The Net has everything, but can it be trusted?

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Article

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"In the last election, we certainly lost the Internet war, the cyberwar." Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi was quoted as saying this at the opening of Invest Malaysia 2008 last week, describing it as a painful lesson, and he reckoned that "it came at the right time".

Earlier, newly-appointed Information Minister Datuk Ahmad Shabery Cheek said the government would not control bloggers but would take into consideration their views as well.

In fact, he recognised that the "alternative media, like bloggers, play a role in nation building".

He gave an assurance to hear out the blogging community at a meeting in the near future.

In a similar vein, the prime minister said: "We thought that the newspapers, the print media, the television were important, but young people were looking more at text messages and blogs." This is especially so in the prevailing atmosphere when the conventional non-online media is perceived as biased to one set of thinking.

He admitted that it was "a serious misjudgment"to underestimate the Internet and rely solely on newspapers and television.

"We didn't think it was important.

It was a serious misjudgment." The power of the Internet has long been regarded as awesome by many, especially those who are information technology-savvy.

Some even alleged that it brings us close to the brink of another cultural renaissance powered by the online revolution.

And to think that it was not so long ago that communication was not only difficult but also costly.

Suddenly, the Internet changed all that, making the concept of "global village"a reality to billions who were once alienated from one another.

Some argued it is a version of democratisation where opinions are shaped and shattered, virtually instantaneously and exerting wide influence on the online community, mainly populated by the denizens of the digital.

While this may be true given the exponential increase of Internet users, the socio-economic impact is still debatable.

According to one opinion, it is also eroding knowledge, expertise and wisdom.

Andrew Keen, the author of The Cult of the Amateur (2007), went further by asserting that we are heading towards "catastrophe"as the modern day Internet (notably, the broadband) assaults the economy and cultures.

We will be tempted to dismiss Keen's allegation as some sort of self-inflicted fantasy, if not for the fact that his thought-provoking insights were backed by research and his vast experience in the IT sector.

Keen began his career in 1995 in the Silicon Valley with the founding of a dot.com company which was reportedly funded by prestigious global electronic companies.

Apart from other extensive work-related experiences, Keen has taught at well-known US universities and is regarded as a leading contemporary critic of the Internet.

One of his main concerns is the question of "reliability and truthfulness" found on websites, with respect to their contents.

After all, anyone with an opinion can post it on the Net, or launch a video without too much effort.

This further blurs what is "real"and what is "false", that of an expert opinion to one which is not.

It results in what can be trusted and believed, in contrast to those fabricated and suspected.

Of course, all media face the same dilemma, but none is as pervasive as when it involves the Internet.

More so when the information can be "pushed" to the users of the various online systems.

Among the numerous examples he gave, on page 19 of his book, Keen posted an interesting question: "Who is to say, for example, that a Malaysian prostitution ring didn't sponsor the famous YouTube video of the sexy Malaysian dancer?" It seems that democratisation Internet-style could not only undermine truth but also belittle expertise, experience and talent, wrote Keen.

He paraphrased Tom Friedman's "flattened world" by recognising that almost everyone can create his/her on-demand, personalised version of truth which becomes as "true"to anyone else's with equal validity.

As chief executive officer of a world-famous public relations company succinctly remarked, "In the era of exploding media technologies, there is no truth except the truth you create for yourself." I am reminded, however, of what my teacher once said: "Wise people speak because they have something to say.

"Fools, because they have to say something!" It is interesting to find out which of the two describes the Internet more accurately.

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