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NTU students set up online paper

In the wake of Chee Soon Juan saga, a group of NTU students have set up an independent online newspaper that promises to "answer only to their readers". -AsiaOne

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By Candice Cai

In the furore that erupted after it was discovered that Nanyang Technological University (NTU) had censored news stories about Dr Chee Soon Juan's visits to NTU in late August, a group of students from NTU have found an alternative platform for their views to be aired - on the Internet.

They recently launched an online newspaper, The Enquirer, which is fully student-run and independent from the university. Its first article, published on 3 October, 2008, featured a story on how overseas Muslims celebrated Hari Raya in NTU. Subsequent articles focused on student protests over the censorship issue.

According to information obtained from their website, the aim for the paper is to provide "in-depth reporting of issues within the university." In addition, the paper will highlight issues or angles not covered by either of the two campus newspapers, The Nanyang Chronicle and NTU Tribune.

The small editorial team is made up of second- and third-year students from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information in NTU. When contacted by AsiaOne, its Chief Editor, Mr Chong Zi Liang, explained that the idea of starting the online newspaper had been brewing for some time. "We actually started thinking about it since 2006, when we were first-year students". But their busy schedules during those first two years forced them to put their plan on the back-burner.

"A catalyst"

What then, prompted them to regroup and finally push ahead with setting up the paper?

No doubt, the recent saga involving Dr Chee Soon Juan's visits to NTU hastened the process, and the website was created in less than two months.

Mr Chong admitted that the incident was a "catalyst" that spurred the group to action, but added that "it is not the main reason". He says, "The website will give us a very good opportunity to delve deeper into issues that are of interest to the student population.

"Because the Nanyang Chronicle only runs once every 3 weeks, the Enquirer will be able to complement it and do follow up stories quickly while they are still of interest."

When quizzed on his thoughts on the whole censorship incident, he reflects that he remains "pretty neutral" on the issue, as he understands both the university's and students' point of view. "I think it is an issue of conflicting ideals between the students wanting to get their story out, and the university trying to prevent the school from being used (as a political tool)".

Background story

An article on opposition politician Dr Chee Soon Juan's visit to NTU was pulled from the campus' newspaper just one day before it was to be published. A broadcast news package on the visit was subsequently pulled off the air as well.

The "media blackout" caused some unhappiness amongst those in the editorial team and in the student population.

In protest, three students and an alumna from the communication school in NTU made a series of speeches at Speakers' Corner in Hong Lim Park, urging participants to sign a petition to publish the censored article.

In its defence, the university told the Today newspaper that they had to exercise the university's ownership rights in this case, as there was a risk that the school's student media platforms were being exploited to "further a political objective".

Making readers their focus

In the fallout from the incident, the team behind The Enquirer also believes that there is a void to be filled in terms of the coverage of on-campus news.

By avoiding monetary lures from potential advertisers and demands from important financial providers, they hope to restore the "balance" that has been lost in journalism by bringing the focus back to serving the readers.

Of course, being an independent paper means the student writers and editors have full control over the content that they publish. Mr Chong agrees that it is a powerful position, and - alluding to a popular quote from a movie - says, "with editorial independence comes great editorial responsibility."

The paper's motto, is to be one that "answers only to our readers, the most important stakeholders in journalism", and to the writers themselves, "with no strings attached."

However, the students will have to be mindful of certain guidelines regarding publishing content on the Internet, especially on issues related to politics and those affecting racial and religious harmony.

According to a spokesperson from the Media Development Authority (MDA), online newspapers that require subscription fees as well as websites whose content primarily cover political or religious issues, are required to register with the MDA upon notification to do so.

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