The Big Read: The S'porean in the digital ether: An evolving identity

In this "Wild Wild West" as the Internet has been called, individuals and communities band together to speak out on policies, raise petitions for causes they believe in and aid hapless tourists.

Alicia Wong
TODAY, 18 April 2015

IN this "Wild Wild West" as the Internet has been called, individuals and communities band together to speak out on policies, raise petitions for causes they believe in and aid hapless tourists.

On the flipside, lynch mobs and vigilantes thrive in this space, and bad behaviour often ends up amplified.

Without a doubt, like many around the world, Singaporeans are turning to the Internet to spark positive change in their society, as recent incidents have shown. Observers and netizens say this is an online manifestation of a change in Singapore society — with people less afraid of expressing their views — but several also point to the Internet's role in helping to catalyse this vocality.

But with the good, comes the bad and the ugly. As many observers have pointed out, the Internet has brought out the best and worst in Singaporeans. The hope is that, over time, as more Singaporeans become comfortable with the medium and speak out against trolls — there are some signs of this, experts and bloggers point out — behaviour online will veer towards healthier norms.

To Dr Terence Chong, a sociologist and senior fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singaporeans do not behave worse online than offline. "But because the Internet allows for split-second reactions, the most poorly thought out sentiments and responses are captured for all to see," he said. "The instantaneousness, publicness and permanency of the internet tend to accentuate bad behaviour."

However, Dr Chong pointed out that there is also a "natural tendency towards equilibrium" online because the Internet is a public sphere. "The worst of Singaporeans is often countered and checked by more moderate and fair-minded Singaporeans," he said.

Blogger Lee Kin Mun, famously known as mrbrown, agreed: "Maybe not everyone, but enough people will say 'okay, I think you shouldn't be going after the guy's kids'... While (the Internet) is open to mobs, it's also open to collective, moral outrage … there's space for all of that."

The good

LATE last year, a Vietnamese tourist fell victim to a rogue trader at Sim Lim Square, prompting netizens to spring into action — Some sought to punish the shop owner, others aided the tourist. Eventually, the Government and consumer watchdog stepped in, with the former now looking at how to bolster legislation to better protect consumers.

Months earlier, an outcry broke out over the National Library Board's (NLB) removal of three controversial children's titles containing homosexual references. There was an outpouring of views on social media, petitions were made online, a reading event was held, and local writers also pulled out of NLB events. Eventually, Communications and Information Minister Yaccob Ibrahim instructed the NLB to place two of the titles in the adult section. On Wednesday, a 19-member independent committee to review titles for the NLB was unveiled.

That people are being vocal is proof of a greater sense of self-efficacy – an emerging aspect of Singapore identity especially among the digital natives, said Professor Ang Peng Hwa, from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

"The online people can connect … they feel like they can make some difference," he said. In comparison, people of his generation - the baby boomers - "don't feel so self-efficacious", in part because many things were done by the Government previously and also because "you (didn't) have the resources, you (didn't) know where to go, how to do it".

Adding that the Internet "has become a vital tool for mobilisation and organisation", Dr Chong said: "People are more able than ever before to spread news, garner support and organise themselves whether in the form of reading sessions like the recent 'penguingate' saga or through petitions... The ease with which we are able to organise ourselves will normalise dissent, advocacy or contention."

Dr Carol Soon, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said social media grants different voices "an accessible outlet". "Minority groups can now contest dominant discourse with greater ease," said Dr Soon, whose areas of research include digital engagement and how new media can be used to cause political and social change.

Mr Belmont Lay, founding editor of Mothership.sg noted that social media has allowed coffee shop chatter to seep into the open. "The move vocal people get, perceived or real, the more vocal they will be. It feeds unto itself," he said.

Blogger Mr Lee added: "The fact that you have more ubiquitous access to the Internet now has helped catalyse the attitude. "We didn't have a medium in the past … Now everybody is allowed to have a voice, for better or for worse."

The bad

THERE are times, however, that the Singaporean seems more intolerant, insensitive in cyberspace than they may be offline.

Hate speech and harsh anti-foreigner sentiment is abundant online. In January, former president S R Nathan raised concerns about rising discontent in Singapore, with some of this dissatisfaction amplified by social media. "Reasoned political discourse and intelligent, constructive criticism are rare in this online world," Mr Nathan had said.

On another occasion, a Miss Singapore Universe 2013 finalist caused a minor ruckus online last year when she mocked a food stall helper for wearing a shirt with a hole in it on Facebook.

Following instances such as when Briton Anton Casey had been flamed for his derogatory comments about the public transport system and former National Trades Union Congress employee Amy Cheong condemned online for posting racist comments, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong last year cautioned Singaporeans against having a lynch mob mentality. Mr Lee had said: "Yes, somebody has done something wrong, repudiate it, condemn it, but do not lower ourselves to that same level to behave in a way which really makes us all so ashamed of ourselves to become abusive, hateful mobs, especially online and anonymously."

Most recently, teenager Amos Yee became the target of outrage when he made disparaging remarks in a YouTube video about the late Mr Lee Kuan Yew and of Christianity. He has since been charged for his comments.

Mr Choo Zhengxi, lawyer and co-founder of socio-political site The Online Citizen, highlighted how the "anonymising power (of the Internet) has emboldened people to say things online that they may not say offline". And this could be very threatening, he noted. "It has the potential to unleash vigilante justice on individuals who might not necessarily deserve it," he said.

...And the anonymous

A SURVEY last year by market research firm GlobalWebIndex, which profiles the Internet population across 32 countries and covers 90 per cent of the world's Internet audience, found that 55 per cent of Internet users in Singapore prefer to be anonymous online, slightly higher than the global average of 52 per cent. Data from the first quarter of this year showed that this figure rose to 59 per cent in Singapore, while the global average remained the same.

Mr Choo cautioned of the "chilling effect" anonymity could have on free speech if people "act with impunity". He hopes for more Singaporeans to grow comfortable with putting their names to their critiques. "Once things go viral, it's difficult to rectify the damage that can be done, which can be disproportionate to the wrong being committed," he said.

Given that the online environment can be harsh, perhaps, the Singaporean in cyberspace – an active participant at the least – is one who has developed a thicker skin. Mr Lee felt that those who want to give an opinion must be "prepared to defend it".

"If you don't have a thick enough skin to deal with it, maybe just stay out of the kitchen – don't participate, be a lurker," he quipped.

He added that there are many options in cyberspace, and there is no need to engage others in a space that is "negative and toxic". Drawing parallels with situations in the physical world, he said: "People will gather where they think their views are heard. Not everyone will be comfortable in a robust environment."

In time to come, however, even the quieter Singaporean may find his or her voice in cyberspace. "The issue of the silent majority will become less and less pronounced," Dr Soon

said. This will come as healthier norms develop online, and people speak up against trolls or those who are "very acerbic or abusive in their comments". "We're seeing more incidents where people stand up in cyberspace to condemn certain behaviours and speech. So as more and more people find the gumption and conviction to do so, we will see healthier online norms," Dr Soon added, citing for example those who stand up against xenophobic speech. "(This) is part of a changing society where people are more educated, people are more civic minded. They feel that by voicing their opinions… they may be doing their part as citizens."