

CHATRoom | TAN CHENG HAN

A step forward for self-regulation online

The Amy Cheong incident sparked debate over the impact of social media and online behaviour. Law professor Tan Cheng Han, who chairs the Media Literacy Council (MLC), says several lessons can be drawn from both the original posting and the responses to it.

By PHUA MEI PIN

■ *What can we take away from the incident?*

This is an important learning moment for our society.

First, it was heartening to see the public express its strong disapproval of the sentiments. This episode has reaffirmed how Singaporeans are very, very firm in their views that there are certain out-of-bounds markers we ought not to transgress, including racial and religious tolerance. Anything contrary to this gets a very strong reaction from Singaporeans.

Second, I hope this makes us realise social media is not entirely like a coffee shop where we can sit around with friends enjoying a casual and private conversation. Rather, it is as if we are sitting in a coffee shop conducting our conversation through loudspeakers.

Social media has the ability to amplify and broadcast our words, and what we say has the potential to hurt and embarrass others. Our interactions in the online world can have very real consequences in the real world.

So just as in the real world, we try to treat others as we would like them to treat us. I hope this value will take root in the online world.

■ *Ms Cheong's employer fired her within a day, and many government leaders have condemned her action. Are these reactions appropriate?*

In such moments, it is useful for our political leaders to reaffirm the important values of tolerance, understanding and mutual respect.

My sense is, in Singapore, we are constantly worried about the racial and religious divides. While we've made great strides, our leaders still worry that these are fault lines that have the potential to erupt. Therefore they tend to incline towards an abundance of caution. They feel that this is one of the issues that we always need to be careful about, no matter how much progress we make. So they feel that it is better to do more, rather than to do less.

I also understand fully why NTUC had to terminate her employment.

■ *What do you think of the responses from the public?*

I understand and empathise with many of the responses. At the same time, I particularly agree with those who caution against engaging in a "witch hunt".

While our response as a community must be strong, firm and clear, it should also be dignified and accompanied by a willingness to extend a second chance to Ms Cheong if she is sincere in her apology.

The manner in which we respond is a reflection on ourselves as a society. Some responses went too far and were tantamount to bullying and harassment.

■ *Is this incident a step backwards for those who believe in self-regulation of online media use? Will it prompt more calls for the online space to be policed?*

I consider it a step forward, because it shows that our community can be counted upon to condemn such acts.

Given the diverse nature of our society, there may be people who would want clear lines in the sand. But I don't see a very significant or sustained voice calling out for this type of approach.

I do not believe that greater policing is the answer. As a practical person, I wouldn't know where to start policing what goes on in social media. It's going to be very difficult and would be a waste of resources.

This incident has shown us that when somebody behaves very badly, people will react. People will tell that person off, and tell that person that what you've done is wrong. Of course, some of the ways that we say it are a bit unfortunate as well. But it's a new medium of communication, let's give it some time to mature.

■ *What can regular members of the public do to engender a better social media environment?*

As in the real world, show your disapproval of anti-social behaviour. And also try to be fair-minded and courteous even in disagreement.

After all, most people who don't agree with you are more likely to at least see your point of view if you put it across politely.



Professor Tan Cheng Han believes the education system should and can play a key role in fostering a healthy online media environment. ST PHOTO: DESMOND WEE

They may even come round to your point of view eventually, but they almost certainly won't if you put your points across insultingly and condescendingly.

■ *Other than rely on the authorities, is there a role for others in fostering a healthy online media environment?*

Most definitely – parents and educators, because discernment and good values are best inculcated when young. Unfortunately, the parents of today's parents could not pass these on because social media, as we understand it today, did not exist then. Thus there is a disconnect because today's par-

ents are making it up on the fly, if they are at all.

This means that the education system should and can play a significant rôle, and this is work in progress. The MLC can work with the Ministry of Education and the schools to develop public education programmes for school-going children. This is certainly one of the things that we ought to do.

The MLC can also work with other organisations and community bodies to ensure there are suitable public education programmes for parents or other adults who are interested in finding out more about the pitfalls and good things about the online space.

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