Singapore

Partly Free
56
100

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Last Year's Score & Status
59 100 Partly Free

Overview

Internet freedom in Singapore declined as the government furthered its control over content. The authorities' crackdown on opposition and critical voices intensified during the reporting period, with new website blocks, a restrictive online media environment, and the passage of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, which further enables censorship. As the country gears up for an election in 2019 or 2020, those challenging the ruling party's dominance online continue to face intimidation and criminal prosecution.

The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) allows for some political pluralism, but it constrains the growth of credible opposition parties and limits freedoms of expression, assembly, and association.

Key Developments

June 1, 2018 – May 31, 2019

- In November and December 2018, the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) temporarily blocked online news outlets the States Times Review and the Singapore Herald after they did not comply with takedown orders (see B1 and B2).
- Following the release of Parliament's Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods report in September 2018, Parliament passed the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act in May 2019, which gives broad censorship powers to any government minister (see B3, B6, and C1).
- Singaporean authorities continued prosecuting activists and journalists for their online social and political activities, including, for the first time in decades, new criminal defamation charges filed against an online journalist and private citizen in December 2018, for the publication of a letter in the Online Citizen accusing the government of corruption (see C3).
- Mainstream online outlets continued to support the government's positions on important political and social issues, restricting the diversity of content online (see B5

and B7).

A Obstacles to Access

As a wealthy and compact city-state, Singapore has highly developed information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructure. The government has achieved its target of 90 percent home broadband penetration as part of its Intelligent Nation 2015 master plan for an ultra-high-speed, pervasive network. The national wireless network offers free public access.

A1 0-6 pts

Do infrastructural limitations restrict access to the internet or the speed and quality of internet connections?	66

Singapore's internet penetration rate is high, as is the general quality of service. Some 91 percent of resident households had broadband internet access as of 2017.1 Mobile data usage reached 20.97 PB in the final quarter of 2018—over five PB more than the previous year.2

The fiber-based Next Generation Nationwide Broadband Network (Next Gen NBN), providing speeds of 1 Gbps or more, reaches more than 95 percent of homes and businesses. The national wireless network, Wireless@SG, offers free public access via hotspots running at 5 Mbps. The IMDA), the industry regulator, told local media in August 2018 that there are now over 20,000 public Wireless@SG Wi-Fi hotspots across the island.3

The government is experimenting with a heterogeneous network (HetNet), a new wireless system that allows smartphone users to switch automatically between cellular and Wi-Fi networks for smoother mobile internet use.4

The government is active in promoting its Smart Nation initiative, seeking to position Singapore as a "leading economy powered by digital innovation." As part of the plan, the government is building the backbone infrastructure to support big data, the so-called internet of things, and other advances.5

- 1. Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore, https://www.imda.gov.sg/industry-development/facts-and-figures/infocomm...

- 2. Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore, https://www.imda.gov.sg/industry-development/facts-and-figures/telecomm...
- 3. The Straits Times, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/more-than-20000-wirelesssg-hot-s...
- 4. Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore, https://www.imda.gov.sg/industry-development/infrastructure/next-gen-na...
- 5. Smart Nation Singapore: Transforming Singapore through Technology, https://www.smartnation.sg/why-Smart-Nation/transforming-singapore

A2 0-3 pts

Is access to the internet prohibitively expensive or beyond the reach of certain segments of the population for geographical, social, or other reasons?	33

The internet is largely available to all users in Singapore. The government has undertaken projects to limit any existing digital divide, such as that which cuts along generational lines. While 95 percent of residents between 15 and 24 years of age reported in 2017 that they had used the internet in the past three months, the rate was 28 percent for those 60 and older.1 The government's Digital Inclusion Fund aims to make internet connectivity more accessible and affordable to older and lower-income Singaporeans. Under its Home Access program, which began in 2015, eligible households receive subsidized fiber broadband connectivity for a period of two years, with the option of a basic computing device, at rates that begin at S$6 (US$4.40) per month.2

- 1. Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore, 'Annual Survey of Infocomm Usage in Households and by Individuals for 2017", https://www.imda.gov.sg/-/media/imda/files/industry-development/fact-an...
- 2. Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore, https://www.imda.gov.sg/community/consumer-education/digital-inclusion/...

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity?	56

No known restrictions have been placed on ICT connectivity, either permanently or during specific events. The Singapore Internet Exchange (SGIX), a nonprofit entity established by the government in 2009, provides an open, neutral, and self-

regulated central point for service providers to exchange traffic with one another directly, instead of routing through international carriers. This improves latency and resilience when there are cable outages on the international network.1

Singapore has adopted a National Broadband Network (NBN) structure, with the network built and operated by an entity that supplies telecommunications services that are wholesale-only, open-access, and nondiscriminatory to all telecommunications carriers and service providers.2 To avoid conflicts of interest, separate companies have responsibility for passive infrastructure and active infrastructure such as routers, as well as for retail service provision downstream.

- 1. Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore https://www.imda.gov.sg/industry-development/infrastructure/next-gen-na…
- 2. Infocomm Media Development Authority of Singapore, https://www.imda.gov.sg/regulations-licensing-and-consultations/framewo…

A4 0-6 pts

Are there legal, regulatory, or economic obstacles that restrict the diversity of service providers?	46

Service providers do not face onerous obstacles to enter or operate within Singapore. However, users' choices of internet service providers (ISPs) and mobile providers remain limited.

