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Internet-Act (News Focus)

PRINTING PRESSES ACT NEEDS TO COVER CYBERSPACE AS WELL

By: Alan Ting

KUALA LUMPUR, May 29 (Bernama) -- Twenty years ago computers, let alone the Internet, are so foreign to most Malaysians despite American spies already using them in the Second World War although not in the current form.

Today the Internet is already an indispensable part in the life of most Malaysians especially the youngsters who use it as a vital mode for gossips and snoops in their "hip-hop" world.

However, since there is no policing of cyberspace, certain people have been capitalising on this feature of the Internet to sow hatred and strife among Malaysia's multiracial citizenry.

In the wake of this, various quarters have called for extending the ambit of the Printing Presses and Publications Act to also cover materials on Internet websites.

Associate Professor Dr Safar Hasim of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM) said several issues needed to be addressed first if the Act were to police cyberspace as well.

Safar, a lecturer in communications, said most of the Internet portals are foreign-based and it would be difficult to apply Malaysian laws against them.

"Anyhow there are existing legislations which can be used to curb cyber rumour-mongering and defamatory inclination," he said.

Another difficulty would be in obtaining hard evidence of rumour-mongering and incitement on the Internet especially when views of individuals are involved, he said.

"We do not know who they actually are and from where the defamatory or inciting articles are written...so how do we prove they are the authors," Safar said adding that websites can originate from anywhere in the world.

A local media practitioner, who declined to be named, reckoned there was an urgent need to control Internet content which he said had deviated from the portals' actual objective of giving facts.

"The rumour-mongering has gone too far to the extent of tarnishing the reputation of our leaders and antagonising the various communities," he said.

To illustrate his point, he cited blatant lies posted on pro-opposition websites that the government was trying to poison jailed former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim and that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had fallen from a horse while visiting Argentina.

A yet another blatant lie posted on an anti-establishment website was about last March's clashes between rival resident groups in Jalan Klang Lama being orchestrated by the ruling party, he said.

"All these baseless cyberrumours clearly underscore the need for some form of control over the Internet," he said without elaborating.

According to a Parliament backbencher, who also asked not to be named, it would not be easy for the government to act against those spreading malicious rumours through the Internet.

However a regulation requiring website owners to display the identity of the originators of such content could be the answer, said the MP.

"This will make portal owners to exercise caution and be more accountable as their licence can be revoked if they breach the law," he said.

As it is, the Printing Presses and Publications Act 1984 does not cover

Internet content leaving everyone free to write as one fancy without being accountable for the literature, he said.

This is in contrast to the jurisdiction the Act has on printed materials like newspapers, booklets and magazines, he said.

"I believe the government has not much choice but it can amend the Act to cover the Internet as well," he said.

He believed that the Act could be amended to require website and news portal owners to obtain operating licence besides displaying the names of writers and publishers.

"This will create awareness in them to be more responsible for materials posted on the Internet," he said.

He said this was important to screen away rumours which could inflame ill-feelings among the various communities, among other things.

"Hence widening the scope of the Printing Presses and Publications Act to stamp out cyber rumour-mongering will prove to be appropriate and timely given the current scenario," he added.

-- BERNAMA

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