



Freedom on the Net 2021 Singapore

PARTLY FREE

54

/100

A. <u>Obstacles to Access</u>	19 /25
B. <u>Limits on Content</u>	17 /35
C. <u>Violations of User Rights</u>	18 /40

LAST YEAR'S SCORE & STATUS

54 /100

Partly Free

Scores are based on a scale of 0 (least free) to 100 (most free)



Overview

TOP

Internet freedom in Singapore remained under threat, as the government continued to exercise its control over online content. Ahead of the July

2020 general elections, the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) was used against media platforms and opposition politicians. The government confirmed that data collected by contact tracing apps could be used by law enforcement in criminal investigations for serious offenses, including terrorism and drug trafficking. Moreover, ordinary users continued to be investigated by police and criminally charged for the political and social content they posted, further reducing the space for free expression and free assembly online.

The ruling People's Action Party (PAP) has dominated Singapore's parliamentary system since independence. It 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, 2020 - May 31, 2021

- The website of Lawyers for Liberty, a Malaysian nongovernmental organization (NGO), remained blocked during the coverage period. It was blocked in January 2020 after the group failed to comply with a POFMA correction notice regarding its statements on Singapore's system of capital punishment (see B1 and B2).
- Ministers repeatedly invoked POFMA to order independent news websites, opposition politicians, NGOs, and social media users to publicize correction notices pertaining to their online content (see B2 and B3).
- After the High Court dismissed two lawsuits challenging orders issued under POFMA, both were appealed; the suits were brought by the Singapore Democratic Party and the *Online Citizen*, a media outlet (see B3).
- Users continued to be investigated and arrested for their online^{TOP} activities. In November 2020, activist Jolovan Wham was charged for protesting without a permit after he posted two pictures, of which one

was in support of the chief editor of the *Online Citizen* and a contributor previously charged with criminal defamation (see C3).

- The government mandated that data collected by COVID-19 contact tracing applications be accessible to authorities in criminal investigations involving serious offenses, such as terrorism and drug trafficking (see C5).

A. Obstacles to Access

A1 0-6 pts

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

6 / 6

Singapore's internet penetration rate is high, as is the general quality of service. Some 93 percent of resident households had broadband internet access as of 2019. ¹ In the fourth quarter of 2020, there were more than 9.8 million broadband subscriptions on the island, a drop from the previous year. ²

Mobile data usage reached 55.05 petabytes (PB) in the fourth quarter of 2020. ³ Singaporean telecommunications companies selected Ericsson and Nokia in June 2020 as key vendors for the island's fifth-generation (5G) network. Island-wide 5G connectivity is expected by 2025.⁴

The fiber-based Nationwide Broadband Network (NBN), providing speeds of 1 gigabit per second (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 megabits per second (Mbps). As of January 2021, a list compiled by the Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) showed that there were over 6,000 [Wireless@SG](#) hotspots across the island.⁵

The government is experimenting with a heterogeneous network (HetNet), ^{TOP} a new wireless system that allows smartphone users to switch automatically between mobile 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

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?	3 / 3
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The internet is largely available to all users in Singapore and the government has undertaken projects to limit any existing digital divide, such as those which cut along generational lines. As of May 2021, there were a total of 8,521,200 pre- and post-paid third-generation (3G) and 4G mobile subscriptions in Singapore. ¹

The digital divide based on age increased in recent years. While 100 percent of residents between 15 and 24 years of age reported in 2019 that they had used the internet in the past three months, the rate was 58 percent for those 60 and older. ² However, there has been a decrease in the number of older people using portable internet-enabled equipment, such as smartphones: 69 percent of people over the age of 60 reported using such devices in 2019, down from 73 percent in 2018. ³ Such disparities were exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, as people increasingly worked and studied from home. ⁴ In an effort to bridge this digital divide, Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat announced his intention to provide laptops and tablets for students and skills-training for senior citizens ⁵ so they could better access digital resources. ⁶

A3 0-6 pts

Does the government exercise technical or legal control over internet infrastructure for the purposes of restricting connectivity?	TOP 5 / 6
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No known restrictions have been placed on information and communications technology (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 it through international carriers. This improves latency and resilience when there are cable outages on the international network. ¹

Singapore's NBN structure is built and operated by an entity that supplies wholesale-only, open-access, and nondiscriminatory services 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-level service provision downstream.

A4 0-6 pts

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

4 / 6

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

The dominant ISPs are also the main 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. There are now nine mobile virtual network operators which lease network infrastructure from SingTel, Starhub, or M1 and sell mobile plans. ¹ MyRepublic launched a broadband service in 2014, and began offering mobile services in 2018. ² Other relatively new operators include ViewQwest and Circles.Life, Singapore's first fully digital telecommunications company. ³ The Australian telecommunications company TPG Telecom launched commercial services at the end of March 2020. ⁴

TOP

The virtual mobile telecommunications carrier Zero Mobile was suspended and blacklisted by the IMDA in March 2020 over its failure to address billing disputes with former customers after the company stopped offering plans in December 2019. ⁵

The government awarded 5G licenses to Singtel, StarHub, and M1 in April 2020. TGP Telecom failed to receive a 5G license, despite submitting a bid. ⁶

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?

