

YP to close 2 Facebook pages **Move by Young PAP follows Web spats; main page to stay**

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The Straits Times, 18 March 2010

THE youth wing of the People's Action Party (PAP) is consolidating its online presence in a bid for better control over its new media message.

The move by Young PAP (YP) comes two months after a spate of high-profile spats between YP members and netizens.

Tomorrow, two of its Facebook pages - YP Network and YP Community - will be closed. Only the main Young PAP Facebook page will remain up.

YP said the move is not a 'U-turn' but a tweaking of strategy, incorporating lessons learnt.

'For us, it was a lot of experimentation,' said MP Zaqy Mohamad, YP vice-chairman and head of its media operations. 'We've never had these things happen to us. As we move along, we can put better processes in place.'

One lesson learnt is that some will take comments made online by individual YP activists as the youth wing's view - as seen in the 'Eric How' episode in which an inflammatory diatribe putting down lower-income Singaporeans was posted on the YP Network page.

With the new set-up, the YP top brass will directly monitor the main Facebook page, allowing the executive committee to better differentiate what is 'official' and what are personal views and discussions, Mr Zaqy said. The two Facebook pages to be taken down were run by volunteers.

The consolidation will also allow YP to look quickly into abuses and online impersonations.

For instance, the identity of 'Eric How', whose comments sparked an uproar, remains unknown despite two police reports made by two real-life Eric Hows for impersonation.

YP took three weeks to release a statement distancing itself from the comments. By then, its reputation had taken a hit.

'Some activists don't represent the party's view. But because they are under the YP banner, the public may not know the difference,' said Mr Zaqy.

In another controversy a few months earlier, netizens had accused YP member Sear Hock Rong, 24, of a conflict of interest, as some of the grassroots organisations with which he volunteers were also clients of his company.

After receiving complaints, the People's Association investigated and said it had found no evidence of wrongdoing.

Tellingly, both these spats originated on the YP Network that will be closed.

Media scholar Tan Tarn How of the Institute of Policy Studies said the new structure evinces a lack of conceptualisation and thorough thinking before YP waded into cyberspace.

'With new media, there is little control, if at all,' he noted. 'The discussion cannot be steered in one direction or another. If people go off-message...how do you deal with that?'

The problem with such failed experiments is that their impact on reputations lingers, he said.

One example is the post-65 blog, set up after the 2006 General Election, for young PAP MPs to connect with youths.

It languished, with the MPs simply posting their speeches. Last year, it was revamped and opened to contributors.

YP detractors, like 22-year-old Alex Tan, however, are not letting the Facebook pages go quietly into the night.

The project engineer, who was banned from the YP Network last November for allegedly malicious comments, has started a new Facebook page named 'YP Network Supporters'.

It is identical to the original YP Network, with the same profile picture and information.

Mr Alex Tan, now a member of opposition MP Chiam See Tong's Singapore People's Party, said he had started it 'for discussion without censorship'.

It has six members. The YP Network has 857 members.

Mr Zaqy said YP would not react to the new doppelganger Facebook page unless Mr Alex Tan 'does something serious or criminal like putting up misinformation or calling himself the PAP'.

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