

## **Raising the tone of online debate**

**Goh Chin Lian**

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GOING online after work for some relaxing cyber-engagement can turn into a trial for lawyer Yeoh Lian Chuan.

Mr Yeoh enjoys posting comments on local sites but sometimes this unleashes vicious replies from others.

He has been called a bunch of nasty names and wrongly accused of being paid to post his views.

Ironically, he uses his real name to post, unlike the name-callers who hide behind the cloak of anonymity.

Yet Mr Yeoh, 44, is unfazed. To adapt to the fast and increasingly furious world of the Internet, he simply makes sure he posts sparingly on forums dominated by those out to upset or anger others.

"I only post if I feel strongly. If I post a lot, I'll invite a lot of trolls," he says, using the Internet slang for such people.

Trolling - and how to deal with it - came under the spotlight two weeks ago when Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong rallied Singaporeans to fight back against this problem. Trolls can ruin the tone of online discussions and deter serious participants.

The fightback will start with the Government's feedback arm, Reach. From Thursday, a user will have to log in with his Facebook account in order to post on Reach's online forum. Before, no such registration was required.

This will widen the space for constructive discourse for Singaporeans, as PM Lee put it.

However, while its reach may be limited - Reach admits to having on average just "over 2,000 feedback inputs" a month - the move is seen by some as yet another step by the authorities to rein in speech in cyberspace.

It also raises issues of whether other Singapore sites will follow suit, if this will reduce online participation or drive traffic elsewhere, and whether people's privacy will be compromised. Insight logs into the issue.

### ***Real names, other solutions***

WEBSITES around the world are dealing with the issue of trolls in a range of ways.

The extreme reaction by some is to ban comments altogether. Science and technology news website Popular Science did so, saying discussion of topics from climate change to evolution had become too polarised.

A more moderate approach has been to require some identification to provide accountability. This includes having to register for an account with the site (news blog The Huffington Post), or having to log in with a social media account like Facebook (sports site ESPN.com) and Google+ (Google's video channel YouTube).

In Singapore, other sites have been urged to follow Reach's lead. These would be "responsible, respectable sites which recognise that sensible, hard, tough discussion can take place", said Law and Foreign Affairs Minister K. Shanmugam at a forum last week.

While Mr Shanmugam and other political leaders have not specified which Singapore sites or online forums could follow Reach's approach, one indicator is the 10 news websites that fall under June's licensing regime changes.

Such sites come under the licensing law umbrella if they have a significant reach, attracting at least 50,000 unique visitors from Singapore in a month; they are also required to take down content that breaches certain standards within 24 hours of being notified, and put up a performance bond of \$50,000.

The 10 sites comprise seven Singapore Press Holdings sites such as [straitstimes.com](http://straitstimes.com); two at MediaCorp, and Yahoo Singapore.

Sociopolitical blog The Online Citizen is not on the list, although in 2011 it became the first website to be gazetted as a political association, with requirements to declare donations.

Separately, two websites - The Independent and Breakfast Network - have been asked in recent months to register under the Broadcasting (Class Licence) Notification, which prohibits them from accepting foreign funds.

While some of these sites do require Facebook log-ins to post comments, others allow posters to be anonymous or not use their real names.

Research in the United States makes a case for removing total anonymity in order to tackle trolling, says Professor Tan Cheng Han, chairman of the government-appointed Media Literacy Council.

Earlier this year, the University of Houston found that 53 per cent of comments on sites that allowed anonymous posts were what it termed "uncivil", nearly double the 29 per cent for those that insisted on real names or Facebook comments.

### ***Problems with requiring ID***

BUT requiring identification raises several problems. One concern is that being stricter on identifying commentators could drive users to other sites that are more lax.

Another is that people who would in fact add to the discourse may be put off posting if they cannot do so anonymously.

On the ramifications of being stricter about identifying posters, The Straits Times editor Warren Fernandez says: "ST websites already require that you give your name and e-mail before you can post a comment. Of course, some might use a pseudonym.

"We are considering whether to raise the bar and require a slightly more detailed registration process, as some other reputable news sites have done.

"Yes, this might deter some people from airing their views. But we also know that many people are put off by trolls, and so chose not to join in the discussion. That's unfortunate, as we do want them to feel free to speak their minds, and for our sites to be places for meaningful discussions.

"We are now gathering feedback from our readers and will decide on how best to proceed when we are ready."

One overarching problem is that of safeguarding privacy in a world of hackers and stalkers.

This means better security on the part of sites that hold the information, and greater savviness of users about the information they make available online.

A related issue is that of people dropping out of commenting because they do not want to risk being identified, perhaps because they still have business dealings with civil servants they are criticising, or they fear losing their jobs if they fault their employer.

Also, communication experts such as Singapore Internet Research Centre director Ang Peng Hwa note that people posting without anonymity might risk the ramifications of being misunderstood, in a high-context Asian culture where people tend to read more into what is left unsaid.

Institute of Policy Studies research fellow Carol Soon notes, too, that "anonymity may embolden others, who for different reasons do not want to be identified, to speak up against objectionable behaviour".

Additionally, sites abroad that have put in place tougher identification policies report an initial drop in the number of comments.

Poynter.org, the website of a journalism institute in Florida, reported ESPN.com as saying that when it tried out adding Facebook commenting to a baseball section of its sports website, the volume of comments dropped by a quarter. But the civility of the comments greatly improved, with fewer flagged as inappropriate.