The dominant ISPs are also the mobile service providers: SingTel, Starhub, and M1. SingTel, formerly a state telecommunications monopoly and now majority-owned by the government's investment arm, has a controlling stake in Starhub. MyRepublic launched a broadband service in 2014, and began offering mobile services in 2018.1 Other relatively new players include ViewQwest; Circles.Life, Singapore's first fully digital telecommunications company; and virtual mobile telecommunications carrier Zero Mobile.2 Zero1 became the third virtual mobile carrier to enter the market in early 2018.3 The Australian telecommunications company TPG Telecom has signaled its intention to operate in Singapore, announcing in December 2018 that it was conducting a trial for mobile services in 2019.4

- 1. Lester Hio, "MyRepublic moves into telco space, launching 3 mobile plans for all users," Straits Times, June 21, 2018, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/myrepublic-to-launch-three-mobil….
- 2. Irene Tham, "ViewQwest to offer smart home setup," AsiaOne, November

20, 2015, https://www.asiaone.com/digital/viewqwest-offer-smart-home-set-ups .; M Shazni, “Circles.Life Is Stealing S’porean Hearts With Their Cool Data Plans—Here’s the Untold Backstory,” Vulcan Post, April 4, 2017, https://vulcanpost.com/607105/circles-life-founder-story/; Irene Tham, “New virtual telco Zero Mobile to launch with unusual promotion,” The Straits Times, December 8, 2017, http://www.straitstimes.com/tech/new-virtual-telco-zero-mobile-to-launc...

- 3. Irene Tham, “Third virtual mobile telco Zero1 enters market, offers unlimited mobile data plan.” The Straits Times. February 12, 2018. https://www.straitstimes.com/tech/third-virtual-mobile-telco-enters-mar...
- 4. Kevin Kwang, “Singapore's 4th telco TPG reveals mobile service trial in 2019.” Channel News Asia, December 21, 2018. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/technology/singapore-s-4th-telco-t...

A5 0-4 pts

Do national regulatory bodies that oversee service providers and digital technology fail to operate in a free, fair, and independent manner?	14

Government agencies oversee service providers and digital technology, and the regulatory framework lacks independence. Under the Telecommunications Act, licenses for telecommunications systems and services can be issued either unconditionally, or with conditions as specified by the authorities.1 The IMDA is responsible for both the development and regulation of the converging infocommunications and media sectors.2 The IMDA is not an independent public agency but a statutory body of the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI), taking instructions from the cabinet.

- 1. Telecommunications Act, Chapter 323, Part 2 Section 5. December 30, 2000. https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act/TA1999#pr5-
- 2. Irene Tham, “Merger of IDA, MDA spurred by changes in tech,” Straits Times, January 27, 2016, http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/merger-of-ida-mda-spurred-by-chan....

B Limits on Content

During the coverage period, the government blocked more websites than it had previously, including temporarily restricting access to those refusing to comply with takedown orders. A licensing system introduced in 2013 has been used to limit the growth of independent online news start-ups by restricting their funding options.

Despite such measures, the internet remains significantly more open than print or broadcasting as a medium for news and political discourse.

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content?	46

While long-term blocks are imposed upon a certain number of websites, during the reporting period, the government has directed ISPs to restrict access to more websites, including two sites that failed to comply with takedown orders.

In December 2018, the IMDA temporarily blocked access to the news site Singapore Herald, after it refused to comply with a number of takedown orders. The authorities claimed that eight articles published in December on a maritime dispute between Singapore and neighboring Malaysia "blatantly mispresent[ed]" Singapore's position, and used "false statements" and "emotionally charged phrases."[1] The Singapore Herald is known for its strident criticism of the ruling party, and is edited by Alex Tan, who previously ran the States Times Review, a news site that ceased operations in November 2018.[2]

In November 2018, the IMDA directed ISPs to restrict access to the States Times Review after it refused to comply with an order to take down an article claiming that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was a key target of money laundering investigations into the Malaysian state fund, the 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB). The article's claims were rejected by both the Singaporean government and the Sarawak Report, an online investigative journalism outlet that helped expose the 1MDB scandal.[3] The IMDA said that the article contained "prohibited content" under its Internet Code of Practice, claiming that it "undermined public confidence in the integrity of the Singapore government and is objectionable on grounds of public interest."[4] Access to the website was later restored and it then ceased operations.[5]

As a matter of policy, the IMDA blocks a list of 100 websites to signal societal values. This floating list has never been made public, but no political site is thought to have been blocked. Other than a few overseas sites run by religious extremists, the list is known to comprise pornographic sites.[6] In addition to this list, the Canada-based extramarital dating website Ashley Madison has been blocked since 2013, after it announced its plan to launch in Singapore.[7] The use of regulation to signpost societal values has been linked to the influence of religious conservatives

(mainly evangelical Christians), who have asserted themselves more in public morality debates in recent years.8

In May 2018, the High Court ordered ISPs to block 53 websites containing pirated materials, including the Pirate Bay and SolarMovie.9 In July 2018, the High Court also ruled in favor of “dynamic site blocking,” allowing the blocking of websites that link to the original 53 sites.10

- 1. “IMDA blocks Singapore Herald website for not removing articles on Singapore-Malaysia maritime dispute.” Channel News Asia. December 16, 2018. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/imda-blocks-singapore-he...
- 2. “Singapore Herald to shut down, editor Alex Tan forced to return to Singapore.” Singapore Herald, March 4, 2019. https://www.singapore-herald.com/1735/
- 3. Kristen Han. “Singapore’s fake news debate wrapped in 1MDB controversy.” Asia Times, November 13, 2018. https://www.asiatimes.com/2018/11/article/singapores-fake-news-debate-w...
- 4. “States Times Review refuses to take down article linking PM Lee with 1MDB.” Channel News Asia, November 9, 2018. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/states-times-review-refu...
- 5. “States Times Review founder says will 'shut down' website” Channel News Asia, November 10, 2018. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/states-times-review-foun...
- 6. “Internet,” Media Development Authority Singapore, Regulations & Liscensing, accessed July 9, 2014, https://www2.imda.gov.sg/regulations-and-licensing-listing/content-stan...
- 7. “MCI's response to PQ on the Ashley Madison website,” Ministry of Communications and Information Press Room, November 11, 2013, https://www.mci.gov.sg/cos2017/mcicorphome/pressroom/news-and-stories/p...
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- 8. Terence Chong, “Christian Evangelicals and Public Morality in Singapore,” ISEAS Perspective 17 (2014): 1-11, accessed July 9, 2014, https://www.iseas.edu.sg/images/pdf/ISEAS_Perspective_2014_17.pdf.
- 9. Irene Tham, “53 piracy websites blocked in battle to curb copyright breach.” The Straits Times. May 21, 2018. https://www.straitstimes.com/tech/53-piracy-websites-blocked-in-battle-...
- 10. “Singapore allows dynamic site blocking in landmark court ruling – Any

Web address linking to blocked piracy sites can now be blocked as well" MPA Asia Pacific. July 19, 2018. https://www.mpa-i.org/in_the_news/singapore-allows-dynamic-site-blockin…

B2 0-4 pts

Do state or nonstate actors employ legal, administrative, or other means to force publishers, content hosts, or digital platforms to delete content? 14

The state has sought to employ legal, administrative, and other means to remove content.

