TO POST OR NOT TO POST?
MULTICULTURALISM IN THE SOCIAL MEDIA

OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES

To Post or Not To Post?

Multiculturalism in the Social Media

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This paper is an edited transcription of the proceedings of the Community in Review 2012 seminar by the same title held on 10 March 2012 at Orchard Hotel, Singapore

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Introduction

Community in Review 2012

Singaporeans saw several high-profile cases over the past year involving religiously and racially insensitive comments towards specific communities posted on various social media platforms. The resulting backlash against these insensitive comments demonstrated how irresponsible posting could hurt inter-ethnic relations. To discuss the development of the social media sphere and its impact on the Singaporean society, the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA), in collaboration with its parent organisation, the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP), organised the Community in Review (CIR) 2012 seminar on 10 March 2012.

The seminar, entitled *To Post or Not To Post? Multiculturalism in the Social Media,* examined the role of social media in relation to the state of multiculturalism in Singapore. The seminar discussed a series of irresponsible postings on social media which attracted much discussion both online and offline, as well as the efforts to curb these abuses. The seminar uncovered strategies to instill responsibility in social media usage and promote the use of social media as a platform to enhance multiculturalism instead of threatening it.

The CIR is an annual event, which provides a platform for discussion of issues in the past year affecting the Malay/Muslim community in Singapore and beyond. The CIR 2012 marked the 12th year that the CIR seminar has been organised since RIMA's inception in 2001.

Opening Remarks by Mr Azmoon Ahmad,
Chairman of AMP

In providing thought leadership to the community, AMP contributes ideas and perspectives on a range of issues confronting the community. Today's seminar is a good example of such an effort, where we hope to address issues related to social media and its impact on multiculturalism. Specifically, we will: (a) Examine the role of social media vis-à-vis the state of multiculturalism in Singapore; (b) Uncover strategies to inculcate responsibility in social media usage and promote social media as a platform to enhance multiculturalism as opposed to threatening it, and; (c) Bring to light recent developments in the social media sphere and its impact on the Malay/Muslim community, as well as inter-ethnic relations as a whole.

State of Multiculturalism in Singapore

The state of multiculturalism in Singapore cannot afford to be shaken by thoughtless Internet postings, often under the guise of "freedom of speech." I say this because ethnic relations can be a thorny and contentious topic. From time to time, disruptions can occur and affect the peaceful relations between the various community groups in Singapore. I have also been informed that today's seminar will discuss recent postings that have attracted much discussion on social media and the efforts at curtailing this issue.

With such diverse backgrounds and areas of expertise represented among the speakers at this seminar, it is my hope that the topics being presented and discussed are dissected from various perspectives. I am confident that the speakers will be able to bring to the table their invaluable

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experiences and knowledge to foster greater understanding on the impact of social media on our community.

I strongly encourage open discussion on issues that could help preserve and enhance peaceful inter-ethnic relations in Singapore and, at the same time, explore opportunities for the betterment of the Malay/Muslim community and the general society at large.

Advent of Social Media and Non-Moderated Platforms for "Free Speech"

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter provide round-the-clock news simultaneously and instantaneously. The nature of social media has also made it easier for individuals to post comments anonymously and, at times, irresponsibly. In the past year, we have seen examples of Singapore's harmonious inter-ethnic relations being put to the test by irresponsible postings on the social media. Let me briefly quote some examples:

Last year, three individuals, namely Jason Neo, Christian Eliab Ratnam and Donaldson Tan, posted racially and religiously insensitive remarks on Facebook on separate occasions, which drew much ire from the community. In the same year, a young gentleman posted on his Facebook wall a statement questioning why the Muslim prayer call, the *azan,* was played at a McDonald's outlet during the fasting month of Ramadan. This saw many from the Muslim community responding with anger. In fact, some of these responses were equally guilty of religious insensitivity. In February this year, a student missionary group was chided for insensitive remarks made about Buddhists and Muslims.

Practice of Irresponsible Posting on "No-Holds-Barred" Platforms

Irresponsible postings under the guise of freedom of speech have transpired from the anonymity of social media. Online blogs and social networking sites have become avenues for users to make unpleasant comments or discuss traditionally-contentious topics, which are otherwise not covered in mainstream media. Social media has become an alternative news source for many Internet users. It remains to be examined whether it would be feasible to provide a regulated and moderated platform for users to have open discussions on sensitive issues, especially those pertaining to religion and ethnicity.

Has legislation covered all grounds to deter Internet users from straying into contentious discussions on race and religion? At this juncture, how do we develop responsible users of the social media? So, let us ask ourselves at today's seminar where the boundary in social media really is, and what could or could not, should or should not be posted online.

