

## **Sshhh...ocial Media**

**Online 'spiral of silence' does tend to hush moderates here but other, S'pore-specific factors may be compounding effect, experts tell Insight**

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IT was one of the biggest news stories in the United States last month, and made headlines around the world, including in Singapore. But in the initial hours after the gunning down of 19-year-old Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, Twitter and Facebook users apparently could not agree on how important it was.

Twitter user Zach Seward posted soon after the shooting: "Last night, it seemed as though my entire Twitter timeline was Ferguson, and my entire Facebook newsfeed was ice buckets."

Why the great disparity?

The explanation offered by some experts points to a phenomenon called the "spiral of silence", and a new study on its effects is challenging much of what everyone thought they knew about the Internet.

In the case of the shooting of Brown, an unarmed black teenager, by a white policeman - which put in the spotlight the issue of police treatment of minorities - experts theorised that some people kept their views to themselves on Facebook because they were unsure if their friends agreed with them. The situation was different on Twitter.

Social media analyst Ethan Zuckerman writes on his blog: "On Twitter, where it is not uncommon to follow dozens of people you don't know well, it's easier to interpret those social signals than on Facebook, where you are more likely to know an ethnically homogenous set of friends."

This is echoed by recent research from a renowned Washington think-tank, the Pew Research Centre, although its researchers did find self-censorship on Twitter. When they polled 1,801 Americans on their willingness to discuss the polarising saga surrounding National Security Agency whistle-blower Edward Snowden, they found surprising results.

Those who would rather discuss the issue in person outnumbered those willing to post about it on social media two to one.

The researchers concluded that what is known as the "spiral of silence" was at play online. This is a term popularised by German political scientist Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann which refers to the tendency of people not to speak up about controversial issues in public when they believe their point of view is not widely shared.

Such online "silencing" today has made people gasp because the Internet has a reputation as the great leveller of opinion and a platform for the voice of the disenfranchised.

The findings - among the first to properly quantify the impact of the Internet on political discussion - raise numerous questions for a Singapore social media landscape that is still growing up and trying to work out its identity.

To what extent does the spiral of silence apply to Singapore? What implications do these findings have for Singapore's approach - both on the part of the Government and netizens - to Internet discussion? And does social media help or inhibit real debate?

### ***Echo Chamber?***

MR Anton Casey and Ms Amy Cheong may have little to do with each other in real life but the two share very similar landmarks in Singapore's cyber space history.

Both sparked an online lynch mob due to ill-advised offensive postings that they thought would not reach a wide audience. Mr Casey, a British expatriate who worked in the finance sector, denigrated Singapore's public transport commuters, while Ms Cheong disparaged Malays for what she perceived to be their low-cost and lengthy void deck weddings.

In both cases, the online uproar that followed - an uproar mostly united in extreme vilification - led to both losing their jobs and leaving Singapore. And in both cases, opposing voices of reason suggesting the reaction had gone too far emerged only after the ferocity of the mob had ebbed.

Cases like these serve both to exhibit and reinforce the spiral of silence, say experts.

With the latter, it does this by making salient just what sort of punishment the Internet can bring down on an offender.

"We speculate that social media users may have witnessed those... experiencing ostracism, ridicule or bullying online, and that this might increase the perceived risk of opinion sharing in other settings," say Pew researchers in their report on the study.

Assistant Professor Elmie Nekmat, from the National University of Singapore's department of communications and new media, notes that the perceived permanence of online posts adds to the reticence.

"Offline, if I were to meet you face to face and I were to argue with you, my words might not be permanent. You might forget it the next time around. Online, your comments can leave footprints," he says.

Another reason the Internet may actually exacerbate the spiral of silence could also be, counter-intuitively, the variety of views available online.

Mr Lee Rainie of the Pew Research Centre notes that the need to self-censor can emerge only if someone is aware he holds a minority view. The Internet thus becomes a vehicle that makes someone ever more aware of his peers' opinions on a difficult issue.

"Because they use social media, they may know more about the depth of disagreement over the issue in their wide circle of contacts. This might make them hesitant to speak up either online or offline for fear of starting an argument, offending or even losing a friend," he says.

Then there is the way social networks like Facebook and Twitter are set up. Nearly all social networks are run on the currency of sharing. Whether it is "liking", reposting or retweeting, all networks want as many users as possible to interact and share content - behaviour that is far more likely if everyone is looking at things they agree with.

