By Stephen Quinn

Roger Sim, 60, is a cleaner. Every three months he takes his mother-in-law to one of Singapore’s 18 health clinics, where he finds long queues. “I was so tired of seeing snaking queues outside Geylang Polyclinic. They start forming at about 5am, and old aunties and uncles have to wait outside for their turn.” Late in 2006 Sim sent a photograph of the queue to Stomp, the user-generated content site of Singapore Press Holdings. A reporter from The Straits Times visited several clinics and discovered that early-morning queues were an island-wide problem. After the paper ran an article health minister Khaw Boon Wan instructed health chiefs to fix the problem. Today, all 18 polyclinics open at 7am, allowing patients to wait indoors for an hour until 8am, the official opening time.

User-generated content has become big news in Singapore. The country’s main media group, Singapore Press Holdings, launched Stomp (Straits Times online mobile and print) in June 2006. Within half a year it was attracting 300,000 unique visitors a year. The island of Singapore has a population of about 4.4 million.

The camera on people’s mobile phones has become a potential agent of change. By November 2006, people were sending Stomp about 100 photographs a day. Almost all are published on the website at www.stomp.com.sg. Only low-quality photographs and offensive images are rejected. Newsworthy images are sent to the SPH’s newspapers. Stomp receives three to four newsworthy pictures a day, compared with the one a day when Stomp launched. In November 15 made it into the pages of The Straits Times, including several on page 1.

Felix Soh, deputy editor for digital media at The Straits Times, oversees Stomp. He believes it is the only platform in Asia that focuses on social networking. Citizen journalism constitutes 80 to 85 percent of the site’s content. Stomp caters for a different market compared with The Straits Times, whose online site, ST Interactive, effectively mirrors the print edition and contains mostly serious journalism. Stomp is alternative journalism. “It is not serious journalism in the form that The Straits Times offers,” Soh said, “though Stomp does deal with journalism that affects people’s lives.”

In 2005 Soh led a small team to visit VGNet in Norway. Stomp editor Jennifer Lewis said Stomp was Soh’s idea. “We knew we wanted to do something exciting and innovative, and VG offered a model.”

Much of Stomp’s content represents a grass-roots kind of reporting. Soh said convergence allowed Stomp to report stories that would not see the light of day in the national newspaper. He cited an example of a lover’s quarrel on a train on the city’s underground rail system, the MTR. “A guy pushed his girlfriend onto the track. He was arrested for attempted murder. The only photo of the girl stuck on the MTR track with a train approaching was sent to the Stomp portal.” That image came from a mobile phone.
camera. *The Straits Times* used it on page 1. The company’s sister papers also ran the story. “This integration is a new form of convergence, past the traditional forms,” Soh said.

When the Stomp team put stories online they also send a copy to the news desk. Often those stories make it into print in one or more of the SPH dailies. On the day I visited in February 2007, for example, Stomp received pictures of a Downs syndrome boy allegedly assaulted by a bus driver. The boy’s sister emailed photographs of the boy’s bruises. People also send photographs via MMS. The site publicises a short code number (7557) and receive lots of material through it. A photograph on page 3 of that day’s *The Straits Times* of a blaze aboard a bus was sent to Stomp but was used in print as well.

Stomp is a bridge between traditional newspapers and young readers. Editor Jennifer Lewis said the aim was to use Stomp as a way for *The Straits Times* to interact with its readers. When Stomp launched the newspaper was 161 years old, and “looking ahead at the next 160 years”. Editorial managers decided that the future had to be online because that was the way to reach young readers. The focus, they decided, would be on involving readers and interacting with them through user-generated content. “It’s rare within an established media group to be so involved with user-generated content,” Lewis said.

Stomp averages 5 to 6 million page impressions a month, which is impressive for a site less than a year old. “From what we can see we have a fair number of young people and students. But at the same time we also see an older demographic aged in their 40s who are very active in what we call Singapore Scene, whch is our citizen journalism section. We know about them because a fair number of older people have called us on our hot line to ask us about how to send pictures by mobile.” Stomp has a section called Digital Club which offers a series of technical guides. But people seemed to prefer talking to a person by phone, Lewis said, and her staff were happy to do that.

People send an email or SMS about an issue or story. Stomp producers interview them and re-write the story for them. “Singapore academics think it’s a cultural thing unique to Singapore where citizen reporters would rather talk to a reporter.” When the story is put online Stomp staff tell the person who provided the information. They read the story and check it for accuracy. “We ask them are you happy with it? If it doesn’t reflect what you meant to say, call us back and we’ll adjust it. This is different from how citizen journalism works in other countries like South Korea,” Lewis said. “Much of what we are doing is new to everybody and given some of the cultural preferences in Singapore our audiences would rather relate their story. We are very meticulous. We write it all down and take copious notes. And often they send us long emails which we re-write. Because we have their contact numbers and email addresses we can contact them for clarification, and they certainly know they can get back to us.