I hope when we go home after the seminar today, we will be able to find the answers as to whether Internet and social media users should be given the ability to exercise complete freedom of speech, or whether our society needs to attain a certain level of responsibility before that freedom can be mandated as a right.

Irresponsible Speech and Web 2.0:
Law's Limitations in the Digital Age

Assistant Professor Eugene KB Tan

One does not need a license to write,
but what one writes or says may have consequences.[1]

Today's seminar is timely given the continuing and growing prominence of bigotry, closed-mindedness, and extremism in cyberspace – domestically and internationally. It is a topic on which each one of us has our own views, coloured by our experiences and expectations, and our understanding of not just how Web 2.0[2] works but also how it *ought* to work. There will be competing, and possibly even conflicting, narratives of how Web 2.0 ought to work. This seminar will enable us to see and appreciate different perspectives on this important subject matter. Even as individual perspectives differ, we should bear in mind that societal perspectives of how Web 2.0 works and ought to work vary from society to society. What may work in one society may fail spectacularly in another. The context, needs, and aspirations of each society will determine the role, prospects and limitations of Web 2.0. There are more than 2.5 million Facebook users in Singapore – almost half of Singapore's resident population, of which 36 per cent use Facebook or Twitter at least once a day.[3]

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[1] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, "A Licence to Write," *Index on Censorship*, vol. 39(4) (December 2010), pp. 83-87 at 87. Ngugi wa Thiong'o is the author of *Weep not Child* (1964), *The River Between* (1965), *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), and *Petals of Blood* (1997).

[2] Wikipedia describes Web 2.0 as "a loosely defined intersection of web application features that facilitate participatory information sharing, interoperability, user-centered design, and collaboration on the World Wide Web". See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0>. In this essay, I use Web 2.0 and social media interchangeably.

[3] Information obtained from response by Dr Yaacob Ibrahim at the Committee of Supply Debate 2012 on enabling a safe and enriching online experience, 2 March 2012; available at
<http://app.mica.gov.sg/Default.aspx?tabid=79&ctl=Details&mid=540&ItemID=1374>.

The harsh reality is that irresponsible conduct in the use of social media will remain a fact of life. I do not think we will ever get away from the fact that ignorance, insensitivity, bigotry and rabble-rousing will continue to feature in social media and generate strong reactions online and offline. Irresponsible speech or "bad speech" will be part of the Web 2.0 landscape and dynamics. The online and offline worlds are separate but inter-dependent in more ways than one. What happens in the online world so often spills into the offline world and vice-versa. The challenge is for societies and people to learn to manage the downsides of social media even as we seek to harness the positive aspects.

Even as information and communication technology (ICT) exudes a sense of modernity, the advancements in ICT certainly do not render ignorance and bigotry as outmoded conduct. Instead, technology can magnify the challenges, and amplify potential threats (for example, to inter-ethnic harmony) even as social media has given speech a boost, facilitated the viability of an alternative public sphere, and reduced the barriers and costs while increasing the speed of mobilising and organising people and ideas. Technology may very well seduce us into thinking that we can express our views directly to the world at large without any care or concern as to how it affects others.

Web 2.0 has, arguably, enabled us to attain a new state of consciousness and connectedness since social media, through its instantaneous communication and its increasing ubiquity, has resulted in the compression of time and space. Hyper-connectedness may be an apt description of the state of affairs in cyberspace. In turn, this immediacy and apparent freedom means that we are no longer just consumers of the media, but producers as well. While we should not overrate the ability of governments to regulate cyberspace, Web 2.0 has enabled the ordinary person to bypass traditional or mainstream media whether it comes to receiving news or making news.

That ICT is a very powerful tool is all too evident when its use has been touted as being instrumental in the "Arab Spring" and the consequent changes, if not transformation. I would, however, be cautious in attributing social media as a causal factor for the waves of political changes and upheavals in the Middle East and North Africa.[4] Nonetheless, the impact of ICT is noted, particularly as the 'fuel' to catalyse and organise actions, and to focus and propagate collective dissent and commiseration.

Today, each one of us has ICT capability in our hands. Social media provides an avenue for us to see and interpret the world through the thoughts, audio and video recordings of others whom we may not know. Social media also enables us to have an insight into the subaltern views on what is happening in Singapore and around the world. Citizen journalism has been touted as a manifestation of social media's empowering ability to challenge established socio-political, cultural and economic hierarchies and orthodoxies. It portends the ability to challenge authority and hierarchies of various kinds.

Promises and Perils: The Dark Side of Web 2.0

Even as we welcome the democratising elements and other positive aspects of Web 2.0, we should be mindful of its dark side as well. Information and communication technology can and has been used by different groups of people for illicit, illegal, and illiberal purposes, including violent extremists, criminal cartels, sexual predators, and dictatorial governments. And we are aware of how Web 2.0 can operate as a tool of disruption, discord and destruction: ranging from being a purveyor of bigotry stoking the cauldron of fear, to being an omnibus vehicle for the propagation of falsehoods, to being a convenient propagator of violent extremist ideas. In short, there is a patent need to recognise that, like many things in our human existence, there is a good side, and a bad side. We will have to take the good and the bad, and optimize the positives while managing the negatives as best as we can.

