

POLITICS AS USUAL: The Right to be Forgotten

By Alison Collins-Mrakas

Google has just begun the process of wading through the 10s of thousands of requests from folks in Europe who are exercising their newly found right to be forgotten.

The European Union's high court ruled recently that people have a right to demand that search engines like Google cut links to articles about themselves that are no longer current or relevant. In other words, you have a right to limit what information about yourself is out there for anyone to see.

The ruling stemmed from a case of a man who had a significantly sizeable debt that he was unable to pay and as a result, was ordered to sell his house to pay the debt.

The matter was reported in local newspapers. What wasn't reported was that the man did pay the debt.

When the newspapers put their archived copies on line, the story about the man losing his house because he couldn't pay his debts, became part of the monolithic trove of searchable information known as Google. And, his potential for mortification was multiplied exponentially. And worse the mortification would never end. It would be forever.

And that's the crux of the issue. In the internet era, privacy is a rather scarce commodity. Every word you say, every picture taken of you, every indiscretion minor to major can end up on the internet.

It's why we warn kids to stop posting so much personal information about themselves online. Many a kid has been warned that that photo you posted to facebook of you hammered, next to a bong, will show up some day when you've made the short list for that dream job and HR does a Google search.

Job gone! Don't kid yourself. It happens.

The man who launched the suit runs his own business, a business built on his personal reputation. The fact that this unfortunate incident from nearly two decades ago popped up every time someone Googled caused him to fear the impacts to both his business as well as his personal reputation

I think it is a ruling that is certainly well past due.

We all have a right to privacy. And we need to exercise that right. Far too much about our lives is stored in databases over which we have little or no control. And so many times that information isn't even accurate and yet we have no means to correct that misinformation.

I don't think I have the right to know about the time my co-worker was stopped by the police for public drunkenness. I don't have the right to mine the internet for juicy pieces of gossip. And spare me the argument about freedom of speech and freedom of access to publicly available information. This isn't about the public's right to know. It's about the public's right to be nosy. And that's not a right.

We should not be able to satiate our prurient interests at the expense of the privacy of others.

In the political context where reputation is everything the Google search engine is especially dangerous. Look at Rob Ford. An arrest and conviction for drunk driving from sometime in the nineties reared its ugly head during the 2010 election. Newspapers ran multiple stories - replete with mug shot photos in the weeks leading up to the election.

I guess his drunkenness is relevant now, but at the time, it was a decade old conviction that had little to do with the current campaign but figured prominently in discussions of his legitimacy as a mayoral candidate.

He's not the only politician to suffer the indignities of indiscriminate data mining. Political leaders of every stripe have seen video clips of themselves from years ago, dusted off and presented as commentary on their current abilities. It isn't right.

Personally, I don't care if Hudak, Horwath or Wynne drank to excess in university. I don't care if they wore an inappropriate Hallowe'en costume when they were 16. And I don't care if they lost their house in the '92 recession because they couldn't pay their bills.

I care about what they stand for, right now. What they will do with my tax dollars for the betterment of my community.

On June 12, think about which leader, which party best represents you what's important to you.

And then, cast your ballot for the best choice.

Until next week, stay informed, stay involved, because this is after all Our Town.