Can Singapore cyber-police without the police?

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The incidents involving Pastor Rony Tan and the three youths who made racist remarks have thrown up the issue of cyber-policing. Why involve the real police when moral censure and suasion by peers, elders and third parties could have been exercised? Are such issues so taboo in civic society - whether online or offline - that the instinctive reflex is to blow the whistle rather than to thrash them out among stakeholders?

WHEN the three teenagers who were arrested by the police for making racist remarks, were released without charge, the man who reported them was most relieved.

National serviceman Prhabagaran, 21, had been so offended by their postings in a Facebook group that he felt compelled to contact the authorities.

But when he heard that they might be charged and convicted under the Sedition Act, he was worried he had gone too far. They were just kids after all.

As he reveals to Insight, calling the police was not his first choice. In the days before the arrests on Jan 31, he tried to resolve the issue by engaging the youths.

He says that when he first came across the youths' derogatory remarks about Indians in the Facebook group of which he is a member, he took a diplomatic stand.

'I told them that what you're saying is very insensitive, very distasteful. They said it was a joke, but added 'you have to admit that you are black, you are smelly'. Then someone said that Indians should use more deodorant.'

When he and others objected strenuously, one or two of them apologised and stopped posting, he notes, but a few, including the three arrested later, did not stop.

As the spiteful remarks showed no sign of abatement, Mr Prhabagaran decided to re-post these comments on his own Facebook wall to alert more people.

His friends re-posted the comments on their own walls. Then he posted the comments in the forum of Stomp, Singapore Press Holdings' citizen journalism website.

'I got random messages from people who weren't connected to me, people from overseas saying they couldn't believe this happened.'

But the racist remarks went on and on and the youths kept defending their statements, he says. 'I was really irked. It really pushed me. The police were a final resort.'

The incident throws into stark relief the difficulties and limitations of online debate in a burgeoning cyberspace still revelling in its newfound freedom of expression.

Unlike the offline world constrained by out-of-bounds (OB) markers and watchdog bodies, in the wild, wild Web, no intermediate sources of authority exist to check on trespassers. Only two extremes seem available: the random objections from faceless voices, and the strong arm of the law.

If these youths had mouthed racist remarks in a school, they would have been reprimanded and counselled by their teachers. At a public forum, they would have been hissed at, booed and taken to task. At home, any one of them might have been scolded by his parents.

But on the Internet, peer pressure does not seem to cut any ice. As Mr Prhabagaran notes, the online uproar seemed to embolden these foolhardy youths.

Perhaps, in a virtual reality, the idea that real people could be hurt by such remarks seems remote to those huddling in anonymity behind a computer screen.

A day after Mr Prhabagaran's police report, three youths were hauled up for sedition and then released on bail as investigations began. Two weeks later, the police announced that they had been released without charge after giving them a caution.

Just as the Facebook incident was fading in the public memory, videos of Christian pastor Rony Tan disparaging aspects of Buddhism and Taoism went viral. This sparked a public cyber-cry for his arrest.

It was then revealed that Internal Security Department (ISD) officers had visited Pastor Tan of Lighthouse Evangelism church to caution him on the inappropriateness of his remarks.

Many netizens howled that he should have been arrested. After all, they said, this was a man whose sermons from the pulpit shaped the opinions of thousands - shouldn't he be more severely punished than the three errant youths?

Some observers note that while comments on political, social and economic issues could heat up cyberspace without inviting official intervention, when it comes to remarks on race and religion, the instinctive reflex is to summon the authorities. Indeed, the irony of anti-establishment netizens clamouring for the iron fist of the law did not pass unnoticed.

Ultimately, the question that begs to be asked is: As cyberspace becomes a growing constituency, why can't it do its own self-regulation the way civic society does it offline?

Is there not an in-between course of action that does not involve tying up police resources and wasting taxpayers' money? In other words, can cyber-policing be done without calling the real police?

The new 'coffee shops'
THAT Singapore has no vibrant civic sphere in which people can confront and challenge one another as their counterparts do in Western countries is an age-old lament.

There are stirrings but they have yet to reach a stage when people can participate in feisty if not fiery public debates on the issues of the day.

Critics argue that the Government has been so all-pervasive, and has placed so many constraints on public discourse that civic society has little chance to grow.

But there are those who posit that this is just part and parcel of an Asian culture. Asians desire an impartial source of order in society, the argument goes. Rather than the chaos of civic society, they prefer a reliable and uncorrupt central authority.

According to National University of Singapore (NUS) sociologist Daniel Goh, Singapore cyberspace is bursting through these controls and becoming a virtual public sphere.

In his view, they could be akin to 'coffee shops' in Western Europe where the cognoscenti in the 18th century gathered to debate political ideas. These coffee shops were instrumental in disseminating the ideas which would ultimately unseat the monarchical system of rule.

He argues that the flourishing of Singapore cyberspace is primarily driven by the lack of such space in the real world. The media is seen as controlled, and civic society groups, while growing, are loath to challenge the government line.

'The state has intervened so much into the public sphere that it is comatose,' says Dr Goh. It is the main reason that explains the online vibrancy in which fearless - some say lawless - discussion abounds.

