From covert vigilantism to communal vigilance

Carol Soon
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The recent tragic deaths of two young brothers involved in a road accident in Tampines triggered an avalanche of online responses, which is to be expected these days. The responses ranged from deep sympathy for the boys and their family to outrageous claims and accusations. Sadly too, graphic photos of the victims were thoughtlessly circulated.

The insensitivity and callousness of some online outbursts led to an immediate response - voicing opprobrium - from the Prime Minister, several MPs, academics and the public.

Although new technologies and social media give voice to the voiceless and help "level" the communication landscape, the ugly side of the Internet rears up whenever complete lack of civility and decorum occur online. What is more, people can be uncivil anonymously, without bearing any responsibilities that go with such actions.

Although uncivil behaviour, propelled either by sheer ignorance or a deliberate intent to provoke, is not unique to cyberspace, the ubiquity of high-tech communication devices and high-bandwidth connections have exacerbated the reach and effects of such acts on an unanticipated scale.

Infocomm Development Authority surveys point to a 150 per cent penetration rate for mobile phones and 80 per cent for broadband connections. Singaporeans can now reach one another with ease and speed.

Although new technologies and social media have galvanised like-minded individuals for the greater good, they have also been used to inflict harm and distress on others.

One example is the practice of "naming and shaming", where people take photos of "bad behaviour" and post these online. The subjects of such exposes run the gamut from the inappropriately dressed and cars parked illegally, to commuters not giving up reserved seats in MRT trains.

At its worst, such tracking down of alleged "perpetrators" by netizens has gone awry, such as a wrongly identified Filipino boy. He was mistaken for another person who had disturbed his neighbours with his drum-playing despite complaints.

In the case of the Tampines accident, the cement truck driver, initially labelled a foreigner, is another example of naming and shaming gone wrong.

Some of these actions may be motivated by a desire to right a perceived wrong, but they often smack of what may be called "covert vigilantism".

Pre-Internet, when a person felt strongly about an injustice which he had just witnessed, he would either confront the offender face-to-face or record relevant details for the purpose of lodging a police report. However, with the cloak of anonymity, ease and speed provided by new technologies, people have taken to exposing bad behaviour without revealing their own identity.

Such covert vigilantism is counterproductive to building a gracious society.

Subjecting others to public ridicule not only smacks of bullying but is also inimical to fostering a more compassionate and cohesive society.

An ominous outcome of such covert vigilantism is a heightened sense of mistrust among citizens who feel that they are under constant surveillance that's not imposed by the authorities but by ordinary people.

However, the alternative to covert vigilantism is not stoic silence. The same technologies can be used to cultivate "communal vigilance". On the basic level, vigilance requires circumspection - being mindful of the consequences of our actions. On another level, it requires us to be watchful of disruptive behaviours that can be harmful to the community, to step out and to speak up against the perpetrators.

Communal vigilance channels our collective concerns and energies to a more productive and sustainable outcome for society.

The swift lambasting by some online citizens of the circulation of pictures of the Tampines accident is an example of communal vigilance. Soon after the photographs were posted, prominent bloggers and forum participants questioned the motives and the need for sharing such pictures. They called on the online community to show greater respect to the family of the boys who died.

In response to an article on a self-purported "site for every Singaporean to express themselves" that wrongly reported on the cement truck driver's nationality, several visitors left comments which highlighted the inaccuracy of the information and questioned the writer's motive.

Last year, communal vigilance countered the anti-foreigner tirade that took place online. Netizens spoke up against anti-foreigner posts through blogs and Facebook pages, with some starting their own blogs (such as "Every cloud has its silver lining") to expose how some websites fan xenophobic sentiments.

Could communal vigilance ultimately be a long-term and more sustainable solution to the current conundrum concerning Internet regulation?

Guided by a shared vision of the type of online culture we want for ourselves and those we care for, and defined by users themselves, a greater clarity of what are acceptable and unacceptable online practices will emerge over time.

In so doing, we may be able to strike a fine balance between upholding the sanctity of freedom of expression and preserving social harmony in society.

The writer is a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies and works in the area of arts, culture and media at IPS.