

The Online Citizen appeals for contributions

Website will post less content as directors of managing firm focus on securing funding

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THE company managing sociopolitical website The Online Citizen (TOC) has made a public appeal for contributions, describing its funds as extremely low amid dwindling donations and a lack of subscribers.

In making its appeal on Monday (Nov 24), the TOC editorial team said it will post less content from this week as directors of The Opinion Collaborative Ltd (TOC Ltd) — formed in June to manage the website — focus on securing funding.

“Whatever funds we have left now would be directed towards maintaining our Web server to keep the website online,” the team said. “The budget crunch has affected the editorial operations in TOC. The full-time editorial team is living on fumes and passion to keep the website operational.”

The site, founded in 2006, has three full-time staff. TOC Ltd director Howard Lee told TODAY that the its daily readership had grown from about 10,000 in 2011 to an average of 20,000 over the past year, and this has increased the cost of hosting it.

At the same time, donations have dropped after peaking in 2011, when TOC was gazetted as a political organisation. Although contributions picked up whenever public appeals were made, Mr Lee said depending on donations is not sustainable and TOC will shift towards relying primarily on subscription and advertising.

It introduced subscription earlier this year, offering exclusive content, such as full-length videos and recordings. However, only about 50 have signed up so far. Mr Lee said: “At the end of the day, we need to establish some kind of business viability, so as to keep the website going.”

The team wants to raise enough to cover operating expenses, he added. TOC spent S\$37,673 last year, with manpower costs — including salaries for full-time staff, interns and commissioned work — making up 72 per cent of the expenditure.

Several media analysts said sociopolitical websites, such as TOC, face similar challenges as news organisations when it comes to subscription.

Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Carol Soon told TODAY: “Locals may not see the need to pay for content that they can easily enjoy for free.”

“Regulations that prohibit foreign funding further narrows the sources of revenue for such sites,” she added, referring to TOC’s status as a political organisation, which bars the website receiving funds from foreign donors.

Assistant professor Debbie Goh, who teaches at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at the Nanyang Technological University, said a paywall is not feasible as sites such as TOC have not yet established themselves as a premium product that consumers are willing to pay for. Its identity as a sociopolitical blog that carries contentious political content also makes advertisers hesitant to associate themselves with the site, she added.

Mr Martino Tan, the managing editor of Mothership.sg, said the socio-political website faces similar challenges like those of other start-ups.

The website, which hires five full-time staff and pays contributors for their work, relies on the investments of two private businessmen who are on the board of directors at Project Fisher-men Ltd, as well as advertisements and advertorial services.

It has received 879,000 unique visitors this month, so far, which translates to more than 35,000 unique visitors per day.

Mr P N Balji, a veteran journalist and editor of sociopolitical website theindependent.sg, said the success of such websites should not be gauged in monetary terms only.

“We can be doing it for the sake of society, to provide plurality to journalism. We have all these dreams and ideas. We are also doing it for those reasons. Money is not the real motivation,” he added.

Mr Lee said TOC was founded on the principles mentioned by Mr Balji. However, professionals who leave their jobs to manage TOC full-time do deserve full-time pay, said the site director who used to work in the communications industry. “It is fair pay for fair work. If we were to go on as volunteers, it is not that we can’t. It is just not something that is sustainable.”