Singapore's razor-sharp Internet television network

A razor is sharp and has a definite edge. The same can be said for RazorTV, the Internet-based television service that Press Holdings (SPH) launched in 2008. The IPTV-based site combines an informal and chatty style with an emphasis on "hyper-local" topics like crime, public transport, lifestyle and entertainment – topics that relate directly to the audiences' lives. RazorTV is a companion network to the innovative STOMP (Straits Times Online Mobile and Print) that SPH launched in 2006, and which is described in the first volume of *Asia's Media Innovators* **published in 2008.**

RazorTV can best be summarised as a unique convergence of web television and social networking that combines the power of Web 2.0 technologies to produce new forms of journalism. It launched on an auspicious day: 8 August 2008, or 8-8-08, and has won several awards in its short history.

RazorTV uses the power and reach of mobile phones and social networking to connect with its audiences. RazorTV's Twitter account had 13,444 followers in June 2010 (www.twitter.com/razortv). And the Facebook fan page had 1,438 friends as of July 2010 (www.facebook.com/pages/RazorTV/233091943252). RazorTV offered viewers a free iPhone app in March 2009. This allows people to view video on demand from their mobile phone.

Singaporeans are among Asia's biggest Internet users, averaging 10.5 hours a month per person. On 10 June 2009 *The Straits Times* reported that Singapore was the most wired nation on earth, with household broadband penetration hitting 99.9 per cent by December 2009. Because of the high broadband access, Singaporeans are watching more and more video on the web. Around the world, people are ignoring traditional media such as television in favour of the Internet to get their daily fix of news, entertainment, music, movies and user-generated content. Traditional television is perceived as having too many constraints – people are confined to fixed schedules and a restricted range of programmes – and many viewers object to interruptions from advertisements. The old paradigm of television has been called "appointment media" because people were forced to set aside time to watch a particular program. As more households receive high-speed broadband, they tend to migrate to "choice media" where they consume media when it best suits them. Convenience is the new media paradigm.

Felix Soh is SPH's digital editor. He conceived of both STOMP and RazorTV and describes the latter as the ideal convergence of the Internet and video. "It's video on demand. It's edgy and sharp coverage of four things: news, current affairs, entertainment and lifestyle. Everybody's life revolves around those four things. Sport comes under news. The style is young and hip, with raw treatment of news, and hyper-local programming that focuses on news that impacts the person in the street." Our interview took place in his Singapore office in June 2010.

RazorTV's niche and focus is hyper-local news in Singapore. "We want to discuss in depth what is happening on the ground in Singapore," Soh said. "The newspapers and television tell people what is happening here and overseas. We give people local news." RazorTV offers video on demand for people who want to control what they want to watch, and when. Soh described the free service as an innovative convergence of both the Internet and television platforms, and a first

Asia's Media Innovators
by Stephen Quinn

August 2010 – Chapter Five

for Singapore. "Our intrepid presenters cut to the heart of the matter to provide a wide variety of content. What you get is an edgy and sharp coverage of current affairs and lifestyle trends. We call it as we see it."

Roberto Coloma, writing for news agency Agence France Press when RazorTV launched, said SPH aimed at creating a young new audience via the new website, amid flat newspaper circulation growth. "In its first few days of operation after the official launch on August 8, viewer statistics on the site confirmed the audience's desire for lively topics, such as attacks on the elderly by robbers and beach volleyball in a shopping mall," Coloma wrote. SPH was "constantly experimenting" with new platforms and technology, he said, noting that with Singapore's economy slowing down, SPH hoped the new venture would create new revenue streams in the future.

Patrick Daniel, editor-in-chief of SPH's English and Malay newspapers, told the annual conference of the Asian Media Information and Communication Centre (AMIC) on 21 June 2010 that his company's board had invested $150 million Singapore (about $US 108 million) in online and mobile "with the aim of being a leading new-media player". Much progress had been made, he said, but the results would show "only in the medium term". Daniel said SPH faced four major challenges. The first was to be able to engage people aged under 30. The others were maintaining quality journalism when budgets are being cut; finding the right business model for new media platforms; and building brands and creating brand value. Products like STOMP and RazorTV are designed to attract and retain that young audience, and create and build a youth brand.

