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When freedom of expression is abused

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FEW things have a shorter shelf life than the morning newspaper. By late afternoon it is already stale and unsaleable. And yet it remains indispensable in the daily life of the citizen despite the pull of television and the inroads made by the Internet.

Several Malaysian newspapers are already on the Internet and cyber surfers are now familiar with their mastheads and on-line versions.

Nonetheless, the optimism which greeted the introduction of the Net is now tinged with misgivings following dissemination of rumours, distortions, lies and malicious information meant to sow hatred and discord. In effect free speech has been abused.

Surely contemptible was the item put out during Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's recent pilgrimage to Mecca.

It was said that he was critically ill and being treated at a secret hospital in the Holy Land. That he faithfully performed the haj and met other Malaysian pilgrims within the precincts of the Kaaba were never reported.

Reported over six times on the Net in April was the Prime Minister's demise!

Much earlier was the item about the alleged resignations of Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Youth and Sports Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and the then Deputy Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Norian Mai.

Still remembered was the item which spread rumours about Indonesian illegals rioting in Chow Kit, Kuala Lumpur.

News fabrications such as these drew criticisms from various readers in newspapers, one of whom suggested a "Netiquette" course. Another called on the Government to look into the possibility of imposing control-based regulations on the Net.

Other letters in the Bahasa Press were more critical.

Referred to was an item on Islamic teachings which were deviationist in nature. Yet another was about a Muslim said to have become apostate.

All things said and done, however, Dr Mahathir had already declared that Internet usage in Malaysia would be free from censorship and other limitations.

This is in accordance with the objective of the Multimedia Super Corridor, largely dependent on creative applications that come from a free and conducive environment.

As mentioned by a member of the Netizens (as users of the Net like to be known): "No government owns the Net. News or anything for that matter can be put up by anyone with some knowledge of web page design. The Internet is just a tool and like all tools, it is amoral. If you hand a knife to a surgeon, he will do good things but if you give it to a homicidal maniac, he will kill people with it." For some of them gossip is news.

On another level is the story of "the gang that couldn't write straight" as described in an American publication late last year.

The report begins thus: "For the US journalism profession, 1998 has been an annus horribilis. Not since 1981, when Washington Post reporter Janet Cooke was shamed into giving back her Pulitzer Prize for inventing a prepubescent heroin addict, has America's prestige Press been so humiliated."

Apart from Time magazine and CNN having to retract stories accusing the

Pentagon of using poison gas during the Vietnam war, the Wall Street Journal had to take a Monicagate story off its web site.

Meanwhile, the New York Times was accused of inventing a front page quote predicting an imminent cure for cancer.

Elsewhere, the New Republic magazine conducted an investigation named "Operation Broken Glass" into stories written by its specialist writer, Stephen Glass. As the the story goes, it "uncovered a pantheon of bogus quotes, people, organisations and events... Glass invented outrageous characters and situations for the purpose of poking fun at them - it was all a good yarn."

Another newspaper, Boston Globe found that four articles written by Patricia Smith, a black communist, contained material that could not be confirmed.

Boston is described as the land of racial double standards. Provided as proof was the case of Mike Barnicle, a white. A rival newspaper noted similarities between the article and the contents of a best-selling book titled Brain Droppings written by another.

In the the end Barnicle had to go but much later than the black columnist.

The story did not end there and there was said to be a bizarre twist.

The Wall Street Journal dismissed reporter James Hirsch over the way he covered Barnicle's departure.

It was said that he repeatedly phoned the New York Times which owns the Globe for comments but there was none.

Sometime later the Times informed the Journal that Hirsch had never phoned for the story. And so he was off the Journal staff.

Meanwhile, in Malaysia, journalistic history of sorts was made recently during the Fourth Langkawi International Dialogue when several heads of states from Africa, Asia and the Caribbean - a King, six Presidents and two Prime Ministers - took part in a Q & A session when they posed the questions and journalists from the same countries, and a BBC journalist, had to answer. It ended amicably.

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