

## Parallel universes in blogosphere

**Chua Mui Hoong**

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The variation in profile and interests of bloggers reminds us that demographics online are as complex as those in the brick and mortar world. -- ST FILE PHOTO: GEORGE GASCON

Just how reflective are online responses, of the real Singapore? That's a question I often have when I scan blogs or read reports of netizens' reactions to events in Singapore.

The latest incident to spark this question in my mind was the online attacks dished out to a group of Filipinos organising an event on June 8 to celebrate the Philippines' Independence Day. After netizens left angry comments, criticising among other things, their plans to hold a celebration at Orchard Road and the use of a photo of Marina Bay skyline, organisers took down a Facebook page.

On Thursday, *The Straits Times* reported that organisers were receiving abusive phone calls laced with expletives at a phone number that had been on the Facebook page for people to call if they were interested in the event. From all accounts, that anger seems to be an over-reaction from a segment of Singaporeans against a perfectly pleasant, legitimate event. Many others spoke up against such anti-foreigner sentiments.

The incident got me wondering, once again, just how reflective what we read online is, of what other Singaporeans are thinking. An Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) survey released last week

sheds some light. A group of researchers spent a few months trawling blogosphere for blogs written in and about and from Singapore in Chinese, Malay and Tamil. One criterion used was that at least of the content had to be on Singapore. They then did a thorough study of 201 blogs in Chinese, 30 in Malay and 20 in Tamil.

Their conclusions are quite interesting. Unlike blogs in English which often discuss current issues, most of those in Chinese and Malay dealt with personal issues. Unlike blogs in English which delight in ripping off mainstream media's reports, Chinese language bloggers used mainstream media reports as sources of information, not as fodder for criticism.

There were also differences in profile of bloggers by language. Most Chinese bloggers were female (58 per cent), and married (97 per cent) and from the media, advertising and creative industries (59 per cent in total). Top topics: Personal issues, family and friends.

Tamil bloggers were 85 per cent males, and 53 per cent from engineering fields. Top issues: language and culture; personal experiences; and politics and social issues in India. But they discussed political and social issues relevant to India, not Singapore. The standard of Tamil used is reported as formal and high. It appears that many Tamil language bloggers are long-term residents in Singapore who come from India, and are not born-and-bred Singaporeans. The lack of discussion on Singapore affairs could reflect a lack of interest, a lack of knowledge, or a caution, or all three. **It does not speak well for integration, a point alluded to by IPS special research adviser Arun Mahizhnan.**

Malay language bloggers are mainly female (61 per cent), and over half are either homemakers or in education (27 per cent each). They blog about lifestyle issues (including weddings) and personal issues, and entertainment.

What does this all mean? The variation in profile and interests of bloggers reminds us that demographics online are as complex as those in the brick and mortar world. Online as off, there are parallel universes, groups are segmented, by language, by interest, by other differentiating factors.

So it's never a good idea to generalise from a group of angry netizens to Singapore society at large.