In September 2009 SPH won 11 awards at the 8th IFRA Asian media awards. Eight of them went to the media company's websites, the highest number of awards yet for SPH's portfolio of multimedia platforms. The web site of the Chinese newspaper division's omy.sg won the gold award while RazorTV received the silver for the "Best in Online Media" category. The website of the *Financial Times* took the bronze award. Felix Soh said he was pleased RazorTV had won an award after only one year from its launch. He

acknowledged the hard work of his team: "The RazorTV team has succeeded in establishing the video news channel as one that produces compelling, impactful and relevant content. They deserve to be rewarded for their dedication and hard work." Thomas Jacob, the managing director for the Asia-Pacific division of WAN-IFRA, which organises the awards, noted that SPH had always been "in the forefront of adopting technology and innovation" and said SPH had set a high benchmark for Asian publishers to emulate.

Generally, the higher the Internet penetration in a country, the higher the share of advertising spent online. In the United States, online receives about 15 per cent of advertising spend. The highest levels globally are in the Scandinavian nations – between 20 and 25 per cent. But in Singapore online's share of the advertising pie is small – under 5 per cent. Print takes by far the biggest share, at just over 50 per cent, Patrick Daniel told AMIC. "How these shares [of the pie] change over time will determine which products thrive and whether online will make a significant dent on print revenues."

In May 2010 SPH reported a 35.8 per cent jump in profits for the second quarter that ended in February 2010, to $127.5 million Singapore (about $US 93 million). This was despite a big rise in staff costs, up $14 million Singapore to $83.3 million Singapore.

In April 2010 RazorTV won a bronze award for the "Most creative use of mobile media" for its iPhone application in the Asia Interactive Awards. *AdAsia* and the Asia Digital Marketing Association created the awards to recognise excellence by designers and online pro-fessionals, and to help promote the use of new technology in advertising, promotion, brand building and consumer relationships.

RazorTV represents an exciting example of the television channel of the future, and shows what is possible with IPTV and a relatively small budget. It has 35 staff. Of those, 15 are multi-media reporters, and another 15 work as videographers and video editors. Videographers use Panasonic P2 digital video cameras in unusual and creative ways. They do not use tripods, and the video they shoot has an edgy and up-to-date feel.

Asia's Media Innovators
by Stephen Quinn

August 2010 – Chapter Five

Isaac Gerald Netto works as a video editor with RazorTV. Before joining RazorTV he worked with the Discovery Channel. "The style of editing I do is very different from the kind we do on [traditional] television. It is more personal and down to earth and makes a huge difference in the way we reach our target audience. The style is edgy [and] current. It is adrenaline-fuelled and action packed. The angles mimic what a human would want to see instead of what people normally see on television news."

Netto said each video editor had his or her own style and preference. "Some of us play with music and sound effects. Others like textures and filters. We employ a faster pace and make sure the video has impact and is what people want to watch. On the web people can switch to another site at any time, or switch off, so your video has to be up to standard and what people want to watch. We aim to keep our videos fun and interactive." Netto said the site aimed to keep story duration to a sensible level. "If the video is compelling it could run 4.5 to 5 minutes. Nothing more than 5, though."

Reporters use high-performance microphones when interviewing to get good-quality sound for the videos, and usually the videographers attach lapel microphones to interviewees to ensure consistent sound. The newsroom has 10 edit booths and editors assemble stories on high-end Macintosh computers using Final Cut Pro. The other five of the 35 staff work as assigning editors and news directors.

Most RazorTV stories involve three people: a reporter, a videographer and a video editor. Sometimes the videographer can also cut pictures so there is no need for a video editor to be involved. RazorTV does not use moble phones for shooting video, known as mojo, or single-person crews, known as video journalism or VJs. The other main television company, Mediacorp, employs VJs and sometimes does mojo work.