Since the Class License system was introduced in 1996 (see B3), it has been used to restrict access to sensitive websites. Most recently, in late 2018, the IMDA ordered the States Times Review and Singapore Herald to remove content from their websites after both sites allegedly breached the Internet Code of Practice. When they refused to comply, the IMDA directed ISPs to temporarily block the pages (see B1).

In September 2018, Terry Xu, chief editor of the independent news website the Online Citizen, complied with an IMDA request demanding that he remove a reader's letter within six hours.[1] The letter contained a reference to corruption at the "highest echelons" of the political elite, as well as "tampering of the Constitution." Both Xu and the letter's author have since been investigated and charged with criminal defamation (see C3).

Eleven news sites have been licensed under a notice-and-takedown framework, which requires them to comply with government orders to remove content within 24 hours (see B3). Nine are run by either Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) or MediaCorp—which, as newspaper and broadcasting companies, are already subject to discretionary individual licensing and traditionally have cooperated with the government (see B6).

Government officials are also known to demand retractions or apologies for comments on social media that they take issue with. In February 2018, a Facebook user who had posted a spoof of a Chinese newspaper's front page apologized after the Attorney-General's Chambers indicated that they were examining the spoofed image as a potential case of contempt of court.2 The offending content was removed.3

- 1. https://cpj.org/2018/11/singapore-police-seize-equipment-interrogate-ed...
- 2. Seow Bei YI. "Parliament: AGC looking into Facebook post with doctored headline of City Harvest news article." The Straits Times. February 5 ,2018. http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/facebook-post-with-falsified-headl...
- 3. Stanley Ho. "Man who posted doctored headline on CHC case makes public apology." Today, February 6, 2018.l https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/man-who-posted-doctored-headline-...

B3 0-4 pts

Do restrictions on the internet and digital content lack transparency, proportionality to the stated aims, or an independent appeals process?	14

There is a lack of transparency in the process for restricting online and digital content.

The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Bill, passed in May 2019, provides any government minister with the power to order correction notices and remove or restrict access to content if they find that it contains false statements and are of the opinion that it would be in the public interest to take action (see C1). Ministers will not be required to obtain court orders to have their directions enforced; instead, their orders have to first be complied with, even if one intends to lodge an appeal with the High Court.1 Internet intermediaries can also be held liable if they do not comply with orders to publish corrections or remove content. The law went into effect in October 2019, following the end of the coverage period.

The Broadcasting Act has included explicit internet regulations since 1996. Internet content providers and ISPs are licensed as a class and must comply with the act's Class License Conditions and the Internet Code of Practice. Under this regime, ISPs are required to take "all reasonable steps" to filter any content that the regulator deems "undesirable, harmful, or obscene."[2]

The Broadcasting Act empowers the MCI minister to prohibit disclosure of any orders to censor content.[3] This—together with the fact that most ISPs and large online media companies are close to the government—results in a lack of transparency and public accountability surrounding online content regulation.

IMDA's notice-and-takedown framework exists for high-impact online news sites—those receiving visits from a monthly average of at least 50,000 unique internet protocol (IP) addresses in Singapore. Since the IMDA is not obliged to make its takedown orders public, and there is no culture of leaks from major media organizations, it is not possible to gauge how often this mechanism is used.

Introduced in 2013, the notice-and-takedown framework removes the identified sites from the class license and subjects them to individual licensing, under which they are required to comply with any takedown notice within 24 hours. The sites are obliged to put up a "performance bond" of S$50,000 (US$37,000) as an incentive to remain in compliance.[4] The bond is in line with the requirement for niche television broadcasters.[5]

- 1. https://www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-libr...
- 2. Conditions of Class Licence, Section 2A (2), Broadcasting (Class Licence) Notification under the Broadcasting Act (Chapter 28) Section 9, last revised May 29, 2013, https://sso.agc.gov.sg/SL/BA1994-N1?DocDate=20161227.
- 3. Broadcasting Act (Chapter 28) Section 3(5).
- 4. Broadcasting (Class Licence) Notification under the Broadcasting Act (Chapter 28) Section 9, revised May 29, 2013, G.N. No. S330/2013.
- 5. "Fact Sheet – Online news sites to be placed on a more consistent licensing framework as traditional news platforms," Media Development Authority Singapore, May 28, 2013, https://www2.imda.gov.sg/news-and-events/Media-Room/archived/mda/Media-...

B4 0-4 pts

Do online journalists, commentators, and ordinary users practice self-censorship?	24

Self-censorship is common among journalists, commentators, and ordinary users, who are all aware that there could be repercussions, including civil and criminal penalties, for certain types of speech or expression (see C3). Matters of race and religion, as well as any comment on the independence of the judiciary or alleged government malfeasance, are considered particularly sensitive, given Singapore's laws relating to sedition, religious harmony, contempt of court, and defamation (see C2).1

- 1. Singapore Profile – Media. BBC News. September 5, 2017. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-15966553

B5 0-4 pts

Are online sources of information controlled or manipulated by the government or other powerful actors to advance a particular political interest?	24

Given the dominance of the ruling PAP in Singapore, mainstream online sources of information generally toe the government line, although these outlets occasionally publish critical content.