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[4] See, for example, Jon B. Alterman, "The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 34(4) (Fall 2011), pp. 103-116.

One more point worth noting: That even with Web 2.0's hyper-connectedness and its ubiquity, we should consider if Web 2.0 actually engenders a healthy respect for introspection. While it enables us to be more connected, Web 2.0 does not necessarily mean that we are communicating better. It may give rise to the appearance of more and better communication. But does it? Thus, even as Web 2.0 becomes an integral part of our lives, there is a need for careful consideration of the form and substance of communication. What matters is not just what we communicate but how we are communicating. This highlights the paradox of communication in Web 2.0: That we can be "in touch" and yet be "out of touch" at the same time.

Web 2.0 and its successors will always be ahead of the law. Technological advancements progress with quantum leaps while legal knowledge and measures to manage the changes will invariably lag behind. As such, while the law can be mobilised to regulate cyberspace, it is important to recognise that the law also has its inherent limitations. Its powers of pre-emption are limited. For example, the law is already trying to keep up not only with the technological developments in Web 2.0 but also with how people will use and misuse existing digital technology. This is inevitable given the speed of change in the technological realm, and the careful consideration that needs to go into implementing judicious regulation and appropriate laws. Regulating is not just a science but an art as well.

While draconian legislation may be apt in the event of an egregious attack sought to sow social discord and contain the real and present danger, such legislation does not assist society in the building and strengthening of the social fabric in calmer times. Coercive legislation does not have the "nurturing" and socializing element that can build social ties and enhance social capital while strengthening social resilience. Put simply, any government can legislate against bigotry but no government can legislate harmony.

In the Singapore context, the government believes in the utility and necessity of coercive legislation. Such legislation acts as a deterrent and also as a tool to deal with action that undermines public order and national security, whether it is in the online world or the offline world. However, the online world's signature is growing as more people converge in the online world. As Deputy Prime Minister, Coordinating Minister for National Security, and Home Affairs Minister Teo Chee Hean put it recently:

> "The new variable in the racial and religious field is cyberspace. The Internet allows irresponsible, offensive and at times seditious comments about other races and religions to be made under the cloak of anonymity. Whether intended as a deliberate attack against another community or not, the end result is equally dangerous. The Internet enables these dangerous remarks to go viral very quickly. This can potentially spiral out of control and rapidly damage inter-communal relations. If transposed into action in the physical world, the consequences can be dire."[5]

The primacy of a hard law approach is that it empowers the state and policy-makers with the power to control and define the "problem" at hand. The coercive powers of hard law are useful in clamping down real and present dangers.[6] However, they also impose severe costs and unintended consequences. Given that the nature of the online threat is both existential and ideational, the structural power of hard law is often not only reactionary but also grossly inadequate as a means of pre-emptive, adaptive socialisation

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[5] Speech by Deputy Prime Minister, Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs, Mr Teo Chee Hean, at the Internal Security Department Heritage Centre 10th Anniversary, 20 March 2012.

[6] Hard law refers to legally binding obligations that are precise (or can be made precise through adjudication or the issuance of detailed regulations) and which delegate authority for interpreting and implementing the law.

and social learning prior to, during, and after an episode of bad speech. There is growing recognition that legislation alone is insufficient to deal with the deleterious effects of cyber-bigotry, or bigotry for that matter. Indeed, governments can never eliminate bigotry and bad speech.

Freedom to Post: Not a Free for All

Race, religion and language remain sensitive topics in Singapore notwithstanding the progress made in nation-building since 1965. A recent iteration of the Government's perspective is: "In our multi-racial, multi-religious, secular society, race and religion will continue to be salient and significant issues that have the potential to be divisive, even explosive".[7] Freedom of speech, assembly and association is provided for under Article 14 of the Singapore Constitution but this constitutional freedom is not an unbridled one. With regard to the restrictions on freedom of speech in Singapore, the salient themes and concerns of race and religion are pervasive. Some might regard the restrictions as a knee-jerk over-reaction to an apparent societal fault-line. However, it is worth bearing in mind that bigotry is not confined to any particular group. Bigotry does not discriminate in terms of one's relative susceptibility.

There are several key laws that provide a variety of options as part of the enforcement arsenal for dealing with individuals and groups in the religious realm that pose a public order and/or national security threat. These laws include the Internal Security Act, the Penal Code, the Sedition Act, the Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act, and other legislation. Under the Sedition Act, it is an offence, *inter alia*, "to promote feelings of ill-will and hostility between different races or classes of the population of Singapore".

