

Alternative media: New era in ties?

By CHERIAN GEORGE

CITIZEN journalism in Singapore appears to have made a major breakthrough, with the Tony Tan Campaign for President trying a handful of leading bloggers to its press conference announcing his candidature on Thursday.

Along with mainstream media reporters, The Online Citizen (TOC) and Mr Lee Kim Mun, better known as Mr Brown, were at the Elections Department to witness Dr Tan collecting his eligibility forms. For a change, the bloggers did not have to pick up the intelligence through backdoor channels, or need to try to gate-crash the event. TOC, Mr Brown, Mr Leong Sze Han and others received personal invitations from Dr Tan's office.

I have been told on good authority that the candidate's aides decided on the invitation list independently. The Government is not handling his media relations. But given who he is and what he is likely to become, Dr Tan's move could turn out to be a landmark in relations between the state and Singapore's intrepid and often unruly alternative online media.

Until now, the Government has refused to treat any of these sites as engaging in bona fide journalism. Bloggers have long complained that government departments do not respond to requests for information. When TOC organised a pre-election forum for all political parties to share their ideas last December, the People's Action Party would have nothing to do with it. TOC highlighted the ruling party's conspicuous absence by leaving an empty chair on stage.

The decision by the Tony Tan Campaign to loop-in bloggers is undoubtedly one result of May's ground-breaking general election. Online media were obviously influential, and sections of the Estab-

lishment may have decided that they have no choice but to do business with them. Dr Tan's likely challengers, Dr Tan Cheng Bock and Mr Tan Kin Lian, have lost no time in courting alternative media coverage. The Clash of the Tri-Tans, as Mr Brown called it, will elevate the status of Singapore's more prominent bloggers.

At the press conference, TOC lived up to its progressive values by asking about the use of defamation law against critics, and on the exercise of presidential pardon in death penalty cases. Mr Leong, Singapore's most numerate citizen journalist, asked Dr Tan how much money he stood to lose by giving up his posts at the Government of Singapore Investment Corporation and Singapore Press Holdings. The answers they received may not have been particularly illuminating, but the significance was the opening granted to citizen journalists to pose questions at all.

The question now is whether the Government will follow the presidential hopefuls' example. Reaching out to the likes of TOC would be a calculated risk. While officials probably still can't stand their guts, such sites represent the more rational and reasonable end of the ideological spectrum in cyberspace.