The government's influence over online information is exerted through formal ownership or executive oversight of mainstream outlets. The most read online news sources are the websites of the mainstream newspaper and broadcast outlets owned by SPH and MediaCorp. MediaCorp is state owned; while SPH previously held a 20 percent stake in MediaCorp Press, it sold its shares back to MediaCorp in 2017.1 SPH is a publicly listed company, but under the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, the government can nominate individuals to its board of directors. Since the 1980s, every SPH chairman has been a former cabinet minister. The government is known to have a say in the appointment of SPH's chief executives and chief editors.2 The government's ability to control online content was on display in October 2018, when the political editor of the mainstream outlet the *Straits Times* was transferred to another desk after government officials complained about political coverage under her watch.3

In addition to influencing the online media environment, the government uses more

informal means to advance progovernment commentary. Individual ministers and government agencies have ramped up and professionalized their social media capacity, including publishing press releases on social media platforms like Facebook. The organizers of major government campaigns regularly and openly commission bloggers and creative professionals. In January 2018, the Ministry of Finance paid over 50 “influencers” on Instagram to promote public awareness of the upcoming budget debate.4

Certain pro-PAP websites and Facebook pages that attack the opposition have been described as engaging in “guerrilla-type activism,” with supporters responding quickly to antiestablishment comments online.5 Bloggers have pointed out that some (largely progovernment) online commentators hide behind anonymous profiles; these accounts are often referred to as the “Internet Brigade,” or IBs.6 However, there is no concrete evidence of large-scale covert deployment of paid online commentators.

- 1. Jacqueline Woo. “SPH completes sale of Mediacorp stakes,” September 30, 2017. http://www.straitstimes.com/business/companies-markets/sph-completes-sa...
- 2. Cherian George, Freedom From The Press: Journalism and State Power in Singapore. Singapore: National University of Singapore, 2012.
- 3. “Straits Times political editor reassigned following government officials' discontent over coverage.” Yahoo News, October 31, 2018. https://sg.news.yahoo.com/straits-times-political-editor-reassigned-fol...
- 4. Joanna Seow. “Ministry of Finance pays for Instagram 'influencers' to promote Budget 2018.” Straits Times, January 17, 2018. http://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mof-pays-for-instagram-influencer...
- 5. Tan Tarn How, “The normalisation of the political cyberspace since the 2011 GE”; Pearl Lee, “Supporters seek to amplify PAP voice online,” Straits Times, September 20, 2015, http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/supporters-seek-to-amplify-pap-voi...; Tan Tarn How, Tng Ying Hui and Andrew Yeo, “Battle for Eyeballs: Online Media in the 2015 Election,” September 11, 2015, http://www.ipscommons.sg/battle-for-eyeballs-online-media-in-the-2015-e...
- 6. Jess C. Scott. “PAP Internet Brigade.” Singapore Politics – Blog, August 25, 2015. https://jesscscott.wordpress.com/2015/08/25/pap-ib/

B6 0-3 pts

Are there economic or regulatory constraints that negatively affect users' ability to publish content online? 13

Online-only news outlets struggle to remain financially viable due to, in part, restrictions on foreign funding and registration rules. The newly passed Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act may exacerbate financial instability by allowing the government to demonetize websites (see B3 and C1). Under the new law, government ministers can declare any website or page a "declared online location" if it has repeatedly published allegedly false information. Any website labeled as such will not be allowed to accept donations and sell advertising or subscriptions.[1]

Special IMDA registration rules prohibit foreign funding and require certain sites to provide details about funding sources.[2] In effect, this prevents sites from receiving grants and loans from foreign foundations, which have been essential for most independent political sites in the region. The Online Citizen and the Independent, two sites known for critical commentary, fall under these registration rules and have never had the capacity to generate original daily news or regular investigative features.[3]

The Online Citizen has been embroiled in a dispute with the IMDA since the agency said in December 2018 that the website can only accept donations from users willing to have their full names, identification numbers, and Singapore citizenship status submitted to the authorities.[4] This could be a serious blow to the site, which depends on donations to remain financially viable, as Singaporeans could avoid supporting the platform in order to not be identified by the government.

In September 2018, the minister of finance rejected an appeal from New Naratif—an online platform that advocates for democracy in Southeast Asia—to register as a Singapore subsidiary of its parent company, based in the United Kingdom. In April 2018, the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority publicly declined to register the company, which was co-founded by Singaporeans, on the grounds that it would be "contrary to Singapore's national interests" to allow registration, pointing to the political orientation of the company and its work, such as "publishing articles critical of politics in regional countries" and organizing democracy classrooms.[5] The refusal to allow the platform to register as a subsidiary company limits the platform's ability to operate as a legal entity in Singapore, which is

necessary to open bank accounts, hire staffers, and rent venues.

The Middle Ground, considered a more politically moderate website, announced in 2017 that it was winding down its operations, citing financial difficulties.6 Its demise followed those of other independent sociopolitical projects, such as Inconvenient Questions and SIX-SIX, both of which shut down due to a lack of financial resources in 2016.7

Some outlets have found ways to sustain themselves financially. Media start-up Mothership appears to be financially stable, and counts among its advertising partners multiple government ministries and agencies, including the Ministry of Defence, the Ministry of Finance, and the Economic Development Board.8 This has contributed to what analysts call a “normalization” of online space, with the PAP’s ideological dominance of the offline world increasingly reflected online.9 Rice Media, a niche digital outlet that launched in 2016, has also managed to sustain itself through advertising as well as seed funding from venture capital.10

- 1. Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act of 2019. https://www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-libr…
- 2. Wong Pei Ting, “MDA seeks registration of website The Middle Ground,” Today, July 29, 2015, http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/mda-seeks-registration-website-mid….
- 3. Walter Sim, “The Online Citizen now a one-man show,” Straits Times, March 3, 2016, http://www.straitstimes.com/politics/the-online-citizen-now-a-one-man-s….
- 4. Coconuts Singapore. “IMDA asks The Online Citizen to verify local donors by collecting full names and NRIC numbers.” December 22, 2018. https://coconuts.co/singapore/news/imda-asks-online-citizen-verify-loca…
- 5. “In Full: Acra's statement on rejection of Thum Ping Tjin and Kirsten Han's application to set up company said to be 'contrary to Singapore’s national interests.” Today Singapore, April 11, 2018. " https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/full-acras-statement-rejection-th…
- 6. Eleanor Dickinson. “Singapore news site The Middle Ground closes down after running on just $3,000 a month.” Mumbrella Asia, October 28, 2017. https://www.mumbrella.asia/2017/10/singapore-independent-news-site-the-…
- 7. Kenneth Cheng. “Lack of funds, so socio-political sites IQ, Six-Six close.” Today Singapore. May 25, 2016. https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/lack-funds-so-socio-political-sit…

