

Commentary: Behind the public shaming of one wealthy elite, a disturbing but growing divide

The harsh comments sparked off by Audrey Tay's case shows a greater need for empathy, restraint and civility in discussing difficult issues of the day, says one observer from the Institute of Policy Studies.

Natalie Pang

Channel NewsAsia, 3 September 2018

On Monday (Aug 27), soon after news of Audrey Tay, the daughter of The Hour Glass founders, pleading guilty to taking drugs and causing a car crash that uprooted a divider broke, netizens flooded social media with harsh comments.

Yet, many comments were not about her wrongdoing, but focused on her inherited wealth and how her privilege may cushion her from the consequences of her misdemeanours, with some labelling her a “Crazy Rich Asian”.

To many, Audrey Tay embodied a certain type of wealthy elite, for whom Singapore seems to be a playground that allows them to live out profligate and reckless lifestyles, with little personal consequences because of their wealth and social capital.

EVERYDAY OPINIONS UNLEASHED

You would not expect people to come up to Audrey Tay to make these vicious comments to her face. Yet it seems that social media platforms, be it Facebook, Twitter, Instagram or blogs have become platforms through which everyday opinions and sentiments are unleashed with little consideration and put on public display.

While it is likely that this is a result of otherwise personal conversations crossing a very blurred boundary to become public, many are expressing the same sentiments because they think others share these thoughts.

But the ease of expressing such sentiments on social media is just one part of the story. That so many think these are dominant opinions suggests something even more disturbing. Is this what the debate on inequality is moving towards?

Class consciousness and a growing awareness of the divide between the privileged and less privileged Singaporeans have heightened over the past year, and Audrey Tay may have been an all too convenient target for those rallying against her.

Might it be that Tay sticks out because her story violates sensibilities of average Singaporeans who work hard and believe in hard work?

Or that her story touched a deeply seated discomfort with wealthy elites?

It would be frightening if such attitudes are left to fester and grow in time to become a sweeping, simplistic categorisation about everyone with wealth.

When identity instead of issues guide public discourse, people forget that even among the affluent, there are differences. When issues are no longer the focus, society may never get to the stage of actually talking about and deliberating on possible solutions.

KINDNESS AND MUTUAL RESPECT

Where should we go from here? Reactions to Tay's case suggest a need for greater empathy and restraint. While the online space has allowed debates and diverse opinions to be expressed, it must maintain some civility.

Media literacy campaigns have achieved much, in coming up with guidelines for using social media platforms.

Thinking before posting, encouraging mutual respect and kindness, and building a social ecosystem in which support is available whenever someone encounters a sticky situation online – these are all incredibly important to cultivate and there's space for our education curriculum to help digital natives adjust to this reality.

These are all the more critical when debates on social issues of the day, such as inequality, have the potential to turn emotional and generate harsh or unkind remarks that are regarded as "truths" to one side. But they alone are insufficient.

The deeper question here is to ask how such divides can be healed. What are the values and shared experiences that can unite us as a society? How can they be communicated, and more importantly, used to connect and engage a thinking citizenry?

In what ways can the online community be an inclusive, constructive one? When opinions and subsequent mobilisation are driven by identity, emotions and not issues, what are the implications?

It is also important to bear in mind that the social media environment is a "global-local" one. As individuals encounter local causes on Facebook, they also encounter external movements beyond Singapore, all communicating their own values and opinions that may shape societal views of issues here.

More than ever, it is time to understand our digital citizenship – not just in understanding how to be a responsible digital citizen, but also how our values are evolving or conflicting as a society as a result of our digital interactions.

Natalie Pang is a senior research fellow from Social Lab at the Institute of Policy Studies, Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, National University of Singapore.