

## **The Big Read: In the Facebook era, whither quality public discourse?**

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Last month, financial consultant Karen (not her real name) was casually browsing Facebook one day when she stumbled upon something that she could not let slide: A racist comment on a video about an interracial couple.

She decided to respond with her own thoughts on the same thread. An hour later, she was receiving comments about her “Indian boyfriend”, and how her “children would have the skin colour of spoiled milk”.

“I wanted to have a proper conversation on race and religion in Singapore and educate others, but it just turned into this flurry of personal attacks on me and my family. They looked through my photos (on my Facebook page) and made horrible assumptions,” said the 33-year-old. “It made me think twice about posting such comments online again.”

For Mr Kyle Malinda-White, 25, an active Facebook user who regularly initiates discussions on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) issues, he has not faced any personal attacks before but a discussion last week on people who do not identify themselves as male or female did not turn out the way he hoped. One or two users started calling this group of people names like “special snowflakes”, and argued that such individuals do not exist.

“It was still a civil debate, but it always helps to understand the other person and (then) continue standing your ground,” said Mr Malinda-White, founder of millennial culture site Pospoken.

For many Facebook users like Karen and Mr Malinda-White, attempts to carry out or participate in constructive discussions on social media are nigh impossible. More often than not, far from being a useful platform to exchange views on weighty issues, individuals get attacked for their views and the discussions go nowhere.

Recently, Singaporeans saw several high-profile public figures clash on Facebook over issues such as foreign policy and the fate of the family home of late founding Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

Over three weeks, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong and his siblings — Dr Lee Wei Ling and Mr Lee Hsien Yang — were locked in a public spat, with several Ministers also weighing in. Dr Lee and Mr Lee Hsien Yang used Facebook as their primary platform, releasing statements regularly on the social media network. Government leaders, including Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean and Law and Home Affairs Minister K Shanmugam, also posted their views and rebuttals.

Separately, Ambassador-at-Large Bilahari Kausikan sharply criticised a commentary by Professor Kishore Mahbubani in *The Straits Times* which argued that “small states must always behave like small states”. Mr Shanmugam also waded in, calling the article “questionable, intellectually” on his Facebook page.

The disagreement over the role of small states drew in Singaporeans from all walks of life, sharing Mr Kausikan's Facebook post and initiating discussions of their own. One of them was international relations student Lawson Lau, 27, who posted his views on the Facebook pages of Mr Kausikan and Mr Shanmugam. Speaking to TODAY, he noted that there were fellow commentators who "appreciate discourse that is sincere and respectful". However, "unfortunately, I see most Singaporeans being very rude and not thinking objectively", he said.

### **'A deterioration of civility'**

In a commentary published by TODAY on Wednesday (July 12), Dr Yap Kwong Weng, a businessman and author, noted that the current media landscape has "created a new social environment where all issues are on the table for everyone to debate". These days, discourse is more participatory, he said. "Everyone has an opinion, and is willing to share, march or wear identifiable symbols to show affiliation," he wrote.

But while social media has greatly increased the speed at which such discussions are taking place. "rarely are arguments of online disagreements conclusive", he said. "Very often, different parties may interpret issues differently and are not even arguing over the same points," Dr Yap said. "With a greater contestation of ideas in the online space, spats often involve an element of personal attacks and acrimony."

He added: "This scenario where everything is debated with great ferocity, but inconclusively, is what worries me, and may indicate a deterioration of intellectual discourse and civility in Singapore."

Indeed, several experts whom TODAY spoke to shared Dr Yap's concern. Given the ubiquity of social media these days, it is important to raise the quality and level of public discourse online, they stressed.

Like it or not, "social media is growing in importance because of its reach, accessibility, ease of usage, and the ability to transmit unfiltered messages", Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan said. "The reality is that its widespread usage by public figures for public discourse indicates its power and utility."

Given the propensity for social media to polarise society instead of bringing people together, Assoc Prof Tan suggested users consider their arguments before posting anything online and they ought to be responsible for what they say.

"Individuals and public figures can raise and shape the level of discourse by treating it no differently as when they are on traditional media platforms," he said. This means avoiding "soundbites and polemical speech", and not making arguments "for a tactical advantage rather than being committed to the arguments, and always substantiating what one articulates", he added.

