

'Internet community should self-regulate'

Tan Weizhen

Today, 11 March 2012

SINGAPORE - Instead of relying on the authorities, members of the Internet community should take it upon themselves to regulate discourse in cyberspace.

This call was made by panellists at a forum yesterday, which included Nominated Member of Parliament and Singapore Management University law professor Eugene Tan, Institute of Policy Studies adjunct senior research fellow Cherian George, and Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad.

The forum, "To Post or Not To Post?: Multiculturalism in the Social Media", was organised by the Association of Muslim Professionals, and comes as concerns grow over racism online, such as the case involving a Facebook comment by a former Young People's Action Party member last year about Malay children on a school bus.

For an online code of conduct to be recognised, it needs to be a "bottoms-up approach", said Dr George.

"It should not involve any sort of regulatory agency, any sort of government ... because ultimately these codes only have moral power if they are seen as something that is purely voluntary. It needs to be practised out of a sense of social responsibility," he said.

He said that prominent websites such as The Online Citizen, Temasek Review Emeritus and Yawning Bread could come together to form a code of ethics.

Last week, Minister for Information, Communications and the Arts Yaacob Ibrahim had called on the online community to develop an Internet code of conduct during the Committee of Supply debate.

At the forum yesterday, Assistant Professor Tan agreed that self-regulation is the way to go for the Internet community, as the law cannot evolve quickly enough to keep pace with social media.

However, there will be challenges: "The online community is huge, it's somewhat dispersed and there are no leaders, and there are people who would use social media for their own agenda. But we must not give up on the possibility of self regulation, where the more reasonable online users will step in."

Mr Zaqy pointed that the Malay community today is more vocal, calling for clarifications when it came to online racism.

He added that the Malay community has become more active online, with the growth of online interest groups and Malay entrepreneurs tapping on the Internet.