- 8. Mothership, About Mothership. https://mothership.sg/about-us/
- 9. Tan Tarn How, “The normalisation of the political cyberspace since the 2011 GE,” Today, August 26, 2015, https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/normalisation-political-cyberspac...; Tan Tarn How, Tng Ying Hui and Andrew Yeo, “Whispers, not shouts: A re-reading of the social media space,” Straits Times, December 4, 2015, https://www.straitstimes.com/opinion/whispers-not-shouts-a-re-reading-o....
- 10. Charmaine Poh. “Interview with Mark Tan: The Man Behind Rice Media.” HN Worth, January 25, 2019. https://www.hnworth.com/article/2019/01/25/mark-tan-the-man-behind-rice...

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity? 34

While the online landscape is significantly more diverse than offline media, independent and opposition-oriented online news outlets are too small and weak to provide a strong counterbalance to the media domination of the PAP establishment. Struggling financially and working with limited resources, independent sources of online news are unable to challenge the newsgathering or reporting ability of mainstream media.

The only two licensed outlets that do not belong to national mainstream media firms are Yahoo Singapore’s news site and Mothership. After it was licensed, Yahoo’s reporters were granted the official accreditation that they had sought for several years. In 2015, Mothership became the first individually licensed site that was not part of a major corporation, after it crossed the regulatory threshold of 50,000 visitors a month.1 Although it is popular for its irreverent commentary, Mothership is not considered an antiestablishment outlet.

YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and international blog-hosting services are freely available, and most bloggers operate openly. All major opposition parties and many nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are active online.

- 1. “Mothership.sg to come under online news licensing framework,” Channel News Asia, July 30, 2015, https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/mothershipsg-told-to-comply-with....

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues? 46

The internet is regularly used for popular mobilization by groups from across the political spectrum and mobilization tools are unrestricted. However, the success of these efforts is significantly constrained by offline restrictions on fundraising and public assembly. There is only one location—a small downtown park known as Speakers' Corner—where Singaporeans can gather without a police permit, due to the country's restrictive laws that limit public demonstrations, including solo protests (see C2 and C3).

In April 2019, a student at the National University of Singapore complained on Instagram that the university administration and police did not adequately respond to her complaint that she was sexually harassed on campus.1 In response, students mobilized—largely online—to pressure the administration to hold a town hall meeting to hear their concerns.2 As a result of the students' campaign, the university held the town hall meeting and strengthened its policy on campus sexual harassment.3

In 2017, the organizers of Singapore's largest LGBT+ pride rally, Pink Dot, announced that barricades would be erected around Speakers' Corner during their event, in compliance with new regulations introduced by the government that ban the presence of foreigners at cause-related assemblies in the park.4 The requirements were criticized by Singaporeans online; some declared that they would attend the event on principle.5 Barricades were erected again in July 2018 for the tenth annual Pink Dot.6

- 1. Dewey Sim. "Singapore Student Monica Baey wants firm action from NUS after man who filmed her in hostel showe goes 'scot free'". South China Morning Post, April 19 2019. https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3006950/singapore...
- 2. Cindy Co and Jalelah Abu Baker. "NUS students call for school to be held accountable for sexual misconduct on campus." Channel News Asia, April 25, 2019. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/nus-town-hall-monica-bae...
- 3. Dewey Sim. "Singapore's NUS forced to overhaul handling of sexual harassment cases after backlash over Monica Baey's peeping Tom incident."

This Week in Asia. April 25, 2019. https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/society/article/3007708/singapores-nus-f...

- 4. Alfred Chua. “Security checks, barricades at this year’s Pink Dot event.” Today, May 30, 2017. https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/pink-dot-event-will-be-barricaded...
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C Violations of User Rights

Self-censorship online occurs mainly due to fear of post-publication punitive action—especially through strict laws on defamation, racial and religious insult, and contempt of court. While citizens remain free from major human rights abuses and enjoy high levels of personal security in Singapore, the government places a premium on order and stability at the expense of civil liberties and political dissent. The authorities are believed to exercise broad legal powers to obtain personal data for surveillance purposes in national security investigations.

C1 0-6 pts

Do the constitution or other laws fail to protect rights such as freedom of expression, access to information, and press freedom, including on the internet, and are they enforced by a judiciary that lacks independence?	26

The constitution enshrines freedom of expression, but it also grants Parliament leeway to impose limits on that freedom.1 The ruling party controls over 80 percent of the seats in Parliament, limiting opposition influence and oversight of legislation.

Several legislative initiatives that were pursued during the reporting period have the potential to negatively affect internet freedom and free expression in Singapore. In May 2019, Parliament passed the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, which gives any government minister broad blocking and removal power when online content is deemed a “false statement of fact,” and it is considered in the public interest to remove it (see B3). Ministers can also order

social media platforms to issue general corrections to their end users. Appeals can only be made to the High Court if the minister who ordered content removed fails to review the initial decision, essentially giving ministers the ability to decide what is true or false twice before the judiciary weighs in. Further, the legislation does not clearly explain what constitutes false or misleading content and broadly defines "public interest" to include the preservation of "public tranquility," "friendly relations" with other countries, and preventing loss of public confidence in government institutions.2 The new law grew out of Parliament's Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods, which released its report with recommendations in September 2018.3 The law came into effect on October 2, 2019, after the coverage period.4

As part of its efforts to counter disinformation, the government announced in February 2019 that it was considering legislation to counter foreign interference. This would include prohibiting foreign funding for "politically involved individuals and organizations" in Singapore.5 It is unclear how the government will define "politically involved," but countering foreign interference has been previously used as a justification for clamping down on civil society activities and independent media (see B6 and B8).

