

Draw a Clear Line on Behaviour Online

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TECHNOLOGY as a double-edged sword is now common wisdom. Social media, instant messaging and file-sharing sites have been used for public good. On the other hand, they have also resulted in some undesirable behaviours with devastating consequences.

Recent incidents include a student from a local university who became the target of vile attacks on Facebook after she criticised the university's financial aid system, and the online posting of a grassroots volunteer's personal particulars, including his phone number and his child's information.

Singapore's first case of online harassment with fatal consequences was recorded in 2010. Then, a student from Myanmar committed suicide after her former boyfriend wrote cruel insults on her Facebook page.

Online harassment runs a wide gamut, from impersonating someone, spreading rumours and lies about the victim, and posting pictures of victims without their consent, to unrelenting verbal abuse and threats.

When encountering vitriolic speech in forums or on websites, one can exercise the power to ignore, report or leave. But when one has pictures and personal information, sometimes embellished with untruths, disseminated online, one becomes powerless. A victim's humiliation and desperation multiplies online and with no boundaries.

A recent conference organised by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) deliberated on harassment in various contexts. A common theme that ran across all three panels was the stark lacuna in Singapore's legislative framework.

Victims of harassment suffer from insufficient protection and face an unclear path when seeking recourse, especially when harassment occurs or spills over to daily life. Minister for Foreign Affairs and Law K. Shanmugam has indicated that new laws on harassment will be tabled next year.

The announcement has been met with support, ire and scepticism. There are discernible misgivings concerning the Government's true intent and contention on who should be responsible for curbing online harassment. Some perceive that the implementation of yet another regulation smacks of a nanny state over-extending its grasp on individual freedom.

Clearly, the lines of intent, responsibility and ownership are blurred, which is why several issues need to be addressed.

Any regulation pertaining to online speech inadvertently triggers doubts on the Government's motive, sparking fears of censorship and a clampdown on online discourse. In other countries, governments have responded to online harassment by implementing new legislation or

amending existing ones. Regardless of the approach, they target communications that are threatening, grossly offensive, indecent, obscene or knowingly false. One example is New Zealand, where a recently proposed legislation makes incitement to commit suicide an offense.

In July last year, New York became the 15th state in the US to pass a cyber-bullying law in response to rising incidents of online harassment of children and youth on Facebook, Snapchat and chatrooms. The amendment specifically targets electronic communications that repeatedly comment on a child's sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and statements that cause serious embarrassment to a child.

As such, any new laws targeting online harassment will have to be lucid in defining what constitutes objectionable material, leaving no doubt that they are victim- and harm-focused.

One of the key takeaways of a panel at the IPS conference is that the law plays a dual role.

Apart from providing legal recourse for victims, it also assumes a symbolic role by setting standards for acceptable and unacceptable behaviour, and reinforcing positive social norms in the long run.

At the conference, Professor Tan Cheng Han, Chairman of the Media Literacy Council, mooted the idea of establishing an independent tribunal to look into cases of online harassment. Victims can seek help from the tribunal if websites do not take down the comments or postings in question. Besides providing a more informal and speedy way to redress victims, a tribunal involving known individuals in the public domain also helps shift the locus of responsibility away from the state to the community.

Finally, as users of technology, we have to assume greater ownership for our actions online. We need to be more cognisant of the dangers that lurk beneath the Web and be responsible for what we share about our lives, ourselves and our children.

Many are unaware that evolving privacy policies and default settings on social media platforms like Facebook are making our profiles increasingly less private.

Even more are unaware of the fact that the pictures we take with our mobile devices and share online have longitude and latitude information embedded in them, which allows for location tracking.

No one deserves to be a victim of harassment. As users of social media, we have a personal responsibility to be aware of the consequences of sharing information and to equip ourselves with up-to-date knowledge to make informed decisions so we are less susceptible to abuse.

The law has a role; as does the community, and individual users.

It is now time for each to draw the line.

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