Reporter Poh Kwan started with RazorTV when it launched in August 2008. Her role is to produce stories in a range of platforms: videos for the Internet TV channel, articles for the web site, and projects for external clients. Those projects are discussed later in this chapter. Poh Kwan said she would like to leave shooting to professional camera-

people and focus on the script. But she involves herself in stories by picking the music and choosing special effects. She described the story-making process as "pretty organic". "I'm sure if I wanted to handle a camera my boss would say 'go ahead'."

Poh Kwan described the process of creating a typical story: She and a videographer do street interviews, and then she prepares a piece-to-camera. Sometimes she also does interviews back in the studio. Back in the office she will write a script and work with the videographers and video editors to create a story: "We try to experiment with more innovative approaches to programs. The job is multi-faceted." Poh Kwan graduated from the journalism program at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore. There journalism education is traditional, with classes in print and broadcast reporting, but nothing related to her current role. "Most of the instructors at NTU were from the old school. They teach you what to expect if working for a traditional newsroom. Here, we try new things. We experiment with new ways to present a story. Sometimes we do a story in MTV style, with a sound track. Sometimes we [hire] talent to do a re-enactment. There are different ways to make a story stand out, so you don't need to start with the news point followed by a sound bite and a link [the formula of traditional TV]. We are working in the Internet medium so you can have five clips in a story if the story warrants it. We can interview a lot more people for a story."
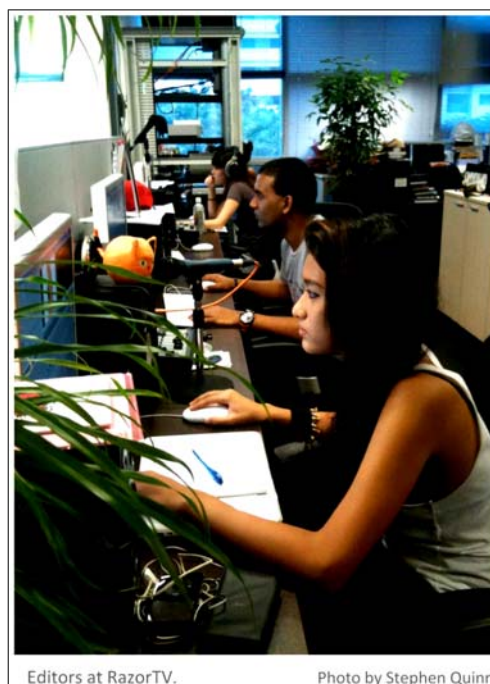
Editors at RazorTV.   Photo by Stephen Quinn

Asia's Media Innovators
by Stephen Quinn

August 2010 – Chapter Five

Poh Kwan said shooting video was a lot more demanding with this new approach, because the videographers needed to find more angles, and do more interviews. Working without a tri-pod also meant a need for more physical strength, to move the camera around. "We do a lot of street interviews. Sometimes it can take a couple of hours to get people's comments on a certain issue. Our editors have to think of different ways to make the story more [visually] interesting. Which sound tracks to use."

After a rough cut of a story is completed, the reporter emails all staff with a synopsis of the story to keep everyone aware of that story. The video editors cut the final version of the story and this is sent to one of the senior editors for approval before the story appears on the web. The editors also ensure the story works on a range of Internet browsers.

During my visit the newsroom appeared serene: People talked quietly into their mobile phones or tapped stories on laptop computers. Editors cut pictures on a row of high-end Mac's along one edge of the newsroom. The assigning editors mapped out stories on white boards. The SPH building has an excellent wi-fi system so many staff email their colleagues via wi-fi rather than talk, which partly explains the quiet atmosphere. A large number of pot plants and other greenery make the area seem homely, even peaceful. Scores of movie posters adorn the newsroom and the newsroom gives the impression of being a pleasant place to work. Photographs of the site's star bloggers and writers occupy most of one of the walls near the entrance to the newsroom. SPH provides a canteen on the seventh floor of the building and food is inexpensive and of high quality. The canteen is open long hours to cater for shift workers.

