

SPEECH BY DR VIVIAN BALAKRISHNAN, MINISTER FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, YOUTH AND SPORTS AT THE LAUNCH OF ONE PEOPLE PORTAL IN CONJUNCTION WITH THE COMMUNITY LEADERS' CONFERENCE ON 21 FEBRUARY 2009, 2PM AT THE WOODLANDS REGIONAL LIBRARY

Good Afternoon

Mr Zainudin Nordin, Mayor, Central CDC and Chairman OnePeople.sg,

Members of the OnePeople.sg Management Committee,

Dr N Varaprasad, Chief Executive, National Library Board,

Community Leaders,

Ladies and Gentlemen

Thank you for the opportunity to join all of you at the inaugural Community Leaders' Conference by OnePeople.sg. The Conference's theme on the challenges and opportunities of the New Media is timely and pertinent as we enter a new era of community engagement.

Why engage Online?

2 All human beings have an inherent need to discover a sense of identity, a sense of belonging, a coherent set of values and the significance of life. For most of us, our religions and inherited cultural traditions provide answers to these fundamental questions. The invention of the printing press, and the publication of Holy Scriptures had a profound impact on the way these key ideas have been conceptualised and disseminated. The advent of trade and shipping then facilitated an accelerated exchange of ideas and ideologies across borders. Some of these exchanges led to new ideas and greater appreciation of diversity. However, some of these interactions also had unhappy consequences, as violence was sometimes committed in the name of race, language and religion. Consequently, we must appreciate the New Media in the context of human history. Today, our personal computers, linked by always-on broadband, enables every single individual to have a personal printing press, and to ship ideas around the world instantly. It has transformed the way we communicate, live and work.

3 We are one of the most electronically connected societies in the world. Both government and citizens are heavily dependent on electronic communication for all our daily needs. However, we are still a long way from fully tapping the potential of new media tools for creative expression, synergistic exchange of ideas and mobilisation of people.

4 For a start, the Government will bolster its engagement on policy and national issues on public consultations and forum discussions on the REACH portal. There has been an increase of 30 percent in postings on the REACH forums in 2008 as compared to the year before. Government agencies will now also respond to online letters carried in the online letter forums of the local media where it warrants. The government has also relaxed its ban on party political films on the net subject to a review by an independent body prior to broadcast.

5 We have to take an evolutionary approach in strengthening government-people relationships over the new media. Due to the fragmentation of the new media, not everyone can be engaged all the time or in the same way. The government will continue to take a light touch and a pragmatic approach on engaging e-citizens on the internet and refine our policies as we go along. The political landscape on the net will evolve with the times. However, the true measure of success is the degree of participation and ownership of Singaporeans in nation building, problem solving and in shaping the future.

Threats

6 The new media is a tool that can be used positively and negatively. Just as it has enabled multiple sources of information, it has also brought along potential social ills and potent threats, including disseminating hate and terrorism on the net.

Terrorism on the Net

7 The net has also been used to spread extreme and violent ideologies. We know that terrorists too are using the net as a tool to promote their ideologies of

hatred. As community leaders, we need to be watchful and foster a vigilant online community. Together, we need to send a strong and clear message, that we will not tolerate those who intend to incite disharmony and threaten our peace and stability, be it the real or virtual world. That is why we prosecuted three bloggers in 2007 under the Sedition Act. Anonymity is an illusion in cyberspace. Let me say categorically that we will not hesitate to do so again if need be. However, we should also remember that the new media as a tool is neutral. It can and should be used to counter divisive and false ideologies. In Singapore, the Religious Rehabilitation Group publishes a site called www.rrg.sg which counters radical ideologies in cyberspace. MUIS publishes www.iask.com.sg which provides a proper understanding of religious practices. Another website www.radical.mosque.sg provides a useful guide to help Internet users distinguish extremist websites from legitimate ones.

Opportunities- Engaging Youth

8 A survey reported in 2008 by the leading global research firm Synovite revealed that among young Asians, Singaporean youth are the most connected and game obsessed in Asia. Young Singaporeans aged 15 to 24, spend an average hour and a half a day on e-mail, over four hours on instant messaging and over three hours on other internet activities.

9 From youths actively contributing ideas for our winning bid to host the first-ever Youth Olympic Games in 2010, to the recent Inter-School Budget Debate Challenge organised by the Ministry of Finance, our youths have demonstrated that they have an interest in helping to shape Singapore. This is further evidenced by the youthphoria seen on online blogs and forums where youths post online videos on community events, share their views and blog about issues concerning the community.

10 It was in this spirit that REACH introduced Youth Vibes, an interactive webpage for youths, in early January 2009. This webpage, which comprises discussion forum, blog, chatroom and other web 2.0 features, aims to raise the level

of awareness of, and discourse on, national issues in youths, and create an online avenue for youths to reflect and express their opinions on issues, through a medium they are comfortable with. The site was developed in consultation with youths, who also provide the online content, so as to encourage youths to take ownership of the website. Such commitment and active participation speak volumes of our budding youth.

Civic Engagement

11 The new media presents a vast potential to initiate civic engagement. We can engage our peers, residents, neighbours and the community as a whole in nurturing a civic conscious society. This could be done by setting up blogs to discuss ideas, and share experiences, opening facebook accounts to connect with your friends, residents, and community groups or post community events on YouTube. We should take advantage of the viral nature of the new media, its ability to narrow cast and select topics to discuss on issues that are of interest to a particular group.

OnePeople Portal

12 Today, we will be inaugurating the OnePeople Portal, the first online resource repository in Singapore on racial harmony. This is a joint collaboration between OnePeople.sg and the National Library Board and aims to be the first stop for students, researchers, community organisations and people seeking expert resources on this topic. I understand that the portal has a diverse collection of useful resources such as books, resource guides, and book lists available in the Public Libraries for children, teens and adults which include online photo galleries and research resources such as NLB's eResources and Singapore Infopedia. The portal will eventually include resources contributed by local and overseas institutions.

13 The portal also contains significant racial harmony milestone events and occurrences that have played a critical role in the development of racial and religious harmony in Singapore. Community partners can also book exhibition panels with multi-cultural content and access multimedia resources via the portal for their

outreach efforts to the community. The OnePeople Portal is not just a passive site, it allows you to contribute and grow resources. You can contribute stories, photos and experiences to nurture and build a collection of racial harmony resources for all to benefit. I urge all of you to explore the portal and encourage as many people to make use of these resources to strengthen racial harmony in our community.

14 I hope today's Conference will leave you with a better understanding of the New Media and the great potential it has for community engagement.

I wish you a fruitful session ahead.

Thank you.