1 / 4

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).

B. Limits on Content

B1 0-6 pts

Does the state block or filter, or compel service providers to block or filter, internet content, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?

4 / 6

Long-term blocks are imposed on certain websites, and the government directed ISPs to restrict access to at least one website during the coverage period in response to its critical content. **TOP**

In January 2020, the MCI ordered ISPs to block the website of the Malaysian NGO Lawyers for Liberty. The block was ordered after the group failed to publish a POFMA correction notice related to its statements on Singapore's methods of capital punishment (see B2). ¹ The website remained blocked as of June 2021.

The IMDA has previously directed ISPs to restrict access to websites and pages related to Alex Tan, a strident critic of the ruling party and a 2011 candidate for an opposition party. In December 2018, the IMDA temporarily blocked access to the news site *Singapore Herald*, which is edited by Tan, after it refused to comply with a number of takedown orders. The authorities claimed that eight of *Singapore Herald's* articles on a maritime dispute between Singapore and neighboring Malaysia “blatantly mispresent[ed]” Singapore's position and used “false statements” and “emotionally charged phrases.” ²

In November 2018, the IMDA had directed ISPs to restrict access to the *States Times Review*, which was also run by Tan, 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 surrounding 1Malaysia Development Berhad (1MDB), a Malaysian state investment fund. 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 corruption scandal. ³ The IMDA said that the article contained “prohibited content” under its Internet Code of Practice, claiming that the content “undermined public confidence in the integrity of the Singapore government and is objectionable on grounds of public interest.” ⁴ The site shifted its activity to Facebook after November 2018. ⁵ A July 2020 test by the Open Observatory of Network Interference found signs of DNS tampering, suggesting that the website may still be blocked. ⁶ As of the end of the coverage period, it is unclear if these websites are still blocked and if they remain managed by Tan.

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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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹

In May 2018, the High Court ordered ISPs to block 53 websites containing pirated materials, including Pirate Bay and SolarMovie.¹⁰ 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.¹¹

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, particularly material that is protected by international human rights standards?

1 / 4

The state has sought to employ legal, administrative, and other means to remove content. Since the implementation of POFMA in October 2019, correction orders have been issued against news outlets, opposition figures, and NGOs.

Government ministers did not order content to be removed under POFMA during the coverage period. However, ministers invoked the law on over 80 separate occasions during the coverage period to order the publication of correction directions.¹ These orders were issued to news websites, opposition politicians, social media users, and social media platforms in relation to a variety of allegedly false claims, on topics including the annual salary of the chief executive of state-owned investment company Temasek Holdings and local transmission of the coronavirus driving the COVID-19 pandemic.² Recipients of correction directions are required to publish notices drafted by the government stating that their content contains “falsehoods.”

In May 2021, the government issued a correction direction to the news site *Online Citizen*, news site *Singapore Uncensored*, and an Instagram user for sharing claims that the police had reprimanded an elderly woman for not wearing a mask. ³ After the order was issued, the Minister for Home Affairs and Law described the *Online Citizen*'s actions as "despicable" and "quite malicious." ⁴ The *Online Citizen* appealed to the minister to withdraw the POFMA order, but the appeal was rejected. ⁵ Also in May 2021, Twitter and Facebook were issued general correction orders requiring them to notify all users that false claims of a Singapore variant of COVID-19 were circulating on social media. ⁶

In January 2020, during the previous coverage period, authorities ordered the Malaysian NGO Lawyers for Liberty to issue a correction for its publication of allegations by an anonymous former prison officer that the Singapore Prison Service used illegal methods of execution if deemed necessary (see B1). ⁷ Three others—Yahoo Singapore, the *Online Citizen*, and journalist Kirsten Han—had shared the article or its claims and received ministerial orders to correct the "falsehoods." Lawyers for Liberty filed a motion in the Kuala Lumpur High Court against Singapore's home affairs minister, claiming that the correction order was an attempt to encroach on freedom of expression in Malaysia. ⁸ However, the legal action expired in July 2020 and was struck out by the Malaysian High Court after the organization withdrew their application to renew the lawsuit. ⁹

During the campaign period for the July 2020 general elections, POFMA orders were issued by senior civil servants who had been temporarily appointed by government ministers to serve as acting ministers while the elected people campaigned. These orders targeted content related to statements or talking points from opposition politicians about funding for foreign students, ¹⁰ Singapore's population policies, ¹¹ and handling of COVID-19. ¹²

TOP

In July 2020, the IMDA directed Facebook to remove "boosted advertisements" from New Naratif—an online platform cofounded by Singaporeans that advocates for democracy in Southeast Asia—claiming that the boosted posts constituted unauthorized election advertising. ¹³

One of those advertisements, which mimicked a perfume ad, accused Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong of using the rule of law to silence his critics. ¹⁴ New Naratif's managing director has since been interrogated by the police over this alleged offence (see C3).