**Dr Carol Soon, a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, reiterated the need for influential figures to lead the way.**

**“To cultivate healthy and inclusive online public discourse, those who are in the position to influence — for instance, parents, teachers, public figures and leaders — play an important role in setting positive norms for deliberation and engagement,” she said.**

Nanyang Technological University communications professor Ang Peng Hwa noted that people might have the “kernel of an idea” but they do not flesh out their arguments before posting them on social media. He advised people to put in some thought before making comments online. “You must think about the defamatory potential of your post too, because in the heat of the moment you may miss it,” he said.

Experts have long noted how individuals communicate differently on social media compared with real life. The veil of anonymity, and the fact that one is talking to a stranger, tends to lead people to become less civil and more antagonistic.

Mr Daniel Koh, a psychologist at Insights Mind Centre, said that social media creates a platform — which may be absent in real life — for some people to vent their emotions. It also “builds a barrier between self and others”, such that people become less inhibited online.

“In real life, your image or ego is associated with your behaviour and acceptance from others, making people put out their best positive impression. Or they are bound by social or moral rules,” Mr Koh said. “When others do not know who you are, you become who you want to be without having to deal with consequences.”

National University of Singapore sociologist Tan Ern Ser reiterated that ordinary people “hiding behind a keyboard” could throw caution to the wind and become intentionally provocative.

“In face-to-face situations, they may be somewhat more cautious, since they are identifiable and social norms require that they come across as civil, responsible, reasonable and proper,” Dr Tan added.

### **It’s all down to individuals**

Rafflesia Holdings CEO Mano Sabnani, a former chief editor of TODAY and the Business Times, runs a closed Facebook group which discusses social issues in the country. To keep discussion on the right track, he has set a list of ground rules such as requiring contributors not to get personal, and to base their arguments on facts and not opinions. He has a group of volunteer moderators helping him to monitor the discussions, and intervene where necessary. He said: “We ask questions when people want to join, too, like how can you contribute to the group?”

With these measures in place, Mr Sabnani felt that the platform “generates a good level of discussion”. “People enjoy it ... we’ve kicked out quite a few people who violate our rules,” he said.

Former Nominated Member of Parliament Calvin Cheng is an outspoken public figure who has not shied away from putting his views out on his Facebook page, however controversial they may be, and engaging other users online — even if it means attracting brickbats.

He has no qualms about blocking people on Facebook and removing comments if he deems them to be getting out of hand. Individuals should engage others on the social media network “exactly the same way that you would in real life” he said.

“It’s very rare for normal people to use vulgarities, insults in normal debate, or to mudsling. Sitting behind a screen shouldn’t make it different,” he said. “One can also block obvious trolls who have no intention of being constructive ... (and) delete comments,” he said.

For individuals taking part in public discourses on Facebook, Karen believes that the situation will improve if they “keep an open mind and listen to other people’s beliefs”.

Mr Donovan Choy, a 26-year-old student, for example, goes out of his way to follow Facebook pages that he does not necessarily support or agree with. “It’s good to have perspective, and it’s important not to lock myself up in my own echo chamber,” he said.

In his commentary, Dr Yap made several suggestions to raise the level of discourse in Singapore in the new media climate: First, arguments cannot be made at the expense of the national brand. “Whatever thesis put forward for public scrutiny should be based on advancing our institutions, and not to advance an individual,” he said. Second, people should bear in mind that there are no correct answers, and what is important is that they “think critically about all sides of the issue”. Third, people are entitled to voice constructive opinions, and they should not be faulted for expressing a valid point of view within the boundaries of the law.

In December last year, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg described the social media network as “a new kind of platform for public discourse”.

“And that means we have a new kind of responsibility to enable people to have the most meaningful conversations, and to build a space where people can be informed,” he said. Among the steps to “build a more informed community and fight misinformation”, Facebook has made it easier for users to report hoaxes, and cracked down on spammers who masquerade as well-known news organisations.

Ultimately, the experts and active Facebook users point out, it is up to individuals to make the online environment more conducive for public discourse on important matters. Otherwise, society will be poorer for it.

Several unpleasant encounters have put off advertising executive Lim Mu Yao from being active on Facebook. Now, the 25-year-old tends to be more selective. “I only comment on issues that I care about, or in areas where I want to have my knowledge enriched through discussions with people of contrasting or varied opinions,” he said.

Assoc Prof Tan stressed that social media should be treated by individuals as a “valuable public space” and prevent it from degenerating into “second-rate platform”.

“We have to learn to talk with, not talk to, one another and strive to find common ground even if there are competing or even conflicting interests and goals,” he said.