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IN MAY last year, as all kinds of rumours were swirling online, it appeared that little action was being taken against the writers.

Cyberspace was like a lawless cowboy town where netizens post lies and inflammatory comments and harass individuals. But that has changed since.

Socio-political website TR Emeritus was made to withdraw defamatory comments posted by netizens.

Police investigated the website Temasek Revealed after a rumour about a full-time national serviceman shooting himself. It is not related to TR Emeritus.

The latest: Seasoned blogger Alex Au finding himself in hot water. Again. The man of socio-political blog Yawning Bread had to say sorry and erase a post by this week. Legal action loomed otherwise.

Besides apologising, Mr Au also had to put up the Attorney-General's Chambers (AGC) letter – informing him that the "Woffles Wu case hits a nerve" post was contemptuous of the court.

The AGC said the June 18 post "alleged that the Singapore courts are biased towards those whom the author, Mr Au Waipang, described as well-connected".

Dr Wu was fined \$1,000 last month for abetting an employee to take the rap for two speeding offences.

Just five months earlier, Mr Au had to remove potentially defamatory comments about Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K Shanmugam's personal life.

He complied both times. On his blog, Mr Au said he accepted the post had scandalised the Singapore courts.

"I apologise for committing that act of contempt of court and have taken down the offending post. I will not, in future, put up any post to the same or similar effect."

When contacted yesterday, Mr Au declined to comment further.

Policing and housekeeping

Back in 2002, a government-appointed panel called for greater liberalisation in the censorship of new media. But light touch clearly does not mean no touch.

Then Mr Shanmugam, who is also the Second Minister for Home Affairs, had said during a Budget 2010 speech that there must be "accountability for actions in the Internet as well as the physical world".

From defamation to acts of sedition and baseless allegations threatening to hurt the reputation of an institution, it is clear the Internet is being policed.

Nominated MP and SMU law professor Eugene Tan said Mr Au's case "demonstrates that even a savvy blogger has to be mindful of the laws governing speech".

While it seems more attention is paid to high-profile blogs and websites recently (see report below), Prof Tan said they are not singled out for special treatment.

"The authorities are trying to remind people that what they say online is governed by the same set of rules in the real world... Certain types of conduct are lawful and some are not.

"What's happening is a housekeeping process," Prof Tan added.

In a May interview with TNP, Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Chan Chun Sing encouraged people to speak up online: "If you don't agree, then you write something. But if you don't write something, then you have abdicated your responsibility to say something."

Singapore Management University's social media expert Michael Netzley expects to see more of such



BLOG IN THE BOG:
 (Left) Mr Alex Au of socio-political blog Yawning Bread found himself in hot water after his post on Dr Woffles Wu's (below) court case was found to be contemptuous of the courts.

PICTURES: ST FILE

ACCOUNTABILITY IN A LIBERAL CYBERSPACE

Will careless blogs 'spoil market?'

Experts weigh in on whether offensive behaviour on the Net is inviting tougher regulation



conduct for responsible online behaviour.

Some bloggers called on the Government to "leave the Internet alone". Others expressed distrust, seeing it as a way for the Government to control free speech on the Internet.

Prof Tan said the recent cases are likely to have a chilling effect on netizens.

And what of those who are anonymous online? Replying to Parliamentary questions on whether there is enough enforcement for Internet offences, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Home Affairs Teo Chee Hean said this week that his ministry is looking into areas like how to track down anonymous perpetrators.

"Fundamentally, we should work together to foster a culture of responsible Internet use where each individual respects the rights and views of others in the online community," he added.

Dr Netzley suggested websites adopt a two-tier approach – one for all to post comments and another that is open only to responsible commentators.

"It doesn't take away anyone's right to say what they want, but it cuts down on the chances of people crying foul. Those who blame censorship when their comments are deleted – that's just baloney."

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