A blog on your character

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For The Straits Times

A NORTHERNWESTERN University student was in the limelight recently for making racist remarks on an online journal in response to a blog post. Many Internet users posted angry messages calling him names, some writing under the anonymity made possible by online nicknames (which leads one to wonder if they were themselves guilty of the type of behaviour of which they were critical).

The incident highlights larger issues surrounding this phenomenon of writing online journals or "blogs", which seem to be in vogue among young people. While previously one needed some technical savviness to write an Internet article, that is no longer the case.

Why do people blog? There are different motivations. Blogging is a useful tool for friends to keep in touch and stay updated on each other's lives with a casual style. Blogging another way is to blog ought to be no substitute for actual contact.

Blogging for strangers is somewhat different. There are some who blog with a purpose — for example, in order to keep their sick or injured friends or to explain their worldviews. Other bloggers take pride in scoring the greatest number of hits per day — probably taken as an indication of how interesting or relevant their lives are.

Critics lament the voyeurism involved in following another's life. And what can only make this worse is the possibility that the other person's life is only his blog persona and not his real self. He writes to titillate or to antagonise.

Blogging as a form of writing seems to be turning into a whole genre in itself. And since human beings are such copycats, one might allow the "style" on many blogs to take over one's voice. How many of us have been surprised when we read blogs by a friend for the first time and see a completely different side of the person from the one we thought we knew?

In the case of the Northernwestern University student, his apology after the incident is telling: "I guess I was not myself when I wrote those things. I don't use my own persona when I write on my blog. I realise they were in very poor taste and I deeply regret my actions. I am not like that."

What the incident also brings to the forefront is the reality of blogging — that it is not just the private business of the blogger and his fans. Blogging about real persons — individually or as a group — implicates others. Interesting issues are raised when the subject of the blog is some-one the blogger is not actually acquainted with.

Who are these subjects? Public figures — and these days, the category has expanded to include teachers and politicians — frequently become the subject of blog posts.

Years ago, my friend "googled" my name and the search revealed a complaint from a student of mine on one of the blogs. That was when it dawned on me that I was actually in other people's diaries. While the student did not identify herself, I knew who she was from what she said had been said in class. I believe blogging also deals with other aspects of her life outside school.

Blogging is revealing about the blogger in another way. As there is no personal contact, blogging can encourage malign and irresponsible statements — some of which can easily form the subject of defamation suits.

Hiding behind a blog means to feed cowardice — some bloggers rant behind others' backs. Perhaps they even hope that those bloggers will be afraid of responses to their postings through tweets that they would not dare to confront others with.

In the end, the question each blogger should ask himself is this: What does your blog say about your character?