Contempt of court charges have been frequently lodged to stifle public debate in Singapore, including against bloggers who wrote about such issues as discrimination against LGBT+ people and the treatment of opposition politicians in the courts.6 A contempt of court law was passed in Parliament in 2016, and came into force a year later (see C2).7

The Newspaper and Printing Presses Act and the Broadcasting Act, which also covers the internet, grant sweeping powers to ministers as well as significant scope for administrative officials to apply vaguely articulated subsidiary regulations as they see fit, including website licensing and registration rules (see B6). Other laws that have been used to restrict online communication, such as the Sedition Act and the Political Donations Act, are open to broad interpretation by the authorities (see C2).

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- 2. Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulations Act 2019. https://www.parliament.gov.sg/docs/default-source/default-document-libr...'
- 3. Report of the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehood, Singapore Parliament, https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/selectcommittee/searchPage?from=20-9-

2018&to=2...
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C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities?	24

A number of laws apply criminal and civil penalties to online activities. Parliament passed the Public Order and Safety (Special Powers) Act in March 2018, and the measure took effect in May. It gives the authorities the power to ban communications—such as recording or distributing videos or images, and sending text or audio messages—in the event of a "serious incident." The definition of a "serious incident" encompasses terrorist attacks as well as peaceful protests such as large sit-down demonstrations.1 Those found guilty of violating the law could be sentenced to up to two years in prison and a fine of S$20,000 (US$15,200).2 This new law gravely restricts online media and freedom of expression, impeding reporting and the dissemination of information if the government deems an event a "serious incident."

In 2016, Parliament passed a new statute codifying the offense of contempt of court.3 The Administration of Justice (Protection) Act, which came into force in 2017, specifies that it is an offense to publish material that interferes with ongoing judicial proceedings or to "scandalize the court" by publishing anything that "imputes improper motives to or impugns the integrity, propriety, or impartiality of any court"

or “poses a risk that public confidence in the administration of justice would be undermined.” The law lowers the threshold for what constitutes a “real risk” of harm to the administration of justice. The law also allows the attorney general to “direct the publisher of any matter to refrain from or cease publishing” content that might be in contempt of court. The maximum penalty under the law is three years in prison and a fine of S$100,000 (US$75,000), a harsher punishment than judges had previously imposed.[4]

The Sedition Act, which dates to the colonial era, makes it an offense “to bring into hatred or contempt or to excite disaffection against the government” or “to promote feelings of ill will and hostility between different races or classes of the population of Singapore.”[5] Punishments for first-time offenders can include a prison term of up to three years. Section 298 of the Penal Code provides for prison terms of up to three years for offenders who act through any medium with the “deliberate intention of wounding the religious or racial feelings of any person.”[6] Police appear to regularly investigate complaints of insult and offense. In most known cases, police intervention at an early stage has been enough to elicit apologies that satisfy complainants.

Defamation is criminalized in the Penal Code (see C3).[7] In addition to criminal charges, civil defamation suits remain a powerful deterrent. PAP leaders have been awarded damages ranging from S$100,000 (US$75,000) to S$300,000 (US$224,000) in defamation suits brought against opposition politicians and foreign media corporations.[8]

Under the 2014 Protection from Harassment Act, a person who uses “threatening, abusive, or insulting” language likely to cause “harassment, alarm, or distress” can be fined up to S$5,000 (US$3,700).[9] Victims can also apply to the court for a protection order, which could include a ban on continued publication of the offending communication. Another provision in the law provides civil remedies for the publication of “false statements of fact” about a person. The affected party can seek a court order requiring that the publication of the falsehood cease unless a notice is inserted to correct the record. The law was amended in May 2019 to outlaw doxxing with intent to either harass or provoke the use of violence. The amendments also allow victims of harassment to seek protection for family members or prevent similar material from being circulated.[10]

Singapore’s broad public assembly laws, such as the Public Order Act, have also

been used to target online activity (see C3).11 Those convicted of organizing public assemblies without a permit can be fined up to S$5,000 (US$3,700); repeat offenders can be fined up to S$10,000 (US$7,500) and imprisoned for up to six months.

The Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act, passed in May 2019, includes harsh penalties for online activities. For example, the malicious communication of statements that are “false or misleading” can lead to fines of up to S$50,000 (US$36,000) or up to five years imprisonment. Failure to comply with orders to correct or remove content can also lead to fines of up to S$20,000 (US$14,400) or up to one year of imprisonment (see B3).

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- 3. Fathin Ungku, “Singapore parliament passes controversial contempt of court bill,” Reuters, August 15, 2016, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-singapore-rights/singapore-parliamen...
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- 6. Penal Code (Chapter 224), Section 298.
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- 8. Michael Palmer, “Damages in Defamation: What is Considered and What is Awarded?” Law Gazette, May 2005, http://www.lawgazette.com.sg/2005-5/May05-feature3.htm.
- 9. Protection From Harassment Act. https://sso.agc.gov.sg/Act-Rev/PHA2014/.
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C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities? 36

A few individuals—including activists, journalists, and opposition politicians—were charged and convicted for using the internet for social or political activities during the coverage period.

In January 2019, activist Jolovan Wham was found guilty of organizing an illegal assembly and refusing to sign a police statement.[1] The assembly in question was an indoor forum held in 2016, in which Hong Kong pro-democracy activist Joshua Wong participated as a speaker via Skype. The authorities argued that because Wong is a foreign speaker, a permit should have been obtained for the event.[2] Wham was fined S$3,200 (US$2,300) for both offenses, but will be appealing the conviction. He has indicated that, if the appeal is unsuccessful, he will serve 16 days in prison instead of paying the fine.[3]

In a separate case involving Wham, he and opposition politician John Tan were convicted in October 2018 of contempt of court.[4] The Attorney-General's Chambers initiated contempt of court proceedings in May 2018 against Wham, and later Tan—the first since the Administration of Justice (Protection) Act came into force.[5] Wham was accused of scandalizing the judiciary for a 2017 Facebook post claiming that Malaysian judges were more independent than their Singaporean counterparts in cases with political implications. Tan was similarly accused of scandalizing the judiciary by writing on Facebook that the Attorney-General's Chambers decision to commence contempt of court proceedings against Wham "only confirms what he said was true."