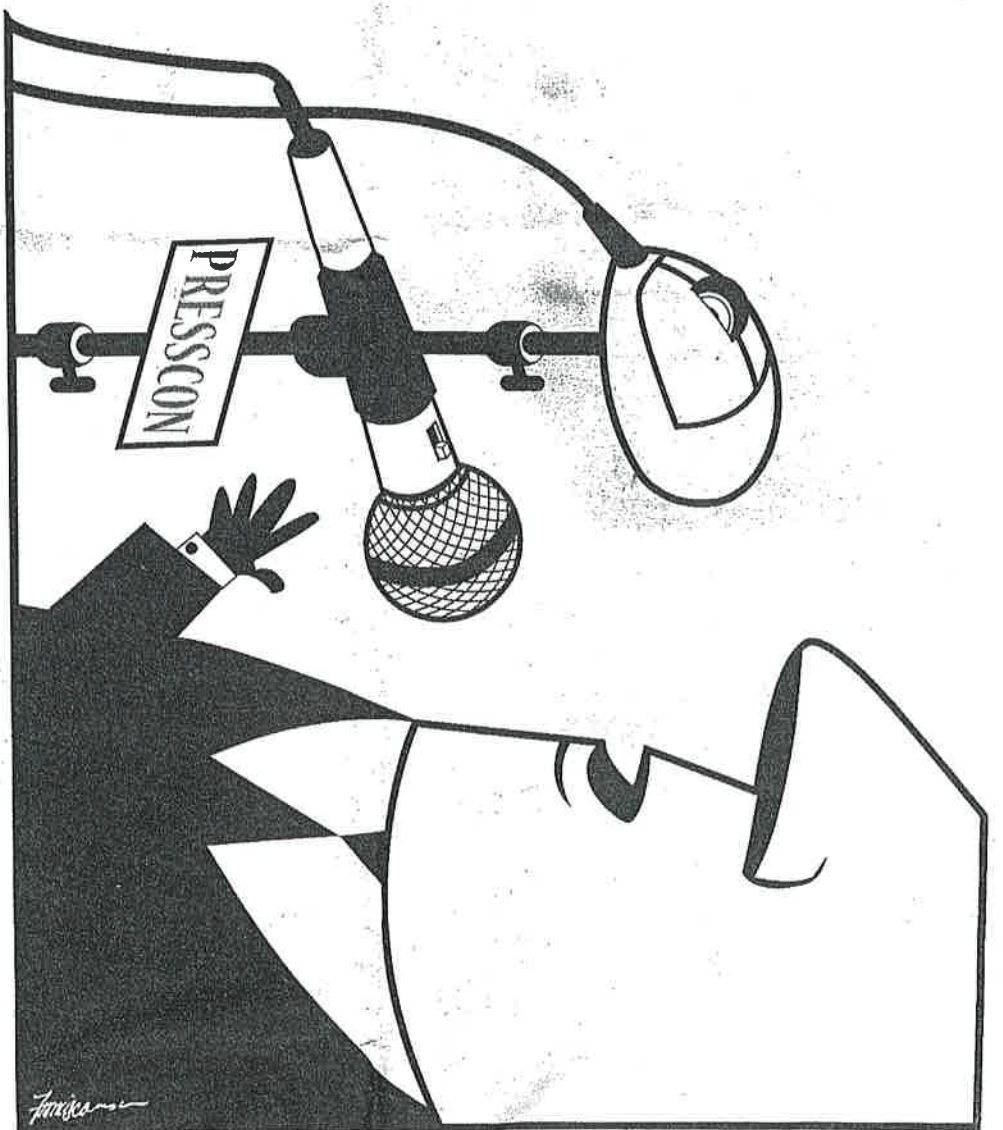
TOC, together with Mr Alex Au's Yawning Bread and some other individual blogs, has been pushing for more credible online journalism within its extremely limited means. Most importantly, the sites have shown some commitment to accountability. They operate openly rather than behind cloaks of pseudonymity, they are not above correcting factual errors when these are pointed out to them, and they practise either pre- or post-moderation of comments to keep discussions within certain bounds.

All the bloggers invited to cover Dr Tan at the Elections Department honoured the embargo on the news. None published the information until that morn-

ing. They were not restrained by the Official Secrets Act, but lived up to the professional trust they were accorded.

Of course, if the Government wants an echo chamber, it will remain bitterly disappointed by the alternative media. Most will remain oppositional. The more realistic and strategic target, though, is to divert the cyber chatter from flowing underground and into the gutter. One disturbing sight during the general election - not just for the Government but anyone with an interest in cultivating Singapore's civic life - was how much of cyberspace was taken over by hot-heads who were opposed to reasonable discussion.

To prevent the growth of the Internet's lunatic fringe, it makes eminent sense for the Government to start taking Singapore's more serious citizen journalists more seriously. Even if they are not



as experienced as professional journalists and lack the reach of mainstream media, they can at least be treated as unusually engaged members of the Singapore family. This message was not lost on TOC, which posted on Facebook: "Foreign press not invited to Dr Tony Tan's press conference. TOC is."

Thursday's move was something of a leap of faith. Assuming it is not a one-off and is instead a sign of things to come, there are bound to be feeling problems. Each side will have unrealistically high expectations of the other. If these expectations are not moderated, the experiment could end prematurely and sullenly.

Bloggers will have to understand that the huge and complex machinery of government is not going to transform itself overnight. Indeed, a blogger-friendly media engagement policy is probably easier

to implement for a small and discrete Presidential Election campaign office than it would be for a ministry.

On the Establishment's part, officials need to be clear that the success of the experiment cannot be measured by how quickly bloggers and their readers are led to the "right" answers or to a "consensus", but by the inclusiveness and civility of the conversation. As long as more and more people are trying to persuade one another - rather than ignoring or shouting down one another - such engagement between government and alternative media would be strengthening Singapore's governance and civic life.

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