Hate mobs thrive in Asia's booming social media

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A man looking at a Thai Internet page displaying a photo of a teenage girl leaning on a road barrier and using her phone moments after she was involved in a car crash that killed nine people. The girl deserves "no happiness forever" according to one of the 300,000 people who "like" a Facebook page set up to condemn her.

A teenager involved in a car crash that killed nine people in Thailand deserves "no happiness forever", according to just one of more than 300,000 Facebook users who support a page set up to condemn her.

"Only your death is worthwhile for what you have done," said an angry post on the site. "Are you still a human?" asked another. One of the members of the cyber hate campaign threatened to rape the youngster if he saw her.

The 16-year-old girl, from a wealthy Thai family, faces charges of reckless driving resulting in death and driving without a licence, after her car crashed with a public minibus on a Bangkok tollway last month.

Soon afterwards a photo emerged that appeared to show the girl leaning on a roadside barrier, calmly using a BlackBerry smartphone, having escaped serious injury.

She was quickly accused in Internet forums of idly chatting to friends as victims lay dying nearby, which her family denied.

Her photos and contact details were posted online and she reportedly received death threats.

While the exact circumstances of the crash are unclear, the outrage unleashed on Facebook, Twitter and other websites has highlighted the murky phenomenon of cyber "hate mobs" on popular social networking sites.

Behind this trend is what is known as "Internet disinhibition", said Adrian Skinner, a clinical psychologist in Britain who has researched behavioural differences on the web.

"It's now well established that some people can behave in a much less inhibited way on the Internet, and the primary reason is that they feel there's no return, no comeback," he told AFP.

He explained this "lowered sense of responsibility" was coupled with the fact that writing online involved much less effort than taking to the streets in a revenge-seeking crowd -- a more likely option in the pre-Internet age.

"A mob can form much more easily because of electronic

communication," he said. "It's much easier for this phenomenon of an 'e-mob' to grow."

Membership of Facebook in Thailand more than doubled last year and now stands at about 7.4 million -- 11 percent of the population -- according to Socialbakers, which compiles data about the site.

The boom was fuelled by fierce debate over the kingdom's political crisis, which triggered deadly opposition protests in Bangkok in April and May last year.

"These tools allow us to express our feelings, ideas and thoughts easily," said Supinya Klangnarong, coordinator of the cyber campaign group Thai Netizen network, who thinks evolution of Internet usage is happening "too quickly".

"Expressing ourselves is good but we need to know the boundary of expression and how to use social media positively," she said. "We need a standard to control what is creative expression and what is intimidation."

Demonstrators march peacefully through Bangkok on April 23, 2010. Clinical psychologist Adrian Skinner says "Internet disinhibition" allows mobs to grow more easily in cyberspace than on the streets. "It's now well established that some people can behave in a much less inhibited way on the Internet, and the primary

reason is that they feel there's no return, no comeback," he said.

The issue is not unique to Thailand, however, with numerous examples of Internet hate campaigns emerging across Asia, which was named by Facebook in September as the fastest-growing region for new subscribers to the site.

In China, where traditional media is heavily censored, the web has become a key way for people to air their views and vent their anger, with many using Facebook and Twitter through proxy servers because they are officially blocked.

There are scores of cases of people -- celebrities, officials or ordinary citizens -- who have been at the receiving end of disapproval or anger on the Internet, particularly where corruption or abuse of power are concerned.

In one of the most famous recent examples, Zhang Ziyi, a Chinese movie star, received a barrage of online criticism after it was revealed she had only given part of a promised donation to victims of the huge 2008 Sichuan earthquake.

The incident took a toll on the actress, known for her roles in "Memoirs of a Geisha" and "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon", and she apologised in a teary interview. The entire one million yuan ($152,000) was eventually paid.

The Internet has now become such a medium for people's wrath in China that it has triggered the so-called "human flesh search" phenomenon, where netizens hunt down and reveal the identities of perceived offenders.

Their targets have included young women who crushed rabbits to death in graphic videos posted on the web.

In South Korea, netizens have come up against the law for what Korean President Lee Myung-Bak has described as "improper Internet witch-hunting".

His comments were sparked by the case of popular hip-hop singer Tablo, who faced a fierce web campaign from November 2009 when bloggers cast doubt about his educational background.

Police launched a criminal probe, concluding that Tablo's academic credentials were authentic, and referred 14 bloggers to prosecutors on libel charges.

The case highlighted "the tyranny of the cyber mob that gets a high from spreading ungrounded rumours," a major South Korean newspaper, the JoongAng Daily, said in an editorial in October.

"The situation shows a dark shadow that arches over the Internet age."

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