The site also saw growth in the number of users extending the conversation into Facebook, creating "a halo effect of bringing traffic back to our site", an ESPN spokesman said.

Indeed, there are other unexpected pluses. An added benefit of driving trolls away by requiring identification is that there will be less need for a posse of dedicated and adroit moderators to sift through offensive comments, either before they are posted or after readers have flagged them.

The resources could be better spent on improving reader experience online, engaging them and building community.

For Reach's small team of moderators, this would be a plus. Its chairman Amy Khor, who expects an initial drop in comments as people get used to its new log-in policy, is optimistic that more people will join in when they see its online forum as a safe harbour for robust discussions.

## **Crackdown?**

AMID all this, a larger concern among some netizens is whether the Government, in the wake of the Reach move and its call for other responsible sites to follow suit, is signalling that it will be clamping down on political discourse in cyberspace.

The political context matters in Singapore's case because of recent changes such as June's licensing regime changes for news websites and other announcements.

The Attorney-General's Chambers is charging blogger Alex Au with contempt of court, for an article he wrote on his blog, Yawning Bread, which the AGC said "contains allegations of wrongdoing by senior judicial officials".

Political leaders reject suggestions of a clampdown, saying, for example, that Reach's move does not foreshadow a law to make everyone register; that the Government has always had the legal power to demand the removal of posts; and that only the \$50,000 bond that news websites have to put up is new.

MP Baey Yam Keng has reckoned that the problem may be more one of how measures are signalled by the Government, and netizens' subsequent perceptions of its intent.

He also suggested that an underlying concern of political leaders is to tilt online discussion away from what they perceive as an anti-establishment bias to one that is more balanced.

It is not just to make the online space friendlier for people, but also that "those who want to say good things about the Government will feel comfortable enough to say so", he has noted.

It will be a tough balancing act for officials who want to receive honest feedback, promote their position and also deal with criticism - unfounded or not.

Dr Soon notes that critical but unbalanced opinions still need to surface, as they may shed light on people's concerns and doubts.

She says: "Views and opinions occupy a wide spectrum, and the same can be said for critical comments. Some are more objective and others seemingly one-sided, but can be insightful nonetheless.

"But a line must be drawn and action taken when there is incitement to hurt, a clear breach of a civil right or criminality involved."

Associate Professor David Tan, who teaches a course on freedom of speech at National University of Singapore's law faculty, notes that netizens cannot claim an absolute right to freedom of speech on the Internet and express their opinions with impunity, but also cautions about the Government's actions on this aspect.

He says: "The ongoing and unenviable challenge for the Government is to find the right balance between encouraging active political participation and chilling citizen engagement in the political process."

Some observers argue the Government must be more confident that it can win people over by the merit of its arguments and resort less to measures that could have a chilling effect on political discourse. This will set the political climate for people to participate in online discussion.

The Media Literacy Council's Prof Tan says: "Certainly there are those who view that anonymity can promote free and open exchanges. But it can also be abused.

"Each society will have to decide for itself where and how to draw that balance. Governments also have a role in setting the right tone through their responses to their critics."

The importance of the issue can be seen in research at the University of Wisconsin-Madison which suggests that those who read online discussions with "uncivil" language tend to judge the issue based on their pre-existing values rather than the objective information at hand.

"This could lead to polarised perceptions on issues among different audience segments which hold different values," Prof Tan says.

That is cause for concern for governments like Singapore's that place a premium on harmony in a multiracial and multi-religious society, among other things.

### ***Educating the community***

ANOTHER concern is the effectiveness of identification measures. Take Facebook log-ins. Some simply might set up bogus accounts.

Duplicate or non-human accounts (such as pets or brands) reportedly make up as much as 10 per cent of all Facebook accounts.

A more sustainable way forward, given how quickly technology changes, is to build a community of users who are savvy online and hold others to responsible behaviour.

As communications professor Jude Yew of NUS sees it, "the trolling problem is essentially a problem with the design of discussion spaces", an area, he says, in which Singapore sites lag behind others abroad.

He cites two websites with anonymous contributors that are viewed as successful discussion spaces: Stackoverflow, where individuals can ask for help on programming problems; and reddit, where individuals can post news items and links of interest.

He says: "Some of the interesting and successful features of these discussion sites include cultivating an active community that both moderates discussion and mentors newcomers, voting up posts viewed as meaningful and hiding posts that are not.

"What I find lacking on many Singapore discussion or comment spaces is the cultivation of an invested and accountable community that is willing to moderate its own discussions."

**Dr Soon suggests a more sustainable approach of giving people the skills to navigate the online space.**

"People have the power to ignore, speak up, report and if necessary, leave (the group) when they encounter offensive material," he says.

Indeed, much online discussion in groups takes place outside of forums, such as among friends on social media platforms, but which could have a wider impact than mere coffeeshop talk.

Manager Firdaus Abdul Samad, 37, recently took part in a discussion on his friend's Facebook page about the debate over Malay women not being able to wear the tudung or headscarf at some places of work.

"I said there's no point to swear at each other and say vulgarities; you must take it positively and be more mannered in your comments. It's about adab," he says, referring to the Islamic term for etiquette and code of conduct.

Whatever the solution to trolling and encouraging constructive online discussions may be in Singapore, it is especially important to the nation, given its unique society.

Indeed, in an interview on Tuesday with SPH print media including The Straits Times, Communications and Information Minister Yaacob Ibrahim said: "We do not want more pro-establishment views. We want more honest views. And people must be responsible for the views that they give."

Few would disagree with that.