The cost of getting too personal online

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TODAY is global Safer Internet Day and is an opportune time to sketch some lessons on social media etiquette that have come to the fore. It is likely that January 2014 will be remembered for the unfortunate series of incidents following posts by British expatriate Anton Casey.

The wealth manager'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 that appeared to insult the poor and the ordinary commuter brought him instant ignominy.

Within hours, netizens incensed by his remarks had posted information on his employment details, his supervisor's contact and his residential address online, along with angry comments directed at him and his family.

The heat got so bad that within a week, Mr Casey had lost his job and left Singapore with his family, citing "death threats".

This case is curious because one would think that, by now, people would have learnt to be circumspect about what they post online, after the recent string of incidents involving people shooting their mouths off on social media and getting into hot water.

Sadly, this has not happened, and it makes the case for educating Internet users on the benefits of self-preservation.

In Singapore, the Media Literacy Council (MLC) is tasked with the core mission of developing "public education programmes that will help the public navigate media, especially the Internet, safely and responsibly" and "promoting a safe, secure and civil media environment for all".

To guide online behaviour, the MLC came up with a set of core values: empathy, responsibility, respect, integrity, inspiring others positively, astuteness and discernment.

These are useful in inculcating positive values that guide technology use. They also appeal to people's sense of responsibility.

The MLC website does have useful tips on how to protect personal information online, such as connecting only with people we know offline, asking friends not to post pictures of us or our family without permission, and working with websites concerned to remove false or private information about ourselves.

While these tips are important and timely, there's a need to send a stronger message: that what you do and post online has consequences offline.

This approach may sound more self-serving than an appeal for empathy, but research has established that most people are driven primarily by self-gratification rather 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 users "market their own personal brand".

In a 2010 study conducted by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, researchers said members of Generation Y in the US 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 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 had 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.

The time we spend online is a cost; it is an opportunity cost as we have less time for other tasks or modes of interaction.

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 labour movement employee who made a Facebook post filled with 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 in users.

One is the loosening of inhibitions due to the Internet's anonymity, resulting in us saying things 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 dug up and spread 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 Mr 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 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 is to pause and think of the price attached to what we share.

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

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