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The Straits Times

www.straitstimes.com

Published on Jun 17, 2012

Secret diary of a teenager? Not in cyberspace

By Matthias Chew

When I was assigned to track down the student blogger who directed the F-word at a minister earlier this month, I was reminded of my own experience in secondary school.

Back then, I kept a blog and, like many my age, vented with impunity on everyone and everything, including on politics. One post contained unsavoury observations about my principal.

It all stopped when said principal, who had apparently been googling his own name, called me up to his office for a telling-off. I decided then to keep in mind that whatever I wrote online could be read even by those for whom it was not intended. I promptly took my blog offline.

Reuben Wang - who has since apologised to Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean - learnt that same lesson last week. But he was far more unfortunate in that he had to face the music in public, after his post went viral.

But another reason why I stayed under the radar was that I was also writing in an earlier Internet age - before the advent of Web 2.0, with its social networking sites and aggregators.

Back then, the vast majority of teen bloggers went unnoticed because it was much harder to project obscure links to a broader audience. You would have had to be particularly funny, engaging, good-looking or shameless to get noticed - and most teens are not.

Neither do most expect widespread attention. Reuben's blog, much like mine, was more personal diary than public pulpit.

But today, it takes only one tap on a mobile phone to tweet an angsty teenage rant or to share it with one's Facebook friends. On top of that, there are many more sites that collate local user-generated online content for Singaporean audiences.

Reuben said before he deleted his blog that he had not expected it to go viral. With more Singaporeans online - 77 per cent today versus 40 per cent in 2000 - going viral means reaching an ever larger public. And that public will hold varying views of what is offensive.

The Reuben incident highlights a dilemma facing social media users today: How do you convey a message meant for one audience, knowing that anyone and everyone can read it, and appropriate it for their own ends?

This is a similar situation to what some political leaders face. Every time a Japanese leader visits a controversial war shrine, every time a Malaysian leader waves the kris, they have to contend with the backlash from segments of the public for whom those gestures were not intended. The difference is that politicians expect to take the heat, and have an army of spin doctors on hand to deal with the damage. For ordinary citizens who simply want to vent behind a screen, the consequences may not have crossed their mind. Never mind a self-confessed 'rash' 17-year-old.

In the context of the Singapore blogosphere, it also means that any view expressed about politics or a politician has the potential to be appropriated by hacks of all stripes looking to advance their agenda.

Reuben was a teenager who made ill-judged comments about a minister, but he suddenly found himself celebrated by those seeking to paint the ruling party as disengaged with young people.

These sites do not appear to care whether the examples they use are representative, nor do they act in the interests of the very people they happily make martyrs of.

Internet users who put content on seemingly private Facebook accounts, or in locked blogs, have to bear in mind that 'friends' with access can circumvent the privacy wall by sharing that post.

When I think about what I wrote in my blog back then, I feel lucky I avoided being crucified for my immature political observations. But today, young netizens like Reuben have to deal with the possibility of having their views taken out of the social context in which they were made, and being judged for holding those views, even if they were never intended for general consumption.

Reuben is certainly not alone. Recently, indiscreet comments about Singaporeans made by individual Filipino Facebook users residing here have gone viral. Made in the heat of flame wars with individual Singaporean users, they were used by a news aggregator site to support its anti-foreigner campaign. The very same site had used Reuben to grind its axe against the Government.

Responding in part to this case, media academic Cherian George has called for an Internet code of conduct for users. He appealed to Internet users and the media to not get into a tizzy 'over inconsequential Internet indiscretions of insignificant individuals almost every week'.

He also urged the mainstream media not to pander to the 'kaypoh-ish petty-mindedness' of Singaporeans by carrying such stories.

It is a noble appeal, and in an ideal world, netizens should grow up and develop a sense of perspective.

But the reality is that people have always had a raging appetite for the unusual, the profane and the salacious. And they will continue to seek such content, regardless of the medium.

Shakespeare sprinkled dirty jokes in his plays to capture contemporary audiences. And even before the early modern era, readers took great delight in devouring sixth-century Byzantine writer Procopius' Secret History, an expose of the sexual exploits of Theodora, an erotic dancer and wife of the Eastern Roman Emperor Justinian.

Even in seemingly intelligent and cosmopolitan communities like that of Cambridge University, the most talked-about student publication is the Tab, a racy tabloid whose most famous feature is the 'Rear of the Year' - a search for the student with the sexiest bum.

The Internet makes it easier than ever to spread the dirt.

Fortunately, there is a silver lining for the likes of Reuben. The Internet also has a short attention span, insofar as what Dr George calls 'insignificant individuals' are involved.

In a matter of months, not many will remember Reuben, or particularly care about what he said. Don't believe me? Ask yourself if you remember Lai Shimun.

mattchew@sph.com.sg

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