During the previous coverage period, government ministers also used POFMA to block or disable access to content on five separate occasions. In May 2020, the Minister for Communications and Information (MCI) invoked POFMA to direct Facebook to disable Singaporeans' access to Tan's *National Times Singapore* page. ¹⁵ MCI had previously designated the page as a "declared online location," requiring it to carry a message disclosing a history of spreading falsehoods, and prohibiting Tan from deriving any benefit from operating the page. ¹⁶ The MCI ordered the block after Tan refused to comply with that directive. The government's order that Facebook restrict access to *National Times Singapore* for domestic users was the fourth such "disabling order" related to a page run by Tan. ¹⁷

Streaming platforms have also complied with requests to remove content. According to Netflix's Environmental Social Governance 2020 report, the company removed two films related to recreational drug use in May and August 2020 at the request of IMDA. ¹⁸ In February 2020, Netflix reported that it had complied with five requests from the IMDA between 2018 and 2020 to remove titles related to marijuana or Christianity from its platform. ¹⁹

In November 2019, Facebook removed the NUSSU-NUS Students United page, which was spoofing a local university group, because it violated the platform's community guidelines; the group had previously used a quote from Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam in a misleading way. ²⁰ An employee of the Housing Development Board was fired in May 2020 for his alleged involvement with the page. ²¹

In July 2019, the IMDA issued requests to remove an online rap video by siblings Preeti and Subhas Nair that criticized a controversial advertisement in which a Chinese actor darkened his skin to portray characters of other ethnicities. Police opened an investigation following

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reports against the siblings (see C3). ²² Twitter users reported that some posts sharing the video were unavailable to other accounts based in Singapore, with at least one user citing a tweet that was “withheld in Singapore in response to a legal demand.” ²³ Preeti and Subhas Nair publicly apologized twice about their video after it was removed. ²⁴

In September 2018, Terry Xu, chief editor of the *Online Citizen*, complied with an IMDA request demanding that he remove a reader’s letter within six hours. ²⁵ 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 were 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).

Individual government officials are known to demand retractions or apologies for comments on social media that they take issue with. In December 2020, human rights lawyer Ravi Madasamy, better known as M. Ravi, was charged with criminal defamation for posting on Facebook allegations that the law minister wielded influence over the judiciary. ²⁶ The charges were dropped in March 2021 after Ravi removed the Facebook post, issued a written apology, and promised not to publish similar allegations. He was also given a 24-month conditional warning. ²⁷ In May 2020, Minister for Manpower Josephine Teo sent letters demanding that activist Jolovan Wham and another individual withdraw comments suggesting corruption on the part of her and her husband, the chief executive of Surbana Jurong, during the COVID-19 outbreak. ²⁸ Both men withdrew their comments and apologized. ²⁹ In September 2019, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong demanded that Xu remove and apologize for an *Online Citizen* article that he claimed was defamatory. ³⁰

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After Xu refused, Lee initiated defamation proceedings against him (see C3). ³¹

Ahead of the July 2020 general elections, Facebook announced that it had removed accounts and pages for “inauthentic behavior.” ³² Among those removed included the progovernment Fabrications About the People’s Action Party (PAP) page, ³³ as well as three accounts running the *Critical Spectator*, a commentary page that also posts progovernment content. ³⁴

Since the Class License system was introduced in 1996 (see B3), it has been used to restrict access to sensitive websites.

B3 0-4 pts

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

1 / 4

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

POFMA, which came into effect in October 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 and C2). Ministers are not required to obtain court orders to have their directives enforced; instead, the directives must first be complied with, even if one intends to lodge an appeal with the High Court. ¹ In addition to content publishers, internet intermediaries can be held liable if they do not comply with orders to issue corrections or remove content. There is a complete lack of transparency around how and when the government decides to invoke POFMA against online content. ²

Only a handful of correction orders issued under POFMA have been challenged in the High Court. ³ The first two cases, brought by the Singapore Democratic Party and the *Online Citizen* in January 2020, were in chambers and not open court. ⁴ The High Court has since dismissed

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both appeals. ⁵ While the High Court judge in the Singapore Democratic Party's case ruled that the burden of proof of a statement's falsehood should lie with the government, ⁶ the judge in the *Online Citizen*'s case later disagreed and said the onus should be on the appellant. ⁷ Both the Singapore Democratic Party and the *Online Citizen* appealed the High Court's decisions, although the Court of Appeals has yet to rule at the end of the coverage period. ⁸ Separately, in May 2020, the *Online Citizen* applied for a judicial review of a POFMA correction direction for a post which included a speculation on the annual salary of state investment company Temasek Holdings' chief executive. ⁹

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." ¹⁰

The Broadcasting Act empowers the MCI minister to prohibit disclosure of any orders to censor content. ¹¹ This—together with the fact that most ISPs and large online media companies have close ties to the government—results in a lack of transparency and public accountability surrounding online content regulation.

