

Filling the information vacuum responsibly

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IN PARLIAMENT last week, Minister for Law and Home Affairs K. Shanmugam called for a "clear, proper framework" to deal with incidents which would prompt legitimate questions from the public. The minister was explaining that the Home Affairs Ministry had earlier refrained from commenting too much on the death of Benjamin Lim out of respect for his family and because there would be a Coroner's Inquiry. The 14-year-old had taken his life on Jan 26, after being questioned by the police for allegedly molesting an 11-year-old girl.

In laying out the facts of Benjamin's case, Mr Shanmugam said that his parliamentary speech and the subsequent discussion - which came on the back of active public discussion of the case and questions raised by Members of Parliament - should not become an automatic precedent for future incidents. Instead, in such cases, facts would first have to be established, people should avoid jumping to conclusions, and not attack others or institutions based on their conclusions.

Indeed, all of us regular citizens should be critical and discerning when seeking information on issues of public interest. But how should the State react when asked for official responses to questions that it may or may not yet know the answers to, especially in crises or emotionally-charged incidents? How can online media refrain from being unreliable purveyors of information?

The CNN effect

In the 1990s, the term "CNN effect" was used by political and media scholars to describe the impact of news media, particularly 24-hour cable news, on policymaking. According to Professor Steven Livingston of Media and Public Affairs and International Affairs at the George Washington University, the media's global reach and real-time coverage of issues can shape policy formulation by agenda-setting - influencing the prominence of specific issues - and accelerating decision-making.

Former US Secretary of State James Baker said this of the CNN effect: "The one thing it does, is to drive policymakers to have a policy position. I would have to articulate it very quickly. You are in real-time mode. You don't have time to reflect."

In the new media age, the "CNN effect" is magnified as anyone can be a newsmaker at the click of a button. Policymakers now have to contend with online clutter and noise. They, as well as traditional mainstream media, no longer have the last say on the issue of the day.

Benjamin's case shows up the conundrum for policymakers. Unlike natural disasters and events related to national security and public safety where facts have to be communicated in a timely manner, human interest stories fall into a grey area.

In the face of questions and accusations flying thick and fast online (and most likely offline as well), which could cast doubt on the integrity and competency of government agencies, what should be done? As East Coast GRC MP Jessica Tan asked in Parliament, "In situations where

it's very emotive and very sensitive... is there a way to share at least some information with online news sites?"

The minister had said that his explanation in Parliament was within the rules of sub judice, which preclude public discussion of a case before the courts. Public officials like him, he added, can "make statements, if they believe it to be necessary in the public interest, even if there is a hearing pending".

Can this position be taken more frequently in breaking stories or crises? To better prepare for likely questions, speculation and even accusations, government agencies can develop a protocol in which information or data is "tiered" from the least sensitive to the most sensitive. This will help public officials react with greater confidence and timeliness during crises. Benjamin's case also highlights the need for guidelines on how much discretionary judgment public officials should exercise when deciding what to communicate in situations where the public's emotions run high.

News website The Middle Ground's consulting editor Bertha Henson, in an article on the case, pointed out that "too many newsmakers think that there is no story when they say nothing". Indeed, this can no longer be the default attitude. We are in an age where people, besides having a larger appetite for information and being empowered by their newfound ability to share information, also demand instant gratification for their need to know.

Online sites and vigilance

In his parliamentary speech, Mr Shanmugam chastised The Online Citizen (TOC) website for its coverage of Benjamin's case, calling it a "planned, orchestrated campaign, using falsehoods". The editor of the site has responded to the charge.

Among other things, TOC said it is an open platform that receives contributions and has "very little control over what the public choose to write about". TOC added that: "In Benjamin's case, questions were raised, and people wanted answers. Their reactions were spontaneous." But surely greater vigilance should be applied to the curation of articles contributed by writers. The publication of a corrigendum to correct reporting errors when official information was released (such as the police statement on Feb 1) would have alleviated some damage to the parties involved. With the power to influence, sites should be responsible, especially during times when information is scarce and the subject matter is an emotional one.

After all, IPS' research on corrosive speech vilifying foreigners and racial minorities in Singapore in 2013 found that online sites which have high readership such as TOC already do practise self-moderation. While they operate within the constraints of limited manpower and time, the editors of these sites acknowledged that they do their best to weed out vitriolic content. Of course, some comments would fall through the cracks due to the sheer volume of posts.

Finally, what can we do as individuals? I have a son who will turn 14 this year. My immediate response from reading initial media reports and online articles written on Benjamin's suicide admittedly was grief (at a young life lost) and doubt (about various parties' involvement and how things could have been handled differently). However, my response was tempered by a need to know the truth, both as a parent and concerned member of the public. It became evident to me,

as I read conflicting accounts, that time was needed for investigations to proceed in a way that respects due process.

When a tragedy happens, especially when it implicates the workings of a system which wields a strong influence on our lives, we all seek the truth. However, speculation may cause further grief to the families concerned, exert pressure on government agencies and compromise their ability to uncover the truth. We have technology at our disposal - never before have we been able to locate information so easily and quickly. This also means that in our efforts to fill the information gap, we have to do it responsibly.

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