

Net innovation feeds bad content

By Clarence Rambharat Thursday, June 25 2009

The internet is akin to the complex financial instruments devised by the financial world to inflate wealth: both were innovative but once their everyday usage moves too far away from commonsense, they are destructive.

First, there's plagiarism. The recent discussion missed a key element: the traditional rules are being pushed. The widespread availability of free online research and commentary on every subject puts information into a lot of hands, but this same easy accessibility tests claims of originality. Claiming ownership and failing to acknowledge use of original material are different: with almost everything being researched there is very little to be completely original about.

No one has fed the storm of originality and ownership more than Arianna Huffington, co-founder and editor-in-chief of the online Huffington Post (HuffPo). Described by Time as the "web's new oracle", HuffPo attracts one million comments a month: the key word in the debate is "aggregator."

Feeding the criticism is the fact that the website takes content electronically from other sites and republishes it on the HuffPo site. Perfectly legal, but in a few cases it has done so without crediting the original writers and in most cases the content is published in such a way that internet searches find the HuffPo version even before the original version. Industry watchers believe that if there is a line between plagiarism and aggregation, HuffPo has come closest to crossing it.

The second danger is that verbal communication is languishing. The internet has created cheaper and, in some cases, free channels for verbal communication. In the early 1980s my father studied in Enschede Holland. Between airport trips to drop him off and pick him up, our communication was limited to the many cards and letters he would post. That was snail mail and in a world of Skype we might have seen and heard him more often.

Facebook (200 million users), MSN Messenger and Twitter (25 million users) are incredible platforms for keeping in touch, messaging and communicating instantly, but in a world still largely dependent on human interaction, they should supplement and not replace verbal communication.

If the internet becomes the dominant form of interaction, a face to face meeting, after online familiarity, will be awkward as the online exchanges must survive the true test of human compatibility: verbal communication, body language and chemistry. Many online relationships will not survive the first human encounter.

Employers are largely ignored in emphasising communication skills as an edge. Communication skills are severely underrated and insufficient attention is paid to them in school and university curriculums. Apart from RBTT's competition, national debating and

oration at secondary school level is nearly dead. Secondary schools drama has barely survived and in the gasp to complete syllabuses, meaningful classroom interaction is often shelved. Tertiary level programmes are packed with useless slide presentations and the tedium of note calling and writing. Eyes are on the clock rather than on the content.

Text talk

The third danger is the destruction of language by the seepage of text talk into communication. Who would have thought that words will eventually be spelt with letters and numbers? Text talk is changing vocabulary and jargon and acronyms are replacing real vocabulary. Watering down formality is one thing, destroying civility is quite another thing.

Too many miss the point: the internet and technology have expanded communication channels, but the formalities remain the same. Mr and Ms, names and greetings have been sideswiped, replaced by “Hey” in formal or business communication. Instant communication methods are fine but brevity at the expense of civility is unacceptable.

Worse yet, acronyms have escaped from the glossary pages into our internet language. In informal exchanges we have seen LMAO, LOL, PAW, PAL and WYCM. Even in business communications, e-mails can have just three letters: FYI. Or we may see WTG, TIA, TC, TY, RFP, QQ, FAQ, and B2B. **Anyone caught in this communication crater may need to visit www.netlingo.com.**

The last two dangers are related. The internet has introduced a higher level of risk to human interaction. The internet provides privacy, anonymity and creates an impersonal bubble in which the participants make their own assessments of character, appropriateness — and risk. These internet exchanges are called “grooming” by researchers. Mistakes can lead to death. In April 2009, two women who advertised under the “erotic services” section on Craigslist were robbed and one killed. Before that, a 24-year-old was lured to her death by an ad for a baby sitter.

ID theft

The fifth danger comes from what actually is exchanged or posted on the internet as part of the human interaction. Identity theft is fuelled by the availability of personal information on social sites: e-mail addresses, websites, telephone numbers and other family information create a sufficient profile for mischief. Photos and our propensity to create and post them also create danger. These are everyday images but the law has made some of those things which we consider to be innocuous, serious crimes. Images of children in little bitty bathing suits or even underwear are discouraged from online sites. In some jurisdictions they can lead to two charges which work in tandem: creating and distributing.

Read more at www.clarenceramharat.blogspot.com