profitability of Singapore newspapers is assured for now. "In Asia ... the economic growth is stronger, the advertising dollars are still stronger. Therefore, as long as you have the reach that you have today, I think the dollars will continue to flow to where the eyeballs are," said Mr Lui.

Even so, the media groups here — MediaCorp and Singapore Press Holdings — have responded to the challenge of the Internet by, for instance, co-opting user-generated

content and citizen journalism on their online platforms.

Noting that the workload and demands on journalists have increased significantly, Mr Lui singled out MediaCorp's experiment of a convergent newsroom. "Gone are the days where you have a correspondent who writes ... two, three times a week. Today, (journalists) are reporters, they are analytical thinkers and they also have to stand in front of the (television) cameras as in the case of MediaCorp and TODAY."

Now, consumers "want to hear, they want to see, they want moving images — they are not satisfied merely with photographs. So that combination of the TV channels as well as the TODAY newspaper under the MediaCorp family is a very powerful one".

Mr Lui acknowledged, however, that the concept was an "evolutionary process" and would require buy-in from journalists. The onus is on media companies to provide the necessary training for these professionals to cope, he said.

"The Government has to be careful about what role it plays. We want to make sure that the Press is, and is seen as, independent of the influence of Government ... So we let the primary training be done at the university level."

Echoing a point made by Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong at TODAY's 10th anniversary dinner on Wednesday, Mr Lui added: "Now the question is: Are the senior people so busy that there is not enough time, as in the past, to sit down with the new journalists in an informal way to pass on some of the experience, some of the values of journalism, some of the ethos?"

What the Government does do, is keep an eye on the bottomline of media groups here "to make sure they are on sound footing". And Mr Lui was impressed with how TODAY became profitable in less than 10 years — especially since the newspaper is distributed free twice a day. Since 2005, TODAY has been in the black. "It's quite amazing you have come up with a different model altogether, fully supported by advertising revenue yet you have managed to make sure that it is profitable," he said. LOH CHEE KONG

Exercising soft power the Singapore way

SINGAPORE — As the global power re-configuration takes shape post-economic crisis, the use of media to perpetuate soft power has taken on added impetus.

China, in particular, seems intent on taking full advantage of what experts have dubbed the Asian decade. Its state news agency Xinhua is embarking on aggressive growth while the China Central Television Network has relaunched its English language 24-hour news channel with the aim of expanding its global reach.

While Singapore's influence on the world stage is not insignificant — and belies its geographical size — its approach to "soft power" has less to do with expanding the reach of its national media, than with growing the pool of foreign correspondents based here.

Said Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts Lui Tuck Yew: "We certainly are not in the position to (compare) ourselves to the United States and to China. What we want to do is to make sure that Singapore is reported on in a balanced and accurate manner."

This can be done "not only through our own newspapers reaching a new client base overseas", but also by having Singapore reported on by the more than 70 foreign correspondents based here. Some major media companies have sited their Asian headquarters here, he noted.

While Singapore insists foreign journalists "do not interfere in domestic politics", they are free to report on the country. "Sometimes their reports do not cast us in a positive light but the majority of them do — simply because I think if you are to report on Singapore in a balanced manner, there will be far more positive things to write about than negative things."

Homegrown media groups, he added — "no matter how am-

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Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts Lui Tuck Yew

bitious their plans may be in the years to come" — will "never reach as wide an audience as having these foreign papers and their journalists reporting in Singapore on Singapore".

Having said that, Mr Lui recognised the growing international reach of MediaCorp's Channel NewsAsia (CNA), which offers an "avenue to report on Asia by Asians".

"In that sense, it gives a different viewpoint ... and even some of the topics that (it) may choose to focus on may well differ from a group from the West," he said

His ministry would be quite happy for local newspapers or news programmes to be consumed in other countries.

"If there is a need for some quid pro quo, Mica would also be quite happy to consider each application on its own merits," Mr Lui added.

Over time, he believes, the global media configuration will naturally reflect Asia's economic rise — and not necessarily through the voice of Asians.

"I suspect that as more journalists and correspondents come to Asia, live in Asia, report on Asia and even increasingly be educated in Asia with people who have grown up in Asia ... the way they look at issues and they way they report on issues (will change)."

LOH CHEE KONG