

'Moderate so Govt can de-regulate'

Bloggers are warming to the idea of having online speech moderated by referees from among them

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WHEN a Member of Parliament was set on fire last month by one of his constituents at a community event, it sparked a torrent of vitriol on the Internet - not against the attacker, but at Yio Chu Kang MP Seng Han Thong.

This in turn has fanned a separate debate on whether and how the freewheeling world of online speech can be moderated according to offline standards of decency and civility.

In Parliament earlier this month, Senior Minister of State (Information, Communications and the Arts) Lui Tuck Yew expressed disappointment that the online community did not do more to rebut nasty comments made against Mr Seng, including statements that the MP deserved to be assaulted.

It was a 'squandered opportunity for a higher degree of self-regulation', he had said.

His words - especially the term 'self-regulation' - led to an outcry among many bloggers who interpreted it to mean a call for greater regulation of the Internet.

Rear-Admiral (NS) Lui later clarified that by 'self-regulation' he meant bottom-up moderation of online speech by netizens.

They should determine the form of such moderation, he said, while the Government continues with an even 'lighter touch' approach to regulating the Internet.

Of the nine bloggers, new media analysts and academics whom Insight interviewed, most agreed that some form of refereeing by the online community is desirable, if only to give the authorities less cause to regulate it.

There already is a licensing scheme which requires websites that discuss political or religious issues to register - although only two are known to have been asked to register as political sites under the Government's 'light touch' regulatory policy.

In line with this approach, bloggers or websites have generally not been taken to task for making critical or disparaging comments of a political nature, although several bloggers have been arrested or charged under the Sedition Act for racist postings.

One former Singaporean lawyer, Mr Gopalan Nair, was also jailed last year after he insulted a High Court judge on his blog.

Instead of cracking the whip of the law against offenders who incite hatred and violence or make defamatory comments, community moderation - as some envision it - would operate through moral suasion or condemnation of such speech.

The idea of community moderation was first broached, albeit sketchily, by a group of 13 Singapore bloggers who presented their views to a government-appointed panel on new media issues last year.

The difficult part, however, is working out the mechanics of the moderation process, as well as establishing - in the freewheeling, potentially anarchic world of cyberspace - who exactly is this 'community' that is willing to stand up and be counted.

Set moral compass

A SET of standards - as well as individuals who speak up on them - helps 'draw lines for what is good and bad' in online discourse, says Institute of Policy Studies researcher Tan Tarn How.

In his view, the online flaming of Mr Seng is complicated somewhat by how it reflects a 'deep disaffection of some people against the elite. (And) no amount of community moderation will solve that'.

Nonetheless, the attack was morally wrong and comments in support of it do not send the right signal to the young as well as Internet newbies, says Mr Tan.

Moderating voices from other bloggers 'will not stop some people from saying what they want to say', but 'it will let these people know that most people disagree with them'.

He notes that a few bloggers did state their objection to the nasty remarks against Mr Seng, but that did not happen widely enough.

Mr Cheong Yip Seng, who chaired the government-appointed Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society (Aims), thinks the tone of online discussion is 'mainly strident' and that its views are 'less diverse' compared to those in the traditional media.

His hope is that community moderation can 'encourage a greater diversity of opinions' and 'encourage more people to join the discussion and not be put off by harsh attacks'.

Another observer who believes community moderation has its place is constitutional law expert and Nominated MP Thio Li-ann.

An 'organic' form of moderation by a community group with 'no or minimal government involvement' can occupy 'a useful third space between self-regulation and external legal regulation', she says.

The group 'should adhere to and encourage adherence to fundamental standards', such as 'a consensus code of conduct which should be accessible and open to criticism'. It should reflect social values and the fact that 'we can be fair and temperate and yet get our viewpoint across', adds Professor Thio.

However, activist and blogger Alex Au and National University of Singapore (NUS) new media lecturer Lim Sun Sun both believe there are already shades of community moderation online and that the status quo is hard to change.

'Where this discussion is going to go wrong is if people approach (moderation) thinking of a single structure on top of a media platform,' says Mr Au. He does not believe there will ever be such a structure given the Internet's unbridled nature.

