Responsible online behaviour – is STOMP getting it right?

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When Anton Casey ruffled the feathers of many a Singaporean, causing some to even post his personal and employment details online in a wave of vigilantism, the outpouring of anger shook our nation so much that even Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had to weigh in on the issue.

He was quoted by media thus:

"You scold, you swear, you curse — all the wrong instincts get fed and in a group, there are certain group dynamics and it is like a pack of hounds hunting, which is bad," Mr Lee said. "We have to be better than that, to deal with situations civilly, patiently, tolerantly. Hold a stand, but remain a civilised human being."

So when STOMP announced that it was embarking on a "Don't be a Facebook Idiot" campaign, in a bid to encourage its users to "exercise discipline and act responsibly on social media and be aware that there are always repercussions to their actions", we might have suspected that the effort was aligned with PM's views, to prevent lynch mobs from taking online justice into their own hands.

Not so. STOMP's intent seems precisely to be aimed at digging up more Anton Caseys, with the implicit aim of getting its users to "name and shame" them.

If anything, judging by the comments made by STOMP's users on the posts that have been made – a boy cursing his family, a rant against fat people working at McDonald's, a woman's selfie with a homeless man – the exact opposite of "responsible online behaviour" seems to have been achieved. They scolded, they swore, or they cursed. PM Lee would surely be frowning on STOMP for allowing this to happen.

In truth or the long run, would such a campaign be effective? Would STOMP's effort have the

opposite effect of encouraging undesired online behaviour, rather than prevent the triggers of such behaviour from happening? Really, what is STOMP doing with this gig? Ultimately, what promotes civil discourse?

Effective, really?

The Media Literacy Council has been encouraging responsible online behaviour, and it was perhaps useful to have its take on whether STOMP's effort is useful in helping it with its own efforts. MLC chairman Prof Tan Cheng Han was unable to offer the Council's position as it has yet to discuss this case specifically, but gave his personal opinions.

"Some of the stated objectives of STOMP for its campaign are objectives that MLC also subscribes to, in particular "that netizens should exercise discipline and act responsibly on social media and be aware that there are always repercussions to their actions"," he said. "Nevertheless, I have reservations over the means by which STOMP hopes to achieve such a laudable outcome. My concern stems from the fact that STOMP is attempting to normalise and legitimise what are essentially acts of Internet vigilantism. Accordingly, I do not feel that the campaign is useful or appropriate."

Mr Arun Mahizhnan, Special Research Adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies, echoed Prof Tan's observations about the effectiveness of STOMP's campaign. "Naming and shaming is one tactic that has been used in other contexts, such as environmental issues, and has yielded both positive and negative results. It's difficult to predict which way it will go."

But Mr Arun also had doubts about whether naming and shaming can be applied to online speech. "No amount of naming and shaming will eliminate bad speech from cyberspace altogether or even substantially. It is and, in my view, will remain very messy."

Prevent or encourage?

So, at the very least, has STOMP's "Facebook Idiot" romp shone a light through the online vitriol?

Associate Prof Cherian George from Nanyang Technological University does not believe so. Indeed, he seems to be less optimistic that STOMP could ever achieve the stated objectives of its effort.

"STOMP's campaign to point fingers at so-called "Facebook Idiots" should not detract from its primary responsibility, which is to stop STOMP Idiots," he opined. "Just because it is a platform for user-generated content does not diminish its responsibility as a curator and taste-maker."

"Unfortunately, from its very start, STOMP has pandered to people's desire to see or read about others behaving badly. Since it is so easy to find such examples, this ends up being a cheap way to increase eyeballs. Its new campaign, which will "regularly highlight such errant behaviour" on Facebook, seems to be in that same vein."

Prof Cherian is also of the view that STOMP, as a branch of the Straits Times (we might remember that its name stands for "Straits Times Online Mobile Print"), should be held to higher standards. "For major media organisations like the Straits Times, the most powerful contribution

they can make to media literacy is to lead by example. They should be showcases of excellent content, and demonstrate discernment in what they publish."

The way forward for cyberspace?

There can only be one way to look at, and de-construct, STOMP's noble intentions: They are not at all noble, not even educational, but merely an attempt to cash in on the eyeballs generated by controversy.

So, if STOMP is doing it wrong, how do we do it right?

Mr Arun offers a simple answer that might surprise most: "What can be achieved is to draw ring-fences around some parts of cyberspace and leave the rest be. Just like what we are doing with coffee shop talk and private exchanges among family and friends. We don't police them. We just let them be."

Prof Tan also agrees to marrying-up between what happens online and in real life. "Ultimately, what is more important is that we understand that the dichotomy between the online and offline worlds is no longer significant and as such all the values that we hold to in the offline world should also apply in the online world."

For Mr Arun, the solution to a more civilised cyberspace is neither naming and shaming, nor closing off the discussion. Rather, he sees a need to encourage open and civil debate.

"We have lost the art of public debate a long time ago because our political system did not encourage much public debate. Only recently are people getting into the practice of sharing their views publicly and it has coincided with the spread of new and unpoliced communication technologies. I'm confident more and more people will engage in robust but civil debates in future."

Mr Arun is also of the view that websites that offer a measured platform for debate already exist, and there is a need for such sites to chip in. "IPS research has shown that many websites and forums… have their own codes and are not "Wild Wild West" sites. We need to engage these sites in extending the civil cyberspace."

Realistically, it might still be too soon for us to throw out a topic for discussion and not expect it to turn into a slug fest of name-calling and online vigilantism. However, the solution should not be to avoid it, but to embrace it.

What we might need to be mindful of is the intent of those who deliberately seek to exploit controversy for commercial gain, leveraging spectacle disguised as public service.