Singapore's criminal defamation law was used to punish online speech for the first time in decades during the coverage period. In December 2018, Terry Xu, chief editor of independent website the Online Citizen, was charged with criminal defamation, as was Daniel De Costa, a reader who had written a letter published on the website about government corruption and "tampering of the Constitution" (see B2).[6] De Costa was also charged with unauthorized access to computer material for allegedly using another person's email account to submit the letter.[7] Xu faces a prison sentence of up to two years and/or a fine, while De Costa faces up to two years in prison and/or a fine for criminal defamation and up to two years in prison and/or a fine of up to S$5,000 (US$3,700) for violating the Computer Misuse Act.[8]

Their cases were ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

Authorities began another investigation into Wham in March 2019, for a photo he posted on social media in support of Xu and De Costa.9 The police argued that Wham was protesting without a permit, although Wham asserted that he was not holding a solo protest in the photo. Wham's mobile phone was confiscated as part of the investigation.10 He has also been required to seek permission from the police and the courts before he is allowed to travel out of Singapore.

In November 2018, the Monetary Authority of Singapore filed a police report claiming that a States Times Review article alleging government corruption was false and had damaged the government's integrity (see B1 and B2).11 During the same month, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong sued financial advisor and government critic Leong Sze Hian for defamation after he shared the States Times Review article on Facebook. Lee described the action as "an attack against me personally as well as against the Singapore Government." Leong countersued the prime minister for abusing the court process, but this counterclaim was dismissed by the High Court. Leong is appealing this decision.12

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- 4. Selina Lum. "Activist Jolovan Wham and SDP's John Tan found guilty of contempt of court." Straits Times, October 9 2018. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/courts-crime/activist-jolovan-wh...
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- 10. “Singapore activist Jolovan Wham under investigation for protesting outside courts without a permit by holding up sign” Yahoo News, March 3, 2019. https://sg.news.yahoo.com/singapore-activist-jolovan-wham-under-0640074…
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C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption?	24

While many people attempt to communicate anonymously online in Singapore, their ability to conceal their identities from the government is limited. Registration is required for some forms of digital interaction. Government-issued identity cards or passports must be produced when buying SIM cards, including prepaid cards, and buyers’ personal details must be electronically recorded by vendors. Registration for the Wireless@SG public Wi-Fi network also requires identity details.

The government does not restrict the use of encryption tools. However, the Penal Code does allow authorities to require access to decrypted content if it is available.1

- 1. World map of encryption laws and policies, Global Partners Digital. https://www.gp-digital.org/world-map-of-encryption/

C5 0-6 pts

Does state surveillance of internet activities infringe on users' right to privacy?	26

Singapore has no constitutionally recognized right to privacy, and law enforcement authorities have broad powers to conduct searches on computers without judicial authorization.1 The full extent of Singapore's surveillance capabilities and practices is unknown. However, according to the London-based organization Privacy International, "It is widely acknowledged that Singapore has a well-established, centrally controlled technological surveillance system" that includes internet monitoring.2 According to one analyst, "Few doubt that the state can get private data whenever it wants." The government justifies its surveillance regime on security grounds. "Whether by compulsion or natural tendency, most Singaporeans appear to be relatively sympathetic to this rationale and do not protest the government's collection, monitoring, or even transfer abroad of data about them," a study by Columbia University published in 2015 found.3

Privacy International notes that law enforcement agencies have sophisticated technological capabilities to monitor telephone and other digital communications. According to the group, surveillance is also facilitated by the fact that "the legal framework regulating interception of communication falls short of applicable international human rights standards, and judicial authorization is sidelined and democratic oversight inexistent."4

A number of laws provide the government with access to users' personal information. For example, some members of Parliament have expressed privacy concerns about the 2018 Cybersecurity Act, which allows authorized officers to take or make copies of hard disks as part of investigations or assessments of cybersecurity threats (see C8).5

Under the criminal procedure code, police officers investigating arrestable offenses

may at any time access and search the data of any computer they suspect has been used in connection with the offense.6 No warrant or special authorization is needed. The police have seized electronic devices in relation to a number of investigations in recent years, including those of Jolovan Wham, Terry Xu, and Daniel De Costa (see C3).7 Penalties for noncompliance can include a fine of up to S$5,000 (US$3,700), six months in jail, or both. With authorization from the public prosecutor, police can also require individuals to hand over decryption codes. Failure to provide decryption information can result in fines of up to S$10,000 (US$7,500), jail terms of up to three months, or both.

According to information leaked by former US National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden, SingTel has facilitated intelligence agencies' access to traffic carried on a major undersea telecommunications cable.8

Singapore has adopted concepts contained in the US Defense Department Total Information Awareness program to gather electronic records en masse and search for evidence of impending security threats. The idea, which has proven controversial in the United States, has been incorporated into Singapore's Risk Assessment and Horizon Scanning program. According to one analyst, "Singapore has become a laboratory not only for testing how mass surveillance and big-data analysis might prevent terrorism, but for determining whether technology can be used to engineer a more harmonious society."9

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- 2. Terence Lee, "Singapore an advanced surveillance state, but citizens don't mind," Tech In Asia, November 26, 2013, accessed July 10, 2014, http://www.techinasia.com/singapore-advanced-surveillance-state-citizen...
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- 5. Jalelah Abu Baker. “Cybersecurity Bill passed in Parliament; MPs raise questions on privacy, cost”. Channel Asia News, February 5, 2018. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/cybersecurity-bill-passe…
- 6. Criminal Procedure Code (Chapter 68) Section 39.
- 7. “Police seize equipment from The Online Citizen in defamation investigation.” Yahoo News, November 20, 2018. https://sg.news.yahoo.com/police-seize-equipment-online-citizen-defamat…; Lim Min Zhang. “TOC editor one of two men to be charged with criminal defamation”, Straits Times. 13 December 2018. https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/toc-editor-one-of-two-men-to-be-…
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C6 0-6 pts

Are service providers and other technology companies required to aid the government in monitoring the communications of their users?	36

Without a constitutional right to privacy, service providers and technology companies can be required to hand information over to the government.