The 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 relevant 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\$37,100) as an incentive to remain in compliance.

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12 The bond is in line with the requirement for niche television broadcasters. **13**

B4 0-4 pts

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

2 / 4

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). **1** 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). **2**

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?

2 / 4

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

The government exerts influence over online information 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**

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SPH is a currently a publicly listed company, but under the Newspaper and Printing Presses Act, the government can nominate individuals to its board of directors. In May 2021, SPH, citing falling revenues, announced plans to restructure and transition its media business into a not-for-profit

organization, SPH Media. ² The government announced that it is prepared to fund SPH Media. ³ Khaw Boon Wan, a former PAP official, became the chairman of SPH Media in May 2021. ⁴

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. ⁵ 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 coverage under her watch. ⁶

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. ⁷

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. ⁸ Bloggers have pointed out that some (largely progovernment) online commentators hide behind anonymous profiles; these accounts are often referred to as the "Internet Brigades," or IBs. ⁹ However, there is no concrete evidence of large-scale covert deployment of paid online commentators. Before the July 2020 general elections, some pro-PAP Facebook pages were removed by Facebook for violating its policies (see B2).

B6 0-3 pts

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

1 / 3

Online-only news outlets struggle to remain financially viable, due in part to restrictions on foreign funding and registration rules. POFMA may exacerbate financial instability by allowing the government to demonetize websites (see B3 and C1). Under the law, government ministers can designate any website or page as a “declared online location” if it has repeatedly published allegedly false information. Websites with this designation are not allowed to accept donations or sell advertising or subscriptions. ¹ In February 2020, the Facebook page of the *States Times Review* was made the first “declared online location.” ² Since then, three other pages administered by Tan—the *Singapore States Times*, *National Times Singapore*, and Tan’s own Facebook page—have been designated “declared online locations” after receiving POFMA orders (see B2). ³

Special IMDA registration rules prohibit foreign funding and require certain sites to provide details about funding sources. ⁴ 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.

⁵ In March 2021, the government indicated that they were “fine-tuning” draft legislation on combatting foreign interference, which may include limits on foreign funding for online media (see C1). ⁶

In December 2019, the Singapore Democratic Party called on Google to explain its decision to ban political advertising in Singapore. In response, Google said it would not accept any advertising that is regulated under Singapore’s Code of Practice for Transparency of Online Political Advertisements, ⁷ which was established under POFMA. The code requires hosts, platforms, or other intermediaries to develop due-diligence measures that include disclosure notices indicating who requested or paid for the advertisement, providing the government with a record of all online political advertisements, and implementing government reporting channels. ⁸ The Singapore Democratic Party argues that Google’s ban on political advertising could disproportionately affect opposition parties, which receive less coverage in the mainstream media.

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In September 2018, the minister of finance rejected an appeal from New Naratif to register as a Singapore subsidiary of its parent entity, which is based in the United Kingdom. In April 2018, the Accounting and Corporate Regulatory Authority publicly declined to register the group on the grounds that it would be “contrary to Singapore’s national interests” to allow registration, pointing to the political orientation of New Naratif and its work, such as “publishing articles critical of politics in regional countries” and organizing democracy classrooms. ⁹ The refusal to allow the platform to register as a subsidiary company limits its ability to operate as a legal entity in Singapore, which is necessary to open bank accounts, hire employees, and rent venues.

Some online outlets have found ways to sustain themselves financially. The media start-up Mothership appears to be financially stable, and counts among its advertising partners multiple government ministries and agencies, including the Ministry of Defense, the Ministry of Finance, and the Economic Development Board. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ Rice Media, a niche digital outlet that launched in 2016, has also managed to sustain itself through advertising and seed funding from venture-capital investors. ¹²

B7 0-4 pts

Does the online information landscape lack diversity and reliability?

3 / 4

While the online information landscape is significantly more diverse than offline media, most independent and opposition-oriented online news outlets are too small and weak to counterbalance 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 and dissemination capabilities 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

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Yahoo was licensed, its 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. Other commercial outlets, such as Rice Media, ² have gained traction online. However, they are also subject to the same pressures of legal restrictions and self-censorship as all other media platforms in the country.

YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and international blog-hosting services are freely available, and most bloggers operate openly. All major opposition parties and many NGOs are active online. Activists and other civil society groups are also able to be vocal about a variety of issues on social media platforms.

B8 0-6 pts

Do conditions impede users' ability to mobilize, form communities, and campaign, particularly on political and social issues?	3 / 6
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The internet is regularly used for popular mobilization by groups from across the political spectrum, and mobilization tools are unrestricted. The success of these efforts is significantly constrained by police investigations and arrests for those participating in online activism, as well as 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. However, during most of the coverage period, this park was closed because of ongoing concerns related to the COVID-19 pandemic. ¹ The country's restrictive laws generally limit public demonstrations, including solo protests (see C2 and C3).