All of the approximately 30 stories a day on RazorTV come out of the fourth floor of the Singapore Press Holding building in central Singapore. STOMP.com.sg and Asia One, another SPH online site, are located on the same floor as RazorTV. SPH's flagship newspaper, *The Straits Times*, occupies the first and second floor, and the company's other newspapers are on the third floor. SPH publishes 12 newspapers in four languages: English, Chinese, Malay and Tamil.

RazorTV newsroom and lobby.   Photos by Stephen Quinn

RazorTV's studio looks like a living room in a home, complete with comfortable red sofas. The backdrop that viewers see is an image of a series of high-rise apartments, and that backdrop can be changed to suggest day or night.

All videos that have ever appeared on the site are accessible and searchable via a database. The site's target audience is the 18 to 40 age group. This group finds video "more compelling" than text, Soh said. "They want video on demand rather than having to make an appointment to watch, as with traditional television." Sliding bars let viewers select a clip within each video category. A drop-down menu provides easy access to RazorTV's news, current affairs, entertainment, lifestyle, sport and specials sections.

The site also has a "Specials" box that showcases RazorTV's major programs and miniseries. For example, visitors can find the "Elite Challenge," which follows the gruelling 24-hour recruitment test for the Singapore Civil Defence Force's elite rescue squad, or catch all 50 episodes of "A Starry Night," Singapore's first subway drama series starring Kelly Poon and Robert Fan.

A report by Gwendolyn Ng published in *The Straits Times* of 7 June 2010 showed how audiences were turning to the Internet for

Asia's Media Innovators
by Stephen Quinn

August 2010 – Chapter Five

their diet of entertainment and news. Ms Ng quoted student Lim Jing Ying, 23, who said that he had stopped watching traditional television five years earlier: "Local television programmes are not to my liking," he said. "Online, I get to choose the quality entertainment I want." Ms Ng also spoke with finance manager Lee Shi Wei, 26, who said the idea of waiting for plots to unfold on television was "too much to bear". Ms Lee spends up to six hours at a stretch on weekends watching Taiwanese and Korean dramas at her own pace. "It's more exciting to watch many episodes at one go," Ms Lee said.

RazorTV's business model
RazorTV has a range of revenue streams. Like most web sites around the world, it has banner advertisements and in-video commercials. The latter appear at the start of a piece of video and cannot be ignored. RazorTV also operates as a production house that provides national advertising campaigns for companies, and it streams live video of events for a fee. The video advertising market is predicted to be worth about $8 billion globally by 2012, and RazorTV is positioning itself to get a slice of that pie.

Early in 2010 Cisco forecast that the amount of worldwide HDTV and Internet video traffic would grow significantly in the next few years. By 2014 Internet video, peer-to-peer video and all other video would account for more than 91 per cent of global consumer Internet traffic, Cisco said.

RazorTV also hosts video channels for government agencies and private sector organisations. The Defence Channel was a prototype. In Singapore every male must report for compulsory national service once they reach the age of 18. Soh said this had an impact on lots of people because parents have to wash uniforms, and girlfriends lose contact with their soldier boyfriends, and the soldiers lose touch with friends. "So the Defence Channel is appropriate for our audience," Soh said.

"Point Blank" is an edgy current affairs program. "Singapore Now" is designed to show news as it happens. "Sometimes we beat mainstream media because they have to wait for news on the hour," Soh said. Another new approach is a program called

"News Square," which consists of unedited (raw) video. People particularly interested in a topic can watch the entire video, rather than an edited packed. For the opening of the Marina Bay casino in late June 2010 – predicted to bring $1 billion Singapore into the economy each year – RazorTV showed eight different video segments, each of about three minutes. "We chop video into manageable chunks. Our content management system allows us to alert audiences of related clips," Soh said.