Over time, the sophisticated algorithms that determine whose Facebook posts you see or what Google search results you get will adjust to minimise the chances someone will encounter an idea that challenges their world view.

None of this is to suggest that the Internet will become a homogenous echo chamber. Rather, it may turn out to be a collection of different homogenous echo chambers, with netizens living in silos that best fit their own opinions.

### ***The Spiral in S'pore***

WHILE there are limits to how much a single study focused on an American issue can tell us about the Singapore experience, most new-media analysts agree that the spiral of silence is now very much a part of local cyber space.

Says Mr Arun Mahizhnan, special research adviser at the Institute of Policy Studies: "The idea of a spiral of silence is not peculiar to any one society. Only the manifestations vary. Nothing really surprising in birds of a feather flocking together or in seeking approval or affirmation from each other."

But he adds: "The spiral of silence in Singapore is compounded by other phenomena. The lack of practice in public debate, fear of reprisal, self-censorship and just plain reluctance to rock the boat - all these have severely narrowed the spectrum of public discourse."

Dr Elmie also notes that while Singaporeans are cautious about writing posts expressing non-mainstream views online, they are not actually keeping quiet.

"They may not be willing to speak out online but at the same time they are willing to speak up. The difference is that in speaking up, you can use symbolic activities like "liking" and sharing but without expressing your opinion, without being confrontational without causing too much trouble. But in a way your actions can show that you are favouring one side of the issue over the other," he says.

In the cases of Casey and Cheong, that meant few had the courage to question if the online mob had gone too far, while the dominant mood online was to attack.

Members of Parliament have also admitted that they have kept their opinions to themselves, especially on the topic of immigration, feeling that fighting the blowback would not be worth the trouble. Law Minister K. Shanmugam, for example, said in a 2012 interview that some

politicians, journalists and institutions did not dare express their true feelings lest they were subjected to attacks.

In that sense, there appears to have been an evolution in Singapore political discourse. While Singaporeans used to engage in self-censorship mainly out of fear of government reprisal, they are now doing so out of fear of reprisal from fellow citizens.

### ***Good for Discourse?***

WHEN it comes to the question of whether social media is a boon or bane for real debate online, the answer appears to be that it is a bit of both.

One clear negative is that the enhanced effects of the spiral of silence online make cyber space an increasingly polarised space.

Explains Dr Elmie: "Because everyone in my little group is voicing the same opinions, it can give me the illusion that a majority are of the same opinion when, in fact, there is a larger group out there whose views I am not exposed to. The spiral of silence can create pockets all over the Internet."

For Dr Keith Hampton, a Rutgers University professor who is one of the co-authors of the Pew study, the most worrying aspect of the findings is the notion that the environment someone has online can suppress his willingness to speak in real-life situations.

His study found, for example, that Facebook and Twitter users were less likely to join offline conversations about controversial topics if they felt their online peers disagreed with them.

"The role of online social pressure affecting offline interactions is new and would seem to curtail opportunities for deliberation more than what would have been present before social media," he says.

He, too, fears that an inability to share conflicting views will polarise society, citing studies that show that when different viewpoints are exchanged, views tend to become more moderate.

All this, however, is tempered by the sense that the Internet has done a lot of good in terms of drawing out a variety of opinion, even if most today do not expose themselves to the whole range.

"The really interesting thing in Singapore is that after decades of near silence, the Internet has unleashed a torrent of alternative voices. We never knew they existed or were as varied. The quality of these voices is as uneven as they are diverse but that is only natural," says Mr Mahizhnan. "So while the spiral of silence is at work at some levels, we also have an unprecedented variety of voices creating a cacophony."

Dr Elmie, in turn, says the silos of like-minded individuals created by the spirals of silence may not always be a bad thing.

"When the spiral works, they can gather more and more like-minded voices. It can gain volume and the minority opinion can become larger than it is in real life. Once you gain visibility, it might take a small but important issue and move it into the media agenda or elevate it into public discussion."

This double-edged sword, though, leaves few options for a clear strategy for anyone trying to battle polarisation online. Not all uprisings online can be dismissed for being out of touch or a product of a spiral of silence, nor should every single one spark a full-blown response.

Ultimately, studies like the one on the spiral of silence simply serve to show that there is still a lot left to learn about the dynamics of human interaction online.

For now, however, there needs to be an effort to make sure the Internet is a uniting force, and not the divisive one it is turning out to be.