

## **TRS website popular but ranks low on credibility**

### **Observers cite plagiarism and the anonymity of its editors as big flaws**

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*The Straits Times*, 18 July 2013

A website that made the news twice in recent weeks for publishing information that PAP MPs say is false is popular with some online readers but ranks low on credibility among sociopolitical sites and blogs.

New media watchers consider The Real Singapore (TRS) the "black sheep" among such sites because of its track record of publishing plagiarised content and unverified assertions, and because its editors are anonymous.

According to Web statistics company Alexa, TRS enjoys higher traffic than many other sites, which observers put down to its sensational content. But when it comes to credibility, TRS fares badly in these media watchers' assessments.

The anonymity of TRS' editors is a major reason to not take it seriously, said former Nominated MP Calvin Cheng. Knowing the editor's identity is important because "it shows an individual is willing to take responsibility for the content", he said.

TRS brands itself as a serious platform for the "voices of average Singaporeans". But when caught publishing unverified information, as it was this week in a dispute with Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad, its editors dodged responsibility by saying they did not produce the content but simply provided a platform for articles by members of the public.

The dispute was over an article containing allegations about Chua Chu Kang town council which Mr Zaqy described as "clearly false and borders on defamation". Two weeks ago, Tampines GRC MP Irene Ng lodged a police report about an article that the site falsely attributed to her.

Last November, a lawyer's letter was sent to the site over a defamatory article it published about Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen, which it later took down.

Observers drew a distinction between TRS, which gives an impression of reliability, and humour website New Nation.

Though both have carried speculative pieces, Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Carol Soon said that New Nation makes it clear it is doing so for satire, "so readers clearly know that they should not take what they read on the site seriously".

During the recent haze crisis, blogger Ravi Philemon re-published on his Facebook page an allegation that the Government's stockpile of N95 masks was not for the public.

That was later rebutted by Minister for Communications and Information Yaacob Ibrahim.

Dr Soon said that the public backlash to Mr Philemon's post and to a recent tirade by blogger Andrew Loh against President Tony Tan Keng Yam "points to an increasing expectation among the Singapore public for people to practise responsibility when producing and sharing content".

Rumours about politicians and their families have also made the rounds online, though these tend to originate from relatively unknown blogs. Nominated MP Eugene Tan cited one such rumour, started two years ago, that Acting Minister for Social and Family Development Chan Chun Sing was related to Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Such misinformation is potentially "damaging and unhealthy", he said.

Observers generally agreed that Singaporeans are becoming more discerning in sifting true information from false but added that more media literacy would help, especially when websites such as TRS that thrive on unverified facts tend to be popular.

Mr Cheng, who is a member of the Media Literacy Council, said that "people have to be taught to fact-check themselves before they believe something, or re-post it".

"If we have a media-illiterate population that naively believes whatever they read, then we are in trouble.

**Additional reporting by Kash Cheong**