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OPINION

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Stop strata leaks by locking up your apartment block's website

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I'm all for websites and Facebook pages, but they do have a potential downside. Imagine all the anonymous trolling and flaming that you read about on Facebook and Twitter, with the added spice that the online combatants could bump into each other in the car park.

"Aha! So you are Barbieburner!" "OMG! You must be Carscratcher, damn your emojis!"

Of course, this is less likely to happen if you use a password and log in system to make sure the (ab)users are identifiable and responsible for their comments.

Passwords also protect the privacy of residents who don't need the world to know that they've been caught hanging their smalls on an illegal balcony washing line.

Barrier to legal action

More seriously, they are your first line of defence against legal action. Even heated discussions made within a strata community attract qualified exemption from defamation suits. But one condition is that they haven't been published to the outside world.

Years ago when my own block launched its website, I suggested a residents-only password protection. But that was dismissed with the airy comment that once something was on the internet, it was "out there".

This is, of course, poppycock. But then just recently, one of those weird coincidences that you wouldn't believe in a detective novel occurred.

A regular on the [Flat Chat](#) website, seeking a precedent in a common property issue, Googled some key words that led her to committee minutes from my block.

Completely unaware of the connection, she then provided a link that made the unprotected minutes publicly available. Not only were the owners in the specific legal wrangle identified, so were other residents involved in various disputes.

Luckily, I was on hand to take the Flat Chat link down almost immediately, and duly reported back to our committee about their interception. We are now getting a password-protected firewall to keep prying eyes away from our [secrets](#).

Steps to take

I mention this only because it shows how easy it is to be caught out when you ignore cyber security.

So what should have been done back at the beginning? And what should you do if you have a website for your block?

You could provide all your residents with passwords and usernames, or get them to register and create their own. Given the normal churn of owners and renters, you might issue new passwords every three months or so.

Or you could use a proprietary package like Stratabox to provide all the bells and whistles. Either way, it's worth the effort. A website is a terrific way of bringing communities together.

But if you don't take sensible precautions, it's also a highly efficient way of exposing your neighbours to all sorts of cyber abuse, legal dangers and privacy issues.

Jimmy Thomson edits the strata living advice website flat-chat.com.au. Different states have different strata laws.

AFR Contributor