

## Let's have Internet calibration, instead of regulation

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UNTIL the early 1990s, Singaporeans were described as politically apathetic. They slowly began taking part in discussion forums and political websites such as Yahoo! discussion groups and the now-defunct Sintercom.

Today, people are using Internet technologies for political and civic engagement such as the Save Bukit Brown, PinkDot and WearWhite campaigns, the read-in organised in response to the National Library Board's initial ban of two children's books in 2014, and the petitions against and for Adam Lambert's performance at the 2016 countdown show.

With more people using new media to mobilise support for their causes, contests of opinion arising online on issues pertaining to race, religion, nationality and sexuality - often heated and ugly - have led to fears about new media's polarising effects.

These contestations range from "Singaporeans versus foreigners" to "the religious right versus the LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) community". (I use the word "polarisation" here with some reluctance as it simplifies an issue by reducing perspectives to two sides, pitching one group against the other as an unintended consequence. In fact, there is always a spectrum of standpoints within each perspective).

Is the online space indeed polarising society? Are there trends that suggest otherwise? What can each of us do to create a better Internet?

While new media does not create differences, its wide and instant reach, especially when it comes to sensational content, accentuates these differences. It certainly does not help when individuals take to making police reports whenever they see something offensive, rather than countering offensive posts by denouncing the views of the writer.

Singapore's Constitution guarantees freedom of speech, but with several caveats such as respecting the judiciary, and maintaining racial and religious harmony. When online discourse is seen as threatening Singapore's social fabric, laws that regulate speech offline - such as the Sedition Act and Penal Code - have been applied to the online space.

The question is whether legislation is adequate and effective in creating a society of tolerance and understanding. First, the law can act only as a deterrent and convict those who flout it, but may not bring about the desired change in attitudes.

Second, a reliance on the authorities to resolve unhappiness impedes the cultivation of a social immunity that is needed in an increasingly diverse society.

Self-regulation, or "self-calibration", which reduces the regulatory burden for the Government, may be a more sustainable alternative. There are encouraging signs to indicate that this does take place online, and on three levels - space, site and self.

First, calibration is taking place via what my colleague, Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) Senior Research Fellow Tan Tarn How, has described as a "normalisation" of the political online space. While the early Internet was resoundingly anti-Government and anti-PAP (People's Action Party), it now houses a much wider spectrum of political views and players such as those from moderate and pro-Government sites.

There is also a greater willingness among online users to speak up for the Government. The oft-described silent majority seems to be less silent.

In addition, online websites of mainstream media such as The Straits Times and Channel NewsAsia continue to dominate as sources of political news. In an IPS survey, which looked at media and Internet use during the 2015 election, mainstream media was, in fact, used more frequently and was more trusted than social media.

Second, calibration is taking place on individual sites. We recently published findings from an IPS study on the online political space. Blogs with political content in June and July 2014 were analysed for their emotionality and objectivity - defined as presenting different sides of an issue. The findings were encouraging. Only about 30 per cent were completely one-sided in their commentaries, with the majority presenting the alternative, and sometimes multiple sides, to an issue. More than half of the blogs were somewhat or very calm when discussing political issues.

Could this signal recognition among online sites that balanced arguments are required to influence opinions? If so, this bodes well for the development of a rational cyberspace.

Third, calibration operates on the level of the self - in terms of personal filtering of information. Based on survey data that IPS collected during the September 2015 General Election, Dr Elmie Nekmat from the National University of Singapore's department of communications found that people are influenced differently by different opinion climates on policy issues.

It is also significant that perceived public opinion on closed-group social media platforms - such as WhatsApp, Viber and Facebook Messenger - was found to be more influential on voting patterns in comparison to open-group platforms like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Although public sentiments were most negative on open-group platforms, they were less influential on one's voting behaviour.

What this means is that social media is not homogeneous in its impact on public opinion. The findings also suggest that voters filter and discern information that they receive from different sources.

As society becomes more diverse, people will become increasingly adept at and willing to express themselves online. This means that policymakers have to calibrate their approach to regulating Internet usage. Yet the responsibility also lies with users of new media, who can be more proactive in regulating themselves and one another.

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