Another channel, "R.age," is the only hyper-local entertainment channel in Asia. "We do extensive coverage of Asian entertainment. We don't do foreign celebrities, though if Lady Gaga comes to Singapore we'd cover her." Soh said RazorTV focused on niche channels because people came to the web for specific content.

In Malay the word "mata" means both "eye" and "police". So the channel known as "Fashion Mata-Mata" refers to coverage as a form of "fashion police". Fashion Mata-Mata is a popular channel. "We prowl the streets of Singapore to get people to talk about what is trendy and what people wear on the streets. We discovered that people actually get dressed up to go to a market on a Sunday. It's quite popular and uncovers new trends."

Earlier in 2010 RazorTV ran a contest where readers emailed photographs of signs containing broken English, in conjunction with The Speak Good English Movement. In 2000 then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong launched the movement to get Singaporeans to recognise the importance of speaking Standard English and to encourage them to speak it. Soh said the photography content was a "huge success" and the site had published hundreds of photographs of offending signs.

The "Word of Mouth" channel ventures into Singapore's heartlands to get grassroots comments about issues. "We want to empower people and give them a voice to talk about things. The mainstream media do not cover this sort of thing, but we do. It is very successful." The "Mini word-of-mouth" channel is similar but focuses on the views of young children. The channel entitled "Food in your 'Hood" looks at food in specific neighbourhoods, while "Club Insider" tells people what is hot at Singapore clubs and pubs.

Asia's Media Innovators
by Stephen Quinn

August 2010 – Chapter Five

On 16 June 2010 STOMP received more than 20 million page views, a record. Heavy rain caused floods in the city and STOMPers contributed an average of more than 100 photographs and videos a day. The site typically receives almost 20 million page views, and has 700,000 unique visitors a month. A unique visitor is based on the IP address of the computer used to access a site, so one unique visitor may in fact represent several or scores of people if the computer is located in a school or library. Each visitor typically stays about 10 minutes on the site per visit, which is "sticky" compared with a lot of news sites in other parts of the world where people typically stay for under two minutes. "We cover news and issues not covered by the mainstream media," STOMP's editor Chew V'Ming said. The site had never been sued, though he had received lots of threats. "We are very bold in what we do. We highlight provocative issues and talking points. We try to reflect what Singaporean people are thinking. We get complaints from the authorities."

Chew V'Ming said STOMP was the second most popular news site on the web in Singapore, and the 45th most popular overall, according to Experia data. RazorTV also attracts a large audience, given the relatively small population of Singapore: about 4.6 million. In April 2010 RazorTV received 7.1 million page views and had a unique audience of 1.2 million. The core audience is aged 18 to 40 and they spend an average of 4.5 minutes on the site. The number of videos watched on RazorTV saw a steady increase of 10 per cent every month in the year to June 2010. Analysts believe audiences are turning more and more to the web to control their access to content, suggesting that RazorTV's audience will continue to grown.

Chew V'Ming cited some examples of STOMP stories that had made a difference in 2010: RazorTV published a photograph of a man using a fire hose to wash his car on the top floor of a public car park. The authorities enclosed the hose in a box with a key that only fire officers can open, saving a lot of water. Water consumption is a topical issue in Singapore. RazorTV also published a photo of a woman assaulting a man in a public area. It also published a photograph of an Army general's car that was parked illegally, and the officer issued a public

apology. Soh pointed out that privacy laws in Singapore were not as restrictive as in other countries, giving the site some room for manoeuvre. But STOMP refrains from publishing graphic photographs, especially of minors. "We receive photographs of kids in school uniform having sex in places like on rooftops but we never publish them."

One of the most powerful programs on RazorTV is "Ground Zero" which showcases citizen journalism once a week. "We take the best stories from STOMP and discuss them. "It's a good round-up, a good perspective on the week," Soh said.

A channel called "This is Asia" brings together video packages from other members of the Asian News Network. ANN is a network of 14 daily English-language newspapers in the region that formed a co-operative to share content in March 1999. As of June 2010 RazorTV was using video from three members: *China Daily*, *The Star* in Malaysia, and the *Brunei Times*. Video from other members will increasingly become available. More details about ANN can be found at www.asianewsnet.net.

