

From Rage to Rationality in Two Years

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TWO years ago, a scholarship student from China at the National University of Singapore (NUS), Mr Sun Xu, sparked netizen outrage when, on his personal Weibo account, he compared some Singaporeans' behaviour to that of dogs.

It stirred up a storm of anti-foreigner angst on Facebook and Twitter, at a time when foreign students studying here on government scholarships were perceived as taking university places that would otherwise go to Singaporeans.

Tampines GRC MP Baey Yam Keng made a comment to the media, urging restraint over the undergraduate's outburst, and well remembers the angry, often extreme views posted on his Facebook page.

"There was a flood of such sentiments, and that gave comfort to people (with more extreme views) to join in the chorus of voices," Mr Baey tells Insight. "While I tried my best to explain my point of view, perhaps it got lost in the flurry of comments and sentiments."

But today, Mr Baey doubts many of those who joined in to attack him still hold their extreme views. At the time, they spoke out strongly because they were emboldened by a sense that many others were on their side. But Singaporeans' discussions on social media have become more rational and thought-out as people become more Internet-literate, says Mr Baey and fellow MPs that Insight spoke to.

And while the American Pew survey found a "spiral of silence" that left netizens with a minority view keeping quiet, MPs here note that Singaporeans are becoming more social media literate and willing to call out trolls and extremists whose views are not backed by facts.

Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad says: "People have become more rational. There is better filtering, better understanding of which sites are more credible, which sites are not. There is greater balance - people don't just take from one side and not the other."

Still, this development comes even as online outbursts can now silence moderates who take a different, more balanced view. The Pew survey, for example, found that people can be reluctant to speak up for fear of being isolated or ostracised.

Here, Dr Carol Soon, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies focused on digital engagement and online communities, notes that posters can become subject to Internet vigilantism and see the vitriol turned on them.

Adds Mr Baey: "If people feel they are in the minority, they don't speak up. I always believe there's a silent majority. It's a challenging hurdle(to get them to speak up)."

One reason that comments on his Facebook page are now more rational, says Mr Baey, is his emphasis on cultivating a space that will grow a community, rather than giving in to the urge to respond to every critic at once. "Sometimes, it's about not hastily responding, but letting the conversation simmer, and people with more moderate views will come in," he says. "It's having confidence in the netizen community, that there are people who are rational and willing to put in constructive comments."

But while social media is substantive and important to those in the political arena, offline dialogues are just as valuable, going by the experiences of Mr Zaqy and Mr Baey. Mr Zaqy says: "If it's controversial, I do get residents and members of the community coming up to me at events to say 'I read your speech, I follow your things on Facebook', (though) I've not seen them as people who regularly 'like' or comment."

While social media is effective in spreading the message and reaching out, Mr Zaqy notes that views are more moderate and thought-out in a physical setting.

"Upfront, there is nothing to hide because they are face to face with you and you get very honest discussions. And you know where their priorities lie because the first few questions they put up are basically at the top of their mind," he says.

This view is borne out by the Pew poll's findings, where more than twice the number of those surveyed were willing to discuss a controversial topic in real life compared with on social media.

Mr Zaqy adds: "The online mechanism has not been that effective in being able to have a proper conversation. You have many people trying to jump in on one conversation and it's hard to see whether someone is sincere, what he truly means and where he is headed."

But the theory that social media is a democratising force is not completely debunked: The Pew survey found that women and the less-educated were more likely to share their views on Facebook than in person.

One reason, says Dr Lim Sun Sun, an NUS assistant dean of research, is that "with social media platforms tending towards brevity of expression, it is not clear that educational advantage (between commentators) would be that discernible". He adds: "Their ease of use and soundbite nature - where people are less compelled to substantiate their views - further lower barriers to participation."

Knowing how to play to the medium's strengths and weaknesses comes with practice, asserts Mr Baey: "I have grown to understand how it works - whether to protect myself or stand by my views, and when to step back."

As to how he decides when to weigh in on an issue, he advises that the key is the owner of the space creates the kind of atmosphere he wants: "Facebook itself is a neutral platform. What is the style or the character of that page depends on the people in charge of that page."