

Undergrads start online NTU paper

Alternative to campus publication aims to be independent voice

By AMELIA TAN

THREE undergraduates have started a news website as an alternative to their campus newspaper which recently saw a report on a political opposition figure's visit yanked from its pages by the university administration.

The Enquirer, helmed by a group of 23-year-olds from Nanyang Technological University (NTU), was launched on Oct 3, a month after Singapore Democratic Party chief Chee Soon Juan visited the campus to speak to students and distribute fliers.

The university administration instructed students in charge of the newspaper, The Nanyang Chronicle, not to print a report on Dr Chee's unsolicited visit. It said that, as publisher, it had the right to stop its media platforms from being exploited by uninvited people to gain publicity.

This ignited a protest by another group of students - at Hong Lim Park on Oct 5 - against the lack of editorial independence on campus.

Chief editor of The Enquirer, Mr Chong Zi Liang, said the act of censorship was the catalyst for starting the website.

"As the Chronicle is funded by the university, the administration has the final say on whether some stories can or cannot be reported. I felt there was a need for an independent avenue to report these stories which can't be covered in the Chronicle," he said.

His assistant, Mr Lin Junjie, who is also the Chronicle's chief editor, said The Enquirer aims to fill the gaps in the Chronicle's coverage.

NTU's action has led to some debate in the forum pages of newspapers over how much independence student newspapers should exercise.

An NTU spokesman was reported in The New Paper on Oct 6 as saying the university generally does not interfere in editorial matters. She added: "In this case, there is the potential of an unsolicited visit being given publicity in furtherance of a political objective."

In his reply to a reader's letter in The Straits Times' Forum Page on Oct 16, NTU senior associate provost Er Meng Hwa re-stated NTU's right as publisher.

At least three people have written in to the ST Forum Page since, taking issue with his stand.



"Enquiring" undergrads (from left) Lin Junjie, Chong Zi Liang and Mohammed Zakaria Zainal Azman, all 23, launched their news website earlier this month. ST PHOTO: ASHLEIGH SIM

National University of Singapore undergraduate Johnathan Kwok Dao Yong, 24, agreed that a publisher has rights but said: "NTU needs to be clear as to whether it wants The Nanyang Chronicle to be a newsletter or a newspaper.

"A newsletter will publish only the good and pleasant things in a university, and basically act as a way for the university to advertise itself. On the other hand, a newspaper will publish both good and bad stories about the school, in as neutral a way as possible."

The Chronicle is published every three weeks during the school term. It was conceived as a way for journalism students to put in practice what they learn.

Protest organiser Scott Teng, 24, is

pleased that students have another platform to turn to for news.

He said: "We do not know when the administration will pull the ownership card again and decide to spike other stories. But with The Enquirer, we know that these stories will not go unreported."

Likewise, the Chronicle's teacher-supervisor Andrew Duffy, also a journalism lecturer, has welcomed the entry of The Enquirer in the student media.

He noted that the site's initiators are students from NTU's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information.

"I hope this shows that the principles of journalism which they have learnt in the classroom are important to them," he said.

ameltan@sph.com.sg

Different views

THE Enquirer is not the only independent, student-run news website in Singapore.

Two years ago, The Campus Observer was formed by a group of students from the National University of Singapore (NUS).

It is written and edited entirely by the students.

Campus Observer executive editor Belmont Lay, 24, said: "The fact that more student-run websites are coming up shows the desire of students to be part of a participatory culture in society. I foresee more such websites coming up in the future."

NUS has a magazine funded by the Students' Union, called The Ridge. It is published once a month during the school term.

DON'T DISCOURAGE THEM

"Our universities should hold themselves up to the standards of excellence beyond academic accolades...While the complaint of youth apathy in the political and social space is common, such actions seem only to further discourage the toe-dipping efforts of the few who try to enter."

Mr Bernard Lim Tiong Hien, 23, who wrote to the ST Forum Page, calling for tolerance for youthful expression

VARSIY'S MISSION TO EDUCATE

"Universities are supposed to be bastions of free speech...Through this censorship, the administration demonstrates that it does not trust its student population to discern the real issues from the political sideshows. It may also point to a wider failure of the university's mission to educate."

Forum Page letter writer Seah Su Chen, 29, public relations executive