RazorTV made an iPhone app available in March 2009 and within four days it was the most popular download in the country. About 700,000 people had an iPhone in Singapore as of mid 2010, and four in five mobile phones sold in the country are smartphones. This means RazorTV's content will increasingly be available on mobile phones.

The future for RazorTV
Soh said he would love to do a reality series if he had more staff. Meanwhile, major developments should be expected as Singapore's broadband networks improve. In June 2010 Pyramid Research, which analyzes the telecommunications business, published a report saying Singapore was expected to be the first country blanketed with a fibre optic infrastructure so fast people could download the contents of a DVD in a few seconds. The government has invested $700 million in the new network,

which is expected to boost the growth of online video services like RazorTV.

Nucleus Connect, which will operate the new network, has announced monthly wholesale prices starting at $ 21 Singapore for Internet speeds of 100 megabits a second for residential connections. This is half what it cost consumers a month in July 2010 for broadband access of 6 megabits a second. By comparison, in Hong Kong consumers pay about 200 Hong Kong dollars, or about $36 Singapore, a month for speeds of one gigabit per second. This kind of speed and low price is not available in countries like Australia.

Martin Pakendorf, director of international sales for CoreMedia, visited RazorTV and described it on his blog as "brash and engaging," with its live television for the web "enriched by latest social media features for audience interaction". Pakendorf noted that because the bulk of the staff worked on site at the SPH headquarters this allowed for rapid turnaround of ideas and decisions. "The SPH team was also extremely engaged, thus actively shaping the project regularly. In fact, I could literally sense their level of joint ownership when I visited the studio. Everybody exhibited a 'can-do attitude', a key factor which I would attribute to the team leadership on both sides."

Role of government in innovation
It is important to note the role of government in fostering innovation in Singapore. In 2006 Singapore's National Research Foundation allocated $500 million Singapore over five years to 2011 to fund the development of a strategic interactive digital media research program. It established a multi-agency R&D program within the Media Development Authority of Singapore (MDA) to oversee R&D initiatives in the interactive digital media space.

Singapore's Media Development Authority (MDA) issued a niche television licence to Singapore Press Holdings on 30 July 2008. The five-year licence meant SPH was the first media company in Singapore to develop a new genre of television focusing on live web studio streaming and real time audience interactivity. The MDA introduced the concept of the niche television licence in 2007 to facilitate the growth of Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) services in Singa-

pore. The licences offer operators greater flexibility to roll out services for different market segments.

As of mid 2010 eight trial IPTV and video on demand (VOD) services were offering Singaporeans more than 125 television channels. Ms Ling Pek Ling, director of media policy for the MDA, said the authority encouraged traditional media players such as SPH to engage the country's increasingly technology-savvy viewers with interactive content through new platforms such as IPTV and participative web 2.0 technologies.

Singapore's Media Development Authority was formed in 2003 with the aim of transforming Singapore into a global media city and positioning it at the forefront of the digital media age. Its web site says MDA spearheads initiatives that promote developments in film, video, television, radio, publishing, music, games, animation, media services and interactive digital media. MDA also helps to "foster a pro-business environment for industry players and increase media choices for consumers". For more information, visit www.mda.gov.sg

The MDA supports innovative research and development via the multi-agency Interactive Digital Media Research and Development Programme Office (IDMPO) that it hosts. IDMPO awarded SPH a grant for the development of RazorTV. The core technology of Razor TV was developed in partnership with a Singaporean technology company, Ufinity Pte Ltd. Mr Michael Yap, IDMPO's executive director, said the aim was to produce innovation in the country's new media sector, as well as offering new services to local viewers. "We are pleased that SPH has launched a new genre of Internet TV using technology developed by our local company," Yap said.

A combination of government strategy and astute market-place analysis by Singapore's biggest media company has seen the development of award-winning new media enterprises over the past few years. In the digital arena, Singapore continues as an exciting example of what is possible through innovation in Asia.