

Wanted: A Net that can catch its own bad hats

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IT IS someone's idea of a joke, though most people who have come across the clip posted on YouTube do not find it funny.

Two young men, presumably Singaporean, walk into a halal coffeeshop and — in a variety of ways calculated to irritate the waiter — keep asking him to serve them pork.

The clip was removed last week, perhaps because it was deemed inappropriate, but by yesterday it had made a comeback.

The episode underscores how difficult it is to police the vast and unruly Internet. It also raises the issue: Who should do it? Various experts that this newspaper spoke to agreed on one thing: Regulating the Internet should not be left to the authorities. Preferably, the netizens themselves should keep cyberspace free of such provocation, they agreed.

"There are many civic-minded individuals who have voiced their objections and concerns after seeing the video," the Media Development Authority told Today. "In fact, the video has been flagged out as inappropriate content by YouTube's community of users. This is an encouraging development."

Observers said it was best when the service provider itself took action — with a little help from the community.

At Hardwarezone, the most popular online forum here, administrators rely on members to report "bad posts". According to product manager Lim Chuan Jer, the site has a group of moderators — appointed by administrators — who voluntarily keep an eye on forums.

"I believe this is the only way to go. Websites do not require licences. At the rate at which they are popping up around the world, it will be virtually impossible for any organisation or government to police every site," said Mr Lim.

The site gets about 10 "bad post" reports a day. Over the past two years, it has heard from the authorities about 20 times regarding more severe cases — the most recent being a bomb hoax posted on the site.

Some violations are clear-cut. But in a community as diverse as the Internet, one man's joke may be another man's hurt and it is not always easy for service providers to decide what is appropriate. Nominated MP Siew Kum Hong cautioned about community policing that crosses the line and becomes vigilante behaviour. "If someone has an agenda and goes around complaining, it's going to create a false or misleading picture of what's going on," he noted.

Mr Siew said that private service providers would have to decide what their comfort levels were. "Over time, they will develop a societal norm within the Internet," he said.

But can one rely on netizens to come up with the right responses?

As far as this particular video was concerned, MDA urged Internet users to continue registering their concerns with YouTube. "This will send a strong signal that most Singaporeans disapprove of such content," it said.

But a study showed that Singaporean youth would require some prodding before their spoke up on online issues.

Fei Yue Community Services surveyed 1,200 teenagers — aged between 13 and 15 — and found that most of them were indifferent to illegal websites or undesirable content.

If they come across any, most say they will not tell their parents or teachers about it as they do not want to answer uncomfortable questions on why they visit such sites.

Others, in a demonstration of twisted logic, thought that everything that they saw on the Internet was aboveboard. As one respondent wrote: "If it's on the Internet, it's not illegal ... because if it's illegal, it would have been taken off already."

Such attitudes show that Singaporean youth have a "long way to go" before they could be considered responsible netizens. Fei Yu hopes to educate both, teenagers and their parents on healthy online behaviour.

But Mr Siew pointed out that learning good behaviour wouldn't help if the source of the problem lay in the real world. Referring to the YouTube video, Mr Siew said that those who recorded it "obviously thought it was funny — whether it was online or not".

He added: "While the Internet makes it easier for certain traits to manifest themselves, those traits must exist in the first place. And the underlying problem (racism, ignorance, apathy) is still there."