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With the introduction of social-distancing rules and a partial lockdown in Singapore during the COVID-19 pandemic, civil society events shifted online, which allowed organizers to accommodate and reach more

people. In June 2020, Singapore's largest LGBT+ pride rally, Pink Dot, was held as a virtual event instead of its usual gathering in Speakers' Corner. ² The thirteenth annual Pink Dot rally was held online again in June 2021, after the reporting period. ³ Singaporeans have also made use of online petitions and fundraisers to draw attention to issues such as the death penalty or the plight of migrant workers affected by Covid-19. ⁴

During the pandemic, political candidates also conducted campaign events ahead the July 2020 general election online. Large political rallies were banned, so opposition parties used social media platforms to address voters, hosting Facebook Live talk shows and engaging with voters through Twitter and Instagram. ⁵

In May 2021, Leong Sze Hian, a financial adviser and government critic, and blogger Roy Ngerng, successfully crowdfunded tens of thousands of dollars to pay damages and court fees after they were sued for defamation by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (see C3). They collectively raised over S\$400,000 (US\$297,000). ⁶

In March 2020, two young Singaporeans posted photos of themselves on social media holding up placards meant to draw attention to the presence of major oil companies in Singapore and raise awareness about the country's climate policies. Both individuals were interrogated by police as part of an investigation under Singapore's Public Order Act. ⁷ The police eventually issued a stern warning to both individuals.

In January 2019, activist Jolovan Wham was found guilty of organizing an illegal assembly and refusing to sign a police statement (see C3). ⁸ The assembly in question was an indoor forum held in 2016, in which Hong Kong prodemocracy activist Joshua Wong participated as a speaker via Skype. The authorities argued that because Wong was a foreign speaker, a permit should have been obtained for the event.

C. Violations of User Rights

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C1 0-6 pts

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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?

1 / 6

The constitution enshrines freedom of expression, but it also grants Parliament the authority to impose limits on that freedom. ¹ The PAP has consistently had a supermajority in Parliament and won 83 out of 93 elected seats in the most recent election. The PAP's supermajority allows them to limit opposition influence and oversight of legislation.

POFMA, which came into effect in October 2019, gives individual government ministers broad power to order the blocking and removal of online content that they deem a "false statement of fact" and contrary to the public interest (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 revise the initial decision, essentially giving ministers the ability to decide what is true or false twice before the judiciary weighs in. 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 public confidence in government institutions. ² The law was adopted based on the recommendations of Parliament's Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods, which released its report in September 2018. ³

As part of its efforts to combat 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. ⁴ The second minister for home affairs, Josephine Teo, announced in March 2021 that the government was in the process of "fine-tuning" the legislation. ⁵ The Foreign Interference (Countermeasures) Bill, or FICA, was introduced in Parliament after the coverage period. ⁶ There are concerns that this legislation could have an adverse impact on local civil society and independent media; in comments related to the potential introduction of

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such a law in 2019, the home affairs minister made references to independent media outlets the *Online Citizen* and New Naratif. ⁷

Teo also indicated that the government may propose laws to address harmful online content, including violent and extremist content, and the nonconsensual sharing of intimate images. ⁸ No further details about this legislation were available at the end of the coverage period. ⁹

Contempt of court charges have been lodged to stifle public debate in Singapore, including against bloggers who wrote about issues such as discrimination against LGBT+ people and the treatment of opposition politicians in the courts. ¹⁰ A contempt of court law was passed by Parliament in 2016, and it came into force a year later (see C2). ¹¹

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).

C2 0-4 pts

Are there laws that assign criminal penalties or civil liability for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?

2 / 4

A number of laws apply criminal and civil penalties to online activities. The 2018 Public Order and Safety (Special Powers) Act gives the authorities the power to ban communications—including videos, images, text, or audio messages—in the event of a “serious incident.” The definition of a “serious incident” encompasses terrorist attacks as well as peaceful **TOP** 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\$15,000). ² The measure effectively allows heavy

restrictions on online journalism and information sharing surrounding major public events.

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 lowered the threshold for what constitutes a “risk” of harm to the administration of justice. It 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\$74,000), 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 such complaints. 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\$74,000) to S\$300,000 (US\$223,000) in defamation suits brought against opposition politicians and foreign media corporations. ⁸

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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 doxing 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 been used in prosecutions that cite people’s 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\$7,340) and imprisoned for up to six months.

POFMA 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\$37,100) or up to five years’ imprisonment. Failure to comply with orders to correct or remove content can draw fines of up to S\$20,000 (US\$15,000) or up to one year of imprisonment (see B3).

C3 0-6 pts

Are individuals penalized for online activities, particularly those that are protected under international human rights standards?

3 / 6

Police opened investigations into individuals for their online activities during the coverage period, and cases initiated earlier continued to be adjudicated.