His take on community moderation is that it is the 'aggregate of all decisions' made by owners of forums and blogs who decide what content to put up. 'The only thing amenable to change is how the website owners go about their actions,' he argues.

But Mr Choo Zheng Xi, editor of the sociopolitical website The Online Citizen, sees value in having some form of moderating structure over and above the blogs that are willing to hold themselves accountable.

The value of such a structure is that 'if we can moderate then the Government can deregulate', says Mr Choo, who was part of the 'Bloggers 13' group which wrote to Aims on the subject.

Deregulation is a big deal because 'the R-word - regulate - is a dirty word and whenever bloggers hear that, they will be turned off'.

No one-size-fits-all model

TO ACCEPT the value of community moderation is to open up another can of worms: How would it work and what form should it take?

These are questions that netizens and new media experts are still grappling with. Some have pitched possible models, though they are quick to say that each is fraught with its own set of difficulties.

Some who tried to put their ideas in practice found out just how challenging the obstacles are.

Mr Choo, a law undergraduate, is currently working on an academic paper on community moderation. He hopes it will result in a possible working model, or at least advance the discussion. As a starting point, he is looking at self-moderation measures that are working in the real world. He hopes that at least one can be adapted for online use.

One model he is considering is that of moderation by a panel of some sort.

This is perhaps the most common self-checking system used in the real world. Banks, law offices and newspapers are among the sectors which regulate themselves in this way.

But for the Web, Mr Choo says that membership to the panel has to be voluntary and on an opt-in basis, similar to how press councils in the West handle it.

'You have a body that moderates the newspapers and they sign up to it, but there will be some tabloids that don't want to get involved,' he explains.

Another real-world method is to have an ombudsman, as sort of an in-house critic for Internet discourse.

A similar system is being used by The Washington Post in the United States. The newspaper has appointed someone to be its reader-advocate. His job is to attend to readers' questions, comments and complaints about the Post's content.

A third option is to simply draft a code of conduct for bloggers.

This option was in the spotlight two years ago when book publisher Tim O'Reilly worked with Jimmy Wales - founder of the free online encyclopaedia Wikipedia - to draft such a code. Websites that opted to comply with the code would post a symbol on their site saying: 'Civility enforced'.

The draft code ignited a storm of debate online. Several revisions were made but it never took off and talk of a code of conduct faded.

For Mr Au, something less formal might have value here. He is opposed to approaching community moderation as the idea of some formal superstructure sitting on top of the Web.

When he signed off on the community- moderation idea in the Bloggers 13 proposal, his idea was that it would take the form of a 'talk shop' - a place where bloggers and Web administrators come together to discuss the choices they make in moderating their own sites: 'What to allow, what not to allow, how much space to give to something, these are problems everyone faces. The talk shop would allow them to tap each other. The outcome would be intelligent, consistent moderation.'

'Don't tell me what to do' mindset

THE proliferation of models and the lack of success of any one of them give a sense of just how difficult community moderation is.

One of the main reasons: online resistance to the idea of being controlled. In a medium where freedom is everything, the thought of someone telling you what not to do is difficult to overcome.

Netizens indeed seem particularly sensitive, and the slightest hint of control triggers a need to bite back. RADM Lui's remarks about bloggers squandering an opportunity to self-regulate unleashed a storm of angry postings.

Similarly, Mr O'Reilly in the US faced fierce criticism for what some saw as an attempt to regulate free speech.

An attempt to set up an Association of Bloggers in Singapore was left dead in the water. Netizens saw it as an attempt by its founder Jayne Goh to exert control on bloggers. Within weeks of its unveiling - and after a barrage of negative reactions - eight of the association's 10 original members dropped out. All denied that their decision had anything to do with the site's overwhelming unpopularity.

Ms Goh stresses that she never tried to control anyone. She says her mistake was in sending out the wrong message: 'I am a nobody. How can I tell anyone what to do?'

Indeed, when speaking of community moderation, most don't talk about rules to be followed. They couch it by using terms like social norms or manners.