As Dr Michael Hill, a visiting professor of sociology at NUS, puts it: 'The thing about Internet debate is you don't join an organisation before you take part... You don't have to register to speak at the Speakers' Corner before you can speak online.'

Perhaps what the recent incidents demonstrate is that the virtual public space is developing from a free-for-all into a constituency which is beginning to insist on some responsibility and accountability.

Rather than letting irresponsible babble go unchallenged, some netizens are assuming the role of a pressure group demanding real-world action for virtual-world infractions.

Political observer Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University sees this as a positive evolution of the online community into a 'socially responsible' one.

'It may function as a whistle-blower and community police of sorts since the authorities cannot be omnipresent as much as some think they are.'

Why not slug it out?
BUT there are those who take a less sanguine view. They say that some netizens seem to relish the idea of seeing rule-breakers punished by the law, rather than engage in substantive debate with them on the differences that exist among races and religions.

Civic society organisations like the polytechnic the Facebook youths attended, or the Inter-Religious Organisation (IRO), also failed to take the lead, they lament.

Dr Terence Chong of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies contrasts the Rony Tan episode with the controversies over religion in the United States and Britain.

There is the conservative Christian right, whose members are staunchly against gay rights and evolutionary science. On the other side are public intellectuals like Dr Richard Dawkins and Mr Christopher Hitchens, outspoken atheists who attack creationism.

'There are different stakeholders, and these people come together in the public sphere to slug it out. All the state needs to do is make sure there is no violence,' the sociologist points out.

Of course, there is much mud-slinging and reckless remarks, he says, but it is seen as par for the course. 'Many of these societies take it in their stride.'

Over here, however, Dr Chong adds, Singaporeans become 'jittery' when issues of race and religion are brought up.

Dr Chong sums up the attitude as when in doubt, alert the authorities. 'We don't know how to have dialogue and we don't know how to have arguments about race, without feeling that everything in society and social harmony is at stake.

'We tend to veer from one extreme to the other. Either we are living in social harmony or we are living in social chaos. But there's some distance between the two.'

No opinion leader
IT IS easy to point the finger at the Government's heavy hand for the people's knee-jerk responses and unwillingness or inability to thrash out issues in the public domain.

After all, the authorities have shown little hesitation in using the whole weight of the law. In 2005, three young bloggers were convicted under the Sedition Act for posting inflammatory remarks against Muslims and Malays.

Last year, a couple were convicted under the same Act for distributing anti-Catholic and anti-Muslim pamphlets.

There are indications that the authorities may prefer to take more of a back seat and let the community resolve such issues.

In Parliament yesterday, Law Minister and Second Minister for Home Affairs K. Shanmugam noted that 'our approach towards resolving such disagreements is that they should be mediated or resolved on the ground through common sense, and moral suasion using the collective efforts of the community, grassroots and religious leaders'.

But he added that 'there may be times when such efforts are not enough. In such instances, the authorities will step in to deal with the problem.'

While some decry Singapore's model of control, others warn that the other extreme - vigilante cyber-justice - is an equally frightening prospect.

They cite the example of Duke University student Wang Qianyuan, who was seen in a video leading protests for Tibetan independence in 2008. The video went viral and her personal information in the United States and that of her family in China were distributed.

The harassment went offline: Her parents' home was attacked with rocks, and it was rumoured that Ms Wang was protected by the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

To prevent this sort of mob hysteria, there is a need for a middle ground: sources and bodies of authority which can adequately arbitrate and resolve disputes in sensitive areas without invoking the blunt instruments of the state.

Mr Tan of IPS expresses disappointment that the civic bodies here seem to shrink from publicity in the wake of the recent incidents.

The same goes for the 61-year-old IRO. Several netizens had reported Pastor Tan's videos to the IRO as well.

But IRO's honorary secretary Ameer Ali says that it is not a regulatory body, and its duty on receiving complaints does not extend beyond informing the respective religious groups involved in the matter - that is the Buddhist and Taoist federations.

But couldn't the IRO provide the arena where the parties involved could have an open dialogue? Mr Ali maintains that 'at present, IRO sees no need to mediate between religions'.

Arguably, there is a fear of wading into a minefield of sensitivities, and ultimately, these organisations still look to the Government for their cue.

As long as the authorities are involved, there is the perception that trespassers will be cowed into submission, and not spurred to re-evaluate their positions or engage with other views.

Pastor Tan apologised for his remarks while referring to e-mail he received from those who felt offended. But this fact was drowned out as news of the ISD visit came to light.

Some netizens accused him of insincerity, saying that his apology must have arisen because of fear of the ISD, and not because he truly took those e-mail messages to heart.

Mr Prhabagaran is ambivalent about the resolution of the Facebook incident. He fears that the outcome may be counter-productive. For the three boys, the arrest and the infamy will mark their lives for a long time to come.

'They could take this as a reason to hate Indians even more. They may think, all Indians are against me,' he says.

'Or they could do the polar opposite and truly change their mentality... but how often does that happen?'

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