During the coverage period, individuals were arrested and sentenced to ~~top~~ short prison terms for online activities that the government claimed disrupted racial harmony. In February 2021, Sirajudeen Abdul Majeed was charged under the Penal Code for WhatsApp messaging that said

the ruling party appeared to be trying to marginalize Malay Singaporeans. In a phone call with a police officer, Sirajudeen also commented that Malay officers displayed unprofessional conduct. Sirajudeen pled guilty to charges of promoting hostility between racial groups and was sentenced to two weeks' imprisonment and a fine of S\$7,000. ¹ After the reporting period, in June 2021, Zainal Abidin Shaiful Bahari was sentenced to three weeks imprisonment for posting slurs and discriminatory comments Indian people on Twitter. ²

Users have been investigated and arrested for their online mobilization (see B8). In March 2021, the police confirmed that they were investigating PAP parliamentarian Louis Ng under the Public Order Act for holding up signs that called for the public to support hawkers during the COVID-19 pandemic; Ng had posted images of him holding the signs on social media. ³

In April 2020 the police began investigations into Wong J-min and Nguyen Nhat Minh, two young climate activists who had posted photos of themselves holding signs in public places to draw attention to climate change and Singapore's relationship with fossil fuels (see B8). ⁴ The two were investigated under the Public Order Act, which bans even solo protests without a permit. As part of the investigation, their mobile phones were confiscated, as was Nguyen's laptop. Both were later issued warnings by the police but were not charged.

In November 2020, activist Jolovan Wham was charged with violating the Public Order Act after he posted a photo of himself holding a cardboard placard in public with a smiley face drawn on it in support of Wong and Nguyen. He was also charged for posting a photo on social media in support of Terry Xu, chief editor of the *Online Citizen*, and Daniel De Costa, a reader who had written a letter published on the website in 2018 about government corruption (see B2). ⁵ The police stated that Wham was protesting without a permit, though Wham asserted that he was not holding a protest in the photos. His mobile phone was confiscated as part of the investigation, ⁶ and he was required to seek permission from the police and the courts before traveling out of Singapore. Previously, in December 2018, Xu and De Costa were charged with

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criminal defamation over the letter. ⁷ De Costa was also charged with unauthorized access to computer material for allegedly using another person's email account to submit the letter. ⁸ Xu faced a prison sentence of up to two years and a fine, while De Costa faced the same penalties as well as up to two years in prison and a fine of up to S\$5,000 (US\$3,700) for violating the Computer Misuse Act. ⁹ Their cases were ongoing at the end of the coverage period.

Wham was previously convicted in January 2019 for organizing an illegal assembly and refusing to sign a police statement. ¹⁰ That case involved a 2016 forum in which Hong Kong prodemocracy activist Joshua Wong participated as a speaker via Skype; the authorities argued that a permit was required for events with a foreign "speaker" (see B8). ¹¹ Wham was fined S\$3,200 (US\$2,400) for both offenses, but chose to serve a 10-day prison sentence instead. ¹²

In a separate case, Wham and opposition politician John Tan were convicted in October 2018 of contempt of court and sentenced to a fine of S\$5,000 (US\$3,700) each in April 2019. ¹³ The Attorney-General's Chambers initiated the proceedings in May 2018 against Wham, and later against Tan, marking the first such cases since the Administration of Justice (Protection) Act came into force. ¹⁴ 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." Both Wham's and Tan's appeals against their convictions were dismissed by the Court of Appeal. ¹⁵ In March 2020, Wham served a one-week prison term in lieu of paying the S\$5,000 (US\$3,700) fine. ¹⁶

In another case involving the *Online Citizen*, in September 2019 Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong sued Xu for defamation over an article that referenced claims made by Lee's estranged sister that he had misled their father, longtime prime minister Lee Kuan Yew, about the status of the family home. ¹⁷ After the coverage period, the court ruled in Lee's favor

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and ordered Xu to pay the prime minister S\$210,000 (\$160,000) in damages. ¹⁸

Journalists of prominent independent online news outlets have been investigated for their online activities. In March 2021, Xu wrote a post on Facebook claiming that the police had confiscated his phone and laptop from his home. In the post, Xu also claimed that the police requested he visit the police headquarters to be questioned, but was told not to share details about the investigation. ¹⁹ In the same month, Thum Ping Tjin, the managing director of New Naratif, was summoned for questioning by the police for a second time. The police were investigating New Naratif's alleged illegal election advertising (see B2). Thum's mobile phone and laptop were also seized. ²⁰

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). ²¹ During the same month, the prime minister sued Leong Sze Hian for defamation after he shared the *States Times Review* article on Facebook. Prime Minister 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 claim was dismissed by the High Court. Leong's appeal against that decision was dismissed in September 2019. ²² The court ruled in favor of the prime minister and ordered Leong to pay S\$133,000 (US\$98,800) in damages and S\$130,000 (US\$96,600) in legal fees. Leong successfully crowdfunded both amounts (see B8). ²³

