

Notice from ministry sparks outrage

Written by Taipei Times

Thursday, 04 November 2010 09:34 -

A notice issued by the Ministry of Education asking the country's largest college bulletin board system (BBS) — Professional Technology Temple (PTT) — to tone down its political rhetoric has attracted outrage after being posted online.

The one-page notice was sent last month to National Taiwan University, which oversees the PTT site frequented by hundreds of thousands of users daily.

Citing complaints received by Premier Wu Den-yih's (吳登毅) office, the notice said political articles dominate the PTT's Gossip Board and that it wished to see political staffers who try to "manipulate" Netizens' opinions on the board removed from "an educational network" to give users a cleaner environment.

Gossip Board administrators should step up their management of Internet use and comments that "are not used for educational or research purposes," the notice said.

The notice was posted on the Internet by one of the administrators of the forum, who claimed it was forwarded to her through school officials. Within hours hundreds of angry messages had been posted online on Internet forums and social networking Web sites.

Most of the comments voiced concerns about what they said was an attempt to assume control of, and regulate parts of the PTT, which include more than 1.5 million registered members and tens of thousands of discussion boards.

"The Ministry of Education's concerns on PTT: Does this represent a new Internet 'White Terror'?" one commentator wrote.

Another wrote: "The ministry now wants PTT to tone it down after we made fun of [former president] Chen Shui-bian (陳水扁) for eight years."

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Some others joked that the government might now see posts on the discussion board as a threat to national security.

A Facebook event calling on Internet users to demand the resignation of both Minister of Education Wu Ching-ji (吳清基) and the premier over the letter had attracted 2,350 responses as of yesterday.

A commentator on the page wrote that after two years, “the Chinese Nationalist Party [KMT] has begun to instill its martial law on the Internet.”

“At least under the eight-year Democratic Progressive Party [DPP] administration, we wouldn’t be arrested or tried for saying the [wrong] things,” the user added.

DPP lawmakers argued in the legislature yesterday that as an institution of higher learning, the university should be able to make its own decisions.

“A university should be training their students to think independently, to be able to take a stance on society,” DPP Legislator Kuan Bi-ling (關碧玲) said. “The comments and actions of students are self-regulatory and the school’s best course of action is to give them this freedom.”

When asked for comment, Wu Ching-ji defended his ministry’s move, saying the notice was simply a “friendly reminder.”

Wu Ching-ji denied the ministry was trying to interfere with freedom of speech on the Internet, adding that university students should be responsible for their behavior.

The ministry’s Computer Center director Ho Jung-kuei (何俊偉) said political discussion of an academic nature is allowed on the nation’s academic BBS, but political attacks or campaigning should be banned.

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Unconvinced, Kuan of the legislative Education and Culture Committee said the minister should step down over the controversy.

Meanwhile, NTU secretary-general Sebastian Liao (廖正興) was quoted by the Chinese-language Liberty Times (the Taipei Times' sister newspaper) as saying that as the PTT is an independent student-run organization, school administrators would not step in.

The PTT was originally founded by information engineering students at the school in 1995. It is currently run by the student-managed Electronic BBS Research Society.

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