

Use social immune system to fight ills of racist speech

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THE proposed change to the Penal Code unveiled last week to make it a crime to utter racial insults over the Internet answers a nagging question that has been around for two years.

But the amendment could lull one into thinking that the best way of addressing the larger social issue of racism is through the courts. That would be a big mistake.

In the revised Code, a person who knowingly causes religious or racial disharmony, or promotes ill will between different groups on the grounds of religion or race, could be jailed for up to three years or fined, or both.

If passed, it will prevent a repeat of the need to resort to the Sedition Act - as was the case in 2005, when three men who posted extremely sick, if not demented, racist comments on online forums and blogs were jailed or fined.

The uproar then was largely over the charge of sedition for offences which, though very serious, did not seem in the least bit seditious - that is, aimed at inciting rebellion against the state.

Unfortunately, it obscured the debate about the most appropriate response to people who spout hate speech.

So far, the Government's preferred instrument is censorship and strong media management. It has succeeded in suppressing the circulation of racist speech in the public domain - though it is doubtful if it has reduced privately held racist sentiments.

However, the Internet has made censorship hard to enforce.

When everyone can air his or her views, it is difficult to have oversight.

Second, unlike coffee-shop chatter, material on the Internet can spread like wildfire and is almost impossible to delete.

In the face of the Internet's challenge, the Government should perhaps consider a totally different approach to managing racist

speech. Such a radical approach eschews legal intervention, keeping it as an instrument of last resort, in cases when people act violently or incite others to violence.

This approach is based on self-regulation, and puts trust on society's self-righting moral compass.

Instead of hauling a racist blogger to court, for instance, it would name and shame him. If opprobrium does not work, then pressure via the media should be put on his social support system, his family, employer and friends, to do the right thing by condemning him or even sacking him.

Essentially, the approach is to use society's own social immune system against its cancers.

Such a system already exists here. Almost every blogger deplored the three racist bloggers when the story broke.

A few months after, many also derided the makers of the so-called 'RK Pork' skit posted on YouTube about two Chinese men harassing a poor Indian Muslim stallholder by insisting on ordering a pork dish.

It showed that most Singaporeans were able to discuss the issue intelligently and responsibly: The spectre of racial violence that is being constantly warned about did not even threaten to happen.

Equally important, even if the bloggers disagreed on whether the video was racist, the clear message was that racism was wrong.

Still, Singapore's social immune system needs to be made even stronger. One way is to get more segments of society involved in setting the moral tone.

In the racist bloggers' case, it is unfortunate that civil society kept silent. Religious groups, especially non-Muslim ones which have a special duty to defend the 'other', ought to have come out to denounce the three culprits.

Many opinion-makers - the business leaders, principals and teachers, counsellors and politicians - also failed in their duty to voice disapproval.

Contrast that with the case of the Bollywood starlet, Shilpa Shetty.

When a racial slur was made about her by a fellow contestant in the British reality television show, Big Brother, almost the whole cross-

section of society came out behind her. That she eventually won is an even more remarkable testament to the social immune system of British society.

Perhaps the silence of Singapore's civil society is a legacy of a political system that has set parameters on what is permissible debate on race and religion, and prefers instead to emphasise the importance of maintaining harmony in a multiracial and multi-religious society.

If so, it is time to change that.

One key catalyst for boosting the social immune system is the mainstream media. Like for civil society, race and religion are viewed by the mainstream media as extremely sensitive, with the agenda on debate largely set by a Government whose view is that a managed discussion will be more productive.

In the new approach, it will need a standard operating procedure. Among the steps it needs to take are to actively canvass the views of opinion-makers, and to do as many stories as it can to portray hate speech as aberrant and abhorrent.

Dealing with racist speech requires, in other words, practice, from individuals, civil society and the mass media. The Government will also have to stop fearing controversy. This is because controversy is often a virtue, allowing society to find a way forward collectively and through reason.

Besides the changes to the Penal Code, the Government has also indicated its concern over the Internet by appointing in April a high-level panel to study its social and other impacts.

This Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society, headed by Singapore Press Holdings editorial adviser Cheong Yip Seng, is expected to give its recommendations next year. It is hoped that it will consider new ways of dealing with new media.

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