In June 2020, Li Shengwu, the nephew of Prime Minister Lee, was found guilty of contempt of court and fined S\$15,000 (US\$11,100). Li had shared a *Wall Street Journal* article in a friends-only post on his Facebook page and commented that the "Singapore government is very litigious and has a pliant court system;" the Attorney-General's Chambers described this comment as an "egregious and baseless attack" on the judiciary and initiated court proceedings after Li refused to retract his statement and apologize. ²⁴

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During the general elections in July 2020, police opened an investigation into Raeesah Khan, a parliamentary candidate for the opposition Workers' Party, over two Facebook posts. One was published in May 2020, and another dated to 2018; both raised the issues of racial and ethnic discrimination in law enforcement and government policy. The investigation was opened under Section 298A of the penal code, which criminalizes acts that knowingly promote enmity between racial and religious groups. ²⁵ The police ultimately issued a warning to Khan. ²⁶

Users were prosecuted for online activity amid the COVID-19 pandemic. In May 2021, an individual was charged under the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act for sending an email to a university researcher in which he falsely claimed he could not attend a research session because he tested positive for COVID-19. ²⁷

In May 2020, taxi driver Kenneth Lai was sentenced to four months' imprisonment after he pleaded guilty to transmitting a false message under the Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act. ²⁸ Lai had published a post in a Facebook group communicating false information about the closure of food centers and supermarkets in Singapore, then removed it 15 minutes later after other members of the group urged him not to spread unverified rumors.

C4 0-4 pts

Does the government place restrictions on anonymous communication or encryption?	2 / 4
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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.

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The government does not restrict the use of encryption tools. However, the criminal procedure code allows authorities to require access to decryption information or technology if it is available. ¹

C5 0-6 pts

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

2 / 6

Singapore has no constitutionally recognized right to privacy, and law enforcement authorities have broad powers to search electronic devices without judicial authorization, including while people are in custody (see C3). ¹ The full extent of the government'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.

Privacy International notes that law enforcement agencies have sophisticated technological capabilities to monitor telephone and other digital communications. According to the group, surveillance is 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." ³

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). ⁴ **TOP**

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. ⁵ 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). ⁶ 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\$7,400), jail terms of up to three months, or both.

According to information leaked by former US National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden in 2013, SingTel has facilitated intelligence agencies' access to traffic carried on a major undersea telecommunications cable. ⁷

Singapore has adopted concepts contained in the US Defense Department's 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." ⁸

As part of efforts to halt the spread of COVID-19, the government launched the TraceTogether app, which uses Bluetooth technology to identify and notify people who have been in close contact with infected individuals. ⁹ According to the official website, the information collected is the user's mobile number, identification details, and a random anonymized user identification code, stored in a secure server. ¹⁰ In May 2020, the Ministry of Manpower announced that use of the TraceTogether app would be made mandatory for migrant workers living in dormitories or working in the construction, marine, and chemical processing sectors, raising significant concerns that migrant workers could be subjected to enhanced surveillance. ¹¹

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Apart from TraceTogether, a contact tracing system known as SafeEntry was also introduced, requiring individuals to scan a QR code and log their identification number and contact number before entering venues like malls and supermarkets. ¹² For individuals who do not have smartphones, particularly older adults, the government has begun distributing Bluetooth-enabled tokens as alternatives to the TraceTogether app. ¹³

In May 2021, TraceTogether-only SafeEntry, a new system which merged the two contact tracing systems, became mandatory for all venues deemed “high-risk,” including workplaces and places of worship. ¹⁴

In January 2021, the government confirmed that law enforcement officials could obtain data collected by contact tracing systems for criminal investigations. ¹⁵ Following public backlash, the government passed the COVID-19 (Temporary Measures) (Amendment) Bill, which restricted law enforcement officials from using the data unless investigating cases of serious offences, including terrorism, kidnapping, rape, murder, and drug trafficking. ¹⁶

In May 2021, some Singaporeans claimed they were denied entry to a driving center after their TraceTogether apps showed that they had been in close proximity to individuals infected with COVID-19; this section of the app was only intended for an individual’s personal reference. ¹⁷

C6 0-6 pts

Does monitoring and collection of user data by service providers and other technology companies infringe on users’ right to privacy?	3 / 6
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In the absence of a constitutional right to privacy, service providers and technology companies can be required to hand information over to the government.

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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 its donors in order to verify that it only receives financial support from Singaporean citizens. ¹

Government authorities can request metadata and content from international social media platforms and other tech companies when required for the investigation of offenses, the government has said. ² The Personal Data Protection Act exempts public agencies and organizations acting on their behalf from compliance with its privacy safeguards. ³ Recent transparency reports from various social media and technology companies indicate the extent to which the government seeks access to Singaporean users' data. From January to June 2020, Facebook reported receiving 759 requests from the Singapore government for the details of 1,039 accounts. Facebook provided the data in 72 percent of the cases. ⁴ From January to June 2020, Google received 728 user data disclosure requests related to 1,831 Google accounts. Some data were provided in 84 percent of the cases. ⁵

C7 0-5 pts

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

3 / 5

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

In June 2021, Minister for Home Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam criticized the *Online Citizen*, run by Terry Xu, for sharing footage and publishing articles claiming that the police had bullied an elderly woman for not wearing a mask (see B2). He accused the *Online Citizen* of having manipulated an elderly woman with dementia into making claims in a **TOP** video interview. ¹ The law minister's comments sparked an online backlash against the independent news website.