Mr Cheong, Aims' chairman and a former newspaper editor, feels that one big obstacle is the culture on the Internet that seems to celebrate a lack of civility: 'Those who articulate their views in a non-strident way are in the minority. Those who want to change the culture for the better require patience and perseverance, and must be prepared to suffer cynical, unfair cyberspace attacks without losing heart.'

NUS law lecturer Tang Hang Wu feels that social norms in real life have yet to fully extend online. One reason for this: the lack of consequences for what is done in cyberspace.

'Let's say you go to a new village and you don't follow social norms. There is a village headman who'll have a word with you, or you might become a social outcast. But I'm not sure how this concept might work online,' he says.

And therein lies another problem facing all models that would ascribe authority to a small group: Who will be on the panel? Who will draft the code of conduct? Who will be the ombudsman?

In the diverse world of the Internet, finding a representative, legitimate group seems nearly impossible. In fact, not only is there no headman, but it is also not entirely clear who the villagers are.

A third layer of people

FOR new media researcher Mr Tan, the search for the community should not begin and end online. 'The Web community is an extension of the larger community that includes people who may not be Internet users. And that larger community ought to make itself part of the conversation,' he says.

In the case of Mr Seng, Mr Tan feels that opposition parties could have condemned the attack and the online content which supported the attack.

Similarly, with the three bloggers who were charged with sedition in 2007, he felt churches and community leaders could have come out and spoken about it as well.

'This way, there is a third layer of people - civil society - which helps sets standards. Unfortunately, it is now almost always the case of government and individuals, with nothing in between as an arbiter of values,' says Mr Tan.

For now, it would seem that the best bet for the blogosphere is community moderation in the loose sense of feedback, debate and counter-postings from virtual as well as real-world stakeholders.

As Internet penetration grows and more and more people toggle between their online and offline lives, the key thing is to keep the discussion of what are accepted norms of online speech on the boil.

This will not only educate and create awareness among bloggers of the moral implications of their words, as Mr Tan observes, but also help readers judge content more wisely.

3 possible community moderation models

A PANEL: A voluntary grouping of netizens who subscribe to a set of shared values and positions. For example, the panel could agree on the importance of honesty and accuracy and hold all members of the group accountable to those values.

But the group would not have any sway over sites that did not opt in to its shared values.

There would be a public complaints channel. Readers could write in about postings that went against the shared values. The panel would investigate and take appropriate action, such as whether to defend or reprimand the site.

A CODE OF CONDUCT: A set of guidelines of acceptable behaviour that is drawn up. Websites that agree to uphold the code carry a symbol on their site.

Membership is voluntary and there are no clear consequences for breaching the code. But having a symbol on the website would at least show that it recognises the need for values and standards to be upheld.

AN OMBUDSMAN: Like in the case of The Washington Post newspaper, a website or a person serves as the readers' advocate, and puts forward their concerns and complaints.

It is not clear yet how exactly this might work in cyberspace.

They've been at the receiving end of nasty comments

'My view is that for the online media to be credible and attract readers (other than government critics), what is written has to be objective, accurate and not slanderous. So, some self-imposed 'professional ethics' is desired. Just like mainstream reporters, if what they are reporting is rubbish, they will find that the readership will drop.

'To regulate or moderate online media is not easy and I wonder if it is cost-effective. I do hope that one day, our bloggers will be mature enough and write objectively and responsibly.'

Ang Mo Kio GRC MP Lee Bee Wah, who is also president of the Singapore Table Tennis Association. A week after the women's table tennis team won an Olympic medal last August, she was criticised by netizens for announcing soon after that the team manager's services were no longer required.

'So long as the Internet is there, such criticisms will exist because they come from people from all walks of life and with different ideological perspectives. If we believe in freedom of speech, they have the right to say what they think. What matters is the substance of the remarks. If they are just rude or unsubstantiated, such remarks will just die a natural death.

'It is really very difficult to do community moderation of blog discussions and blog posts. My recommendation is that blogs and forums exercise their own judgment on content.'

Mr Yaw Shin Leong, organising secretary of the Workers' Party. He received flak from netizens last May for revealing on his blog that he voted for the People's Action Party's Teo Ho Pin in the 2006 polls, instead of Mr Ling How Doong from the opposition Singapore Democratic Party.