Website registration requirements, though imposed on only a small number of platforms, have raised concerns about unwarranted official intrusion into the sites’ operations. For example, in December 2018, the IMDA asked the Online Citizen, which is supported by donations, to provide the Singaporean identity numbers of their donors in order to verify that it only receives financial support from Singaporean citizens.1

Responding to a parliamentary question, the government said in 2013 that, as part of the evidence-gathering process, law enforcement agencies made around 600 information requests per year to Google, Facebook, and Microsoft between 2010

and 2012. Most were for Computer Misuse and Cybersecurity Act offenses, while the rest were for crimes related to corruption, terrorist threats, gambling, and vice. Although all requests were for metadata, agencies can request content data if it is required for investigating offenses, the government said.2 The Personal Data Protection Act exempts public agencies and organizations acting on their behalf.3

Recent transparency reports from various social media and tech companies indicate the extent to which the government seeks access to Singaporean users' data. From July to December 2018, Facebook reported receiving 249 requests from the Singapore government for the details of 285 accounts. Facebook provided the data for 65 percent of the cases.4 From July to December 2018, Google received 339 user data disclosure requests relating to 523 Google accounts. Some data was provided in 64 percent of the cases.5

- 1. Terry Xu. "IMDA throws "bombshell" at TOC's fundraising efforts by seeking NRIC number for all its donors" The Online Citizen, December 21, 2018. https://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2018/12/21/imda-throws-bombshell-at-to...
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C7 0-5 pts

Are individuals subject to extralegal intimidation or physical violence by state authorities or any other actor in retribution for their online activities?	35

Internet users did not experience violence in retaliation for their online activities during the reporting period. However, due to the lack of protections for the expression of unpopular or dissenting views, ICT users do not often operate in an environment free of fear.

In April 2018, members of civil society criticized the manner in which the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods held its public hearings, accusing the

committee of not adhering to its own terms of reference.1 Historian and managing director of New Naratif Thum Pingtjin was questioned for six hours about his work and expertise on Singapore's history, in response to a claim he made in his submission that the government had itself spread "fake news" when it carried out detentions without trial. During her testimony, Kirsten Han, the editor-in-chief of New Naratif, was questioned about an article she had written in an exchange that ended with a committee member telling her that she had "not yet" been sued or jailed. Shortly after the hearings, the authorities rejected an application by New Naratif's parent company to register a subsidiary in Singapore (see B6). In the Select Committee's report released in September 2018, a section devoted to Thum claimed that he had lied about his academic credentials and therefore lacked credibility (see C1).

In September 2018, Seah Kian Peng, a PAP member of Parliament and member of the Select Committee, alleged on Facebook that Thum, Han, Jolovan Wham, and artist Sonny Liew had met with Malaysian prime minister Mahathir Mohamad and invited him to "bring democracy to Singapore."2 His allegation that this group of Singaporeans had invited a foreign leader to intervene in Singapore's domestic politics was further amplified by Facebook pages affiliated with the ruling party and some of its members, as well as the mainstream media.3 These accusations triggered online trolling and harassment against the group, including calls for their arrest, detention, and even execution.

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- 3. Yasmine Yayha. "MP Seah Kian Peng calls historian Thum Ping Tjin out for his comments after Mahathir meeting". The Straits Times. September 2, 2018. https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/mp-calls-historian-out-for-his-co...

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack? 23

Hacking and other forms of cyberattack have historically not been a widespread

problem in Singapore. However, during the coverage period, Singapore was subjected to multiple technical attacks and other privacy breaches.

In October 2018, SingHealth—the country's largest group of health care providers—was impacted by the "most serious breach of personal data" in the country's history. The nonmedical personal data of 1.5 million patients, including names, race, and birth dates was collected, including the prime minister, and details about the medications of 160,000 patients was also taken.1

In January 2019, the Committee of Inquiry reported that preexisting vulnerabilities in SingHealth's system and a lack of digital-security knowledge among staff contributed to the breach.2 Although the government claims to have acted against the hackers, it refused to provide details, citing national security concerns.3 In March 2019, the cybersecurity company Symantec determined that the group Whitefly was responsible for the breach, and a company representative suggested that the group could be state-sponsored.4

Another serious breach was reported in January 2019, when the government announced that the personal data—including names, addresses, and medical information—of 14,200 people with HIV who either lived in Singapore, or had visited the country, was leaked online. 5 The information of 2,400 of their contacts was also leaked. The authorities reported that the perpetrator was an American citizen who had previously been incarcerated for fabricating his academic qualifications and his own HIV test in order to get an employment visa in Singapore. His partner had previously been the head of the Ministry of Health's National Public Health Unit, and had allegedly downloaded the registry.

The Cybersecurity Act was passed by Parliament in February 2018 and came into force the following month. The law requires owners of computer systems that deal with essential services pertaining to national security, public safety, or the economy to report cybersecurity incidents and conduct audits and risk assessments, among other obligation.

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- 2. Fann Sim. "SingHealth COI report made public: System vulnerabilities, staff lapses, skilled hackers led to cyberattack". Channel News Asia. January 10,

2019. https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/singhealth-cyberattack-c...

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Country Facts

- **Freedom in the World Status**

  Partly Free
- **Networks Restricted**

  No
- **Social Media Blocked**

  No
-

Websites Blocked

Yes

- **Pro-government Commentators**

  No

- **Users Arrested**

  Yes

Previous Reports

- 2018 Report