In June 2020, the ruling party published a blog post on its website that questioned the loyalty of playwright and poet Alfian Sa'at, a vocal critic of the government online. ² In July 2020, the police announced that then opposition candidate Raeesah Khan was being investigated for comments that allegedly sowed ill-will between racial groups; the PAP released a statement stating without substantiation that Khan had made derogatory comments against Chinese and Christians. ³

In May 2020, the anonymously run and pro-PAP *Global Times Singapore* Facebook page circulated the accusation that individuals who had written critical commentary about Singapore were part of a Chinese conspiracy to undermine the country. For example, journalism professor Cherian George and his wife Zuraidah Ibrahim, an editor at the Hong Kong–based *South China Morning Post*, were alleged to have recruited critics of Singapore's ruling party to write for the paper as part of a Chinese agenda to “put pressure on Singapore.” ⁴ While such pages are known to take aim at activists and government critics, there is no clear evidence of their direct affiliation with the government or the ruling party.

In September 2019, law minister K. Shanmugam characterized Thum's and Han's actions as “nascent attempts” to bring foreign interference into Singapore and claimed that Han sought to use New Naratif as a platform to trigger protests similar to those in Hong Kong. He also singled out writers for the *Online Citizen* as possible instigators of foreign interference. ⁵

In September 2018, a PAP 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.” ⁶ His allegation was amplified by Facebook pages affiliated with the ruling party and some of its members, as well as the mainstream media. ⁷ The accusation triggered online trolling and harassment against the group.

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In April 2018, members of civil society criticized the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods for breaching its own rules for public hearings. ⁸ Historian and New Naratif managing director Thum Pingtjin

was questioned for six hours after he argued that the government had itself spread “fake news” in the past when it detained people without trial. During her testimony, Kirsten Han, then the editor in chief of New Naratif, was questioned about an article she had written and warned that she had “not yet” been sued or jailed. Shortly after the hearings, the authorities rejected the application by New Naratif’s parent entity to register a subsidiary in Singapore (see B6). In the select committee’s September 2018 report, a section devoted to Thum claimed that he had lied about his academic credentials and therefore lacked credibility (see C1).

C8 0-3 pts

Are websites, governmental and private entities, service providers, or individual users subject to widespread hacking and other forms of cyberattack?	2 / 3
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Hacking and other forms of cyberattack have historically not been a widespread problem in Singapore. However, during the coverage period, private companies in Singapore were subjected to technical attacks and other privacy breaches.

In May 2021, the information of more than 1,100 United Overseas Bank customers was leaked after an employee became the victim of an impersonation scam. The information included names, identification and mobile numbers, and account balances. ¹ At the end of that same month, the electronics retailer Audio House told its customers that personal details such as names and contact numbers might have been stolen during a ransomware attack. ²

In February 2021, Singtel revealed that personal information of nearly 130,000 customers had been stolen following the breach of a third-party file-sharing system. The information included identification numbers and a combination of names, birthdates, addresses, and phone numbers. ³

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In March 2021, Singapore Airlines said that the data of 580,000 members of its frequent flyer program had been affected by a breach involving Star Alliance, an air transport information technology company. ⁴

In April 2021, security firm Certis said that about 62,000 emails that had been sent to one of its customer service accounts might have been accessed following a phishing incident. According to the company, about 1.2 percent of the emails contained personal information such as identification and credit card numbers. ⁵

In March 2020 an Indian cybersecurity company reported that credit card details issued by banks in Southeast Asia, including Singapore, had been leaked online. The company said that 25,290 credit card holders in Singapore had been affected. ⁶

Separately in January 2019, the government announced that the personal data of 14,200 people with HIV who either lived in Singapore or had visited the country was leaked. ⁷ The person who allegedly leaked the information was a US citizen who was previously incarcerated for fabricating his academic qualifications and his own HIV test in order to obtain an employment visa in Singapore.

Prior to that, in October 2018, hackers stole the nonmedical personal data of 1.5 million patients, including the prime minister, from SingHealth, the country's largest group of health care providers. ⁸ In March 2019, the cybersecurity company Symantec determined that a group known as Whitefly was responsible for the breach, and suggested that the group could be sponsored by a foreign state. ⁹

The 2018 Cybersecurity Act 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 obligations.



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Country Facts

Global Freedom Score

48 / 100 Partly Free

Internet Freedom Score

54 / 100 Partly Free

Freedom in the World Status

Partly Free

Networks Restricted

No

Social Media Blocked

No

Websites Blocked

Yes

Pro-government Commentators

No

Users Arrested

Yes

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