Institute of Policy Studies

The Curious Case of Anton Casey in Cyberspace

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January 2014 will be remembered for the unfortunate series of incidents that culminated in the self-expulsion of British expatriate Anton Casey.

Casey's online posts of what seemed like personal snapshots — his son travelling on the MRT and another of his son in his luxury car — with inappropriate captions brought him instant ignominy. The damage these photographs wreaked was compounded by a YouTube video of Casey mocking those who reacted negatively to his posts, a video that, as he clarified later, was actually uploaded before his posts.

The case is curious because one would not expect such callous remarks from a person who has been living in his host country for over a decade, what more from one whose significant other is a Singaporean. These details surfaced amidst the fury that was unleashed online.

Within hours, individuals had posted information of his employment details, his supervisor's contact and his residential address. Within a week, Casey lost his job and had to expel himself from the comfort and security of the place he called home for the past 11 years.

The backlash against Casey in cyberspace led to politicians calling for restraint and censuring individuals for their vindictiveness. While Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Law K Shanmugam said he was "terribly upset and offended" by Casey's comments, he appealed to Singaporeans' big-heartedness and asked them to refrain from flaming the Briton's family. Prime Minister Lee criticised those who engaged in "unrestrained, anonymous viciousness" and called for greater civility online.

The case is even more curious because by now, one would think that the recent string of incidents involving people shooting their mouths off on social media and getting into hot soup would have taught everyone something about cyber sense and sensibility, albeit acquired vicariously.

This incident yet again demonstrates a glaring lack of understanding of cyberspace. The malady is non-discriminatory; it strikes both youths and adults regardless of their ethnicity and nationality. A *faux pas* transforms one from a social animal to a social pariah almost as quickly as one can hit "Enter".

In Singapore, the Media Literacy Council (MLC), formed in August 2012, is tasked with spearheading public education on media literacy and cyber wellness. Its core mission is to "develop public education programmes that will help the public navigate media, especially the Internet, safely and responsibly" and "promote a safe, secure and civil media environment for all".

Among its various initiatives, the MLC leverages the global Safer Internet Day (which was commemorated on 11 February this year) to promote more responsible use of online technology and mobile phones, especially among children and young people. The theme for this year is "Let's create a better Internet together", and to guide online behaviour MLC has also developed a set of core values: Empathy, Responsibility, Respect, Integrity, Inspiring Others Positively, Astuteness and Discernment.

Besides inculcating positive values that guide technology use and appealing to people's sense of responsibility, we should also emphasise self-preservation. The MLC has on its website useful tips on what we could do to protect our personal information online, such as connecting only with people we know offline, asking friends not to post pictures of us and our family without permission, monitoring our digital reputation and working with websites concerned to remove false or private information about ourselves.

While these tips are important and timely, we need to send a stronger message to everyone on the consequences one has to bear for one's actions. Such an approach may sound rather self-serving but research has established that for the majority, people are driven primarily by self-gratification than by altruistic motives when they go online.

A study by Anita Whiting and David Williams points to why most people use social media. Besides social interaction, information seeking and entertainment, people use social media to express their thoughts and opinions, criticise others and blow off steam. Social media is often used as a personal promotion vehicle where they "market their own personal brand".

In a 2010 study conducted by the Pew Research Centre's Internet & American Life Project, researchers said members of Generation Y in the United States will continue to disclose huge amounts of personal information. What is their main motive? It is to stay connected and take advantage of social, economic and political opportunities.

I once participated in a radio talk show held at a junior college located in the North Zone and was impressed by the students who were self-aware, articulate and confident. They shared their views on online sharing. Responding to a fellow panellist's appeal for people to behave responsibly online, a female student questioned why she has to do so and said candidly that when she goes online, she says things that she cannot express freely in the offline world.

There is nothing wrong with pursuing personal interests but we need to drive home the message that every action online, just as in the real world, comes at a cost. We incur social costs when we are publicly shamed and criticised, damaging our reputation in our school, workplace or community. An even more severe cost would be legal ramifications when we get on the wrong side of the law.

Whether it is the female polytechnic student who made a disparaging remark about Indians, or the former NTUC employee for her expletives on Malay weddings, these individuals have paid a price in one form or another for their actions online.

What seems like common sense is not so common after all. Three commonly overlooked characteristics of Internet technologies and their implications should be ingrained upon users.

One is the loosening of our inhibitions due to the Internet's anonymity and asynchronicity, resulting in us saying things that we normally would not say to one another face-to-face. Another is the increasingly non-existent boundary between what is private and public, and the speed at which one's personal details can be traced and exposed online. What we share online, or do offline for that matter, is almost guaranteed to come under the scrutiny of strangers. Take the recent case of Quek Zhen Hao. After two videos showing him behaving aggressively on the road went viral, anonymous web users found his parents' address and photos of his girlfriend and posted them online.

Third, everything is permanent on the web — the text, photographs and videos that we post online can be easily copied and reposted repeatedly, making it near impossible to wipe one's slate clean.

In short, users should realise that what they say or do online will define them to the invisible masses, who will not hesitate in unearthing personal details about them, in the name of information sharing. While it is all so easy and tempting to share bits and bytes of our lives, the simplest yet seemingly hardest thing to do would be to pause and think of the price attached to what we share online.

Greater awareness of the characteristics of Internet technologies will compel users to be more circumspect when they post content online. At least, it could prevent them from becoming the next headline, in print or in cyberspace.

A shorter version of this piece was published in The Straits Times on 11 February 2014, which was global Safer Internet Day.

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