“When we first started we saw a lot of complaints, people complaining about things that upset them. But it has evolved. We are all learning about this new power. We are seeing a change in the tone of the contributions.”
The Stomp community had bonded, Soh said. “They have set up their own football group, tuition groups, they have outings they organise among themselves. As the world gets more fragmented people feel the need to bond. Man is a social creature. Online gives them that opportunity.” SPH also has a well-developed schools program and publishes two weekly schools magazines, the Little Red Dot and In. [The phrase “little red dot” comes from former Indonesian president Habibie who described Singapore as merely a little red dot on the map.] The first caters for primary and the other for secondary students. SPH bundles these papers free with The Straits Times if schools take a subscription. Print circulation rises 140,000 because of these two magazines. Soh said. “We open up media clubs at schools and give them a book on how to start such a club. During the school holidays we organise events for the media clubs so they can talk to journalists. We aim to engage the next generation of The Straits Times readers to get them hooked on the reading habit.”

Singapore’s government is fostering media innovation. In 2003 it launched a major media development called Media 21. The strategy includes establishing Singapore as a media exchange, the spread of digital media, and encouraging Singapore’s media to become global enterprises via a helpful business and regulatory environment. Singapore intends to become Asia’s leading media marketplace. Media 21 seeks almost to double the media’s contribution to gross domestic product from 1.56 per cent in 2003 to 3 per cent a decade later, along the way creating more than 10,000 new media jobs for Singaporeans. Singapore is making a big push to make fast wireless networks available across the country. That permits people to use Skype anywhere. The country has pioneered high-definition and mobile television services in the region. Dr Tan Chin Nam, chairman of Singapore’s Media Development Authority, said the media industry in the Asia-Pacific region was expected to grow at a compound rate of 9.2 per cent from 2006 to 2010.

Mobile phone and broadband Internet penetration in Singapore are very high by world standards. Mobile phone penetration was 103.2 per cent in 2006. Singaporeans averaged 212 text messages per person a month that year. Almost every household has an Internet connection, and those connections work well. Three in five households (62.8 percent) have broadband and 34 percent dial-up. Network availability measures the degree to which the Internet functions properly in any society. In Singapore network availability showed between 99.9 and 100 percent reliability. Mobile phone call success rates for all of 2005 were perfect, according to data from the Infocomm Development Authority (IDA), the body that oversees and regulates telecommunications in Singapore.

SPH embarked on its convergence journey in 2001. One of the forces driving convergence is fragmented audiences. People no longer go to a single source for news but to a variety of sources: online and mobile phone as well as the newspaper. “We live in a multi-source world when it comes to getting information and news,” Soh said. Print was one dimensional and 24 hours late. Singaporeans live in a 24/7 world in terms of breaking news so it was inevitable that people turned to things other than the newspaper. “To me breaking news online is not new,” Soh said. “I get breaking news on my mobile phone. Mobile is big for breaking news. Internet is no longer text, it is multimedia. Earlier this
week I gave a presentation to people who used the term new media. I said, please do not use that term. It is now media.”

Soh believes the Internet and multimedia are a natural fit. “Video is going to be big. It is more engaging that, say, a podcast. Multimedia storytelling means using video to tell the story. But it is not as slick as what is being done on mainstream television. I want Internet multimedia storytelling to be raw. If it is too slick it looks too contrived.” Soh said all journalists employed on Stomp needed a fresh outlook. “We look for fresh ideas because you have to break rules when it comes to multimedia storytelling. You have to have an edge, an attitude.”

Convergence can unite fragmented audiences. Part of the process involves creating communities. Newspapers had to interact more with their audiences, Soh said, to know more about them and build a community. “We have loyal subscribers but they do not feel they are part of the paper. So how do we make them feel part of the paper? Through online social networking sites.” To show the “human face” of The Straits Times it organises events that help people identify themselves as part of this community.

Soh said The Straits Times dealt with serious issues, as did its online site Straits Times Interactive, but Stomp was a vehicle where people could talk about anything. “We have a feature called star blog with Stomp where we have seven celebrities blogging for us. They are from all walks of life. One of them was a finalist in the Singapore version of American Idol. She recently confessed that she was pan-sexual [a local term for bi-sexual] and she created a lot of waves on her blog. We have two radio broadcasters who blog. All are very provocative.”

But it is the image that is powerful, and gets results. On 10 November 2006 John Spencer Tan sent Stomp photographs of dangerous stairs on the second level of a double-decker bus. The anti-slip band on a step had dislodged, and a middle-aged woman had tripped and fallen. Two days after Tan’s photograph appeared, the step was fixed. Tan said he felt encouraged to know citizens could improve the situation around them. “I usually post things on my blog or send notices to the authorities but nothing gets done.”

One could argue that Singapore provides a new stomping ground for innovation.

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