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[7] Speech by Deputy Prime Minister, Coordinating Minister for National Security and Minister for Home Affairs, Mr Teo Chee Hean, at the Internal Security Department Heritage Centre 10th Anniversary, 20 March 2012.

In 2005, three bloggers were convicted under the Sedition Act for posting web-blog comments that were anti-Muslim.[8] In 2009, a couple was found guilty under the Sedition Act for the random distribution of religious tracts, which were "seditious and objectionable to Muslims". The District Court noted that the "religious fervor to spread the faith, in our society, must be constrained by sensitivity, tolerance and mutual respect for another's faith and religious beliefs". It found that the acts of the couple demonstrated an "intolerance, insensitivity and ignorance of delicate issues concerning race and religion in our multi-racial and multi-religious society".[9]

Where more draconian measures are needed, the government can resort to "pre-emptive" powers under the Internal Security Act (ISA), which was originally enacted by the colonial government to deal with the communist insurgency in British Malaya after the Second World War. The ISA allows for preventive detention for renewable two-year periods where "it is necessary to do so" to prevent a person from acting in any manner prejudicial to Singapore's security and the maintenance of public order or essential services. The ISA has been applied to persons deemed to be agitating racial and religious discord.

Where racial and religious threats to national security matters are concerned, there is judicial support for a pre-emptive or precautionary approach:

> In my view,… [the] submission that it must be shown that there was a clear and immediate danger was misplaced for one simple reason. It cannot be said that beliefs, especially those propagated in the name of "religion", should not be put to a stop until such a

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[8] *Public Prosecutor v Benjamin Koh Song Huat* [2005] SGDC 272 (District Court), *Public Prosecutor v Lim Yew Nicholas* [2005] SGDC 272 (District Court), and *Public Prosecutor v Gan Huai Shi* [2005] (District Court).

[9] *PP v Ong Kian Cheong & Another* [2009] SGDC 163 at para 82.

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scenario exists. If not, it would in all probability be too late as the damage sought to be prevented would have transpired. In my opinion, any administration which perceives the possibility of trouble over religious beliefs and yet prefers to wait until trouble is just about to break out before taking action must be not only pathetically naïve but also grossly incompetent.[10]

The coercive legislative framework empowers the government with a variety of measures to counter threats to public order and national security. The legislative arsenal enables calibrated measures depending on the nature and immediacy of the threat posed. Despite the government's preparedness to use the various enforcement options afforded to it, the threat posed by bad speech or hate speech has given grounds for serious reconsideration of the effectiveness of such hard law measures. Legislation alone cannot deal with all aspects of radicalism, bigotry, and nihilism. This is particularly so when the battle is not about law enforcement but one that is fundamentally concerned with winning the hearts and minds of people on how to deal with bigotry.

Can We Regulate Web 2.0 Bigotry?

Laws tend to enable us to deal with irresponsible conduct after it has taken place. In the case of social media, this would be after someone has posted something. It would be difficult to "pre-empt" social media postings unless we know what someone is going to post. But the panoply of laws does not help us answer the question of what to do about online bigotry and bad speech online.

One approach is to ignore the bigoted posting. This can be described as the "less said the better" approach. But silence in this case would not be golden. At the other end of the spectrum is the almost knee-jerk

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[10] *Chan Hiang Leng Colin v PP* [1994] 3 SLR 662 at 683 per Chief Justice Yong Pung How.

response of reporting the matter to the police or the relevant authorities. This approach seeks to invoke the law and to throw the rulebook at the transgressor. The state is looked upon as the arbiter or, more accurately, the state is called upon to rein in and punish the irresponsible person. In between is the approach that entails the group that was maligned engaging in robust dialogue with the aim of clarifying the misconceptions and tackling the ignorance as well as debunking the stereotypes and misconceptions. In some respects, the intended audience is society at large rather than the irresponsible social media user, especially if the subject-matter of the irresponsible speech suggests common or widespread ignorance and misunderstanding. This provides an opportunity to clarify, to inform, and to enlighten.

To be sure, there is no perfect approach. Neither should we delude ourselves into taking a one-size-fits-all approach. As is always the case, context matters. A posting that is highly inflammatory and poses a significant threat may have to be dealt with decisively by law. Even then, there is still the necessary action to deal with the half-truths, falsehoods, stereotypes, and prejudice. In such situations, sustained engagement is called for even though the process of engagement can be emotionally very painful and very tiring. The mindset that I am advocating here is that, ultimately, the only way to deal with bad speech is to put out more good speech and take the bad speech by its horns. I am talking about engaging with reason, facts and conviction, rather than confrontation. However, I also urge a moderation of expectations since social media itself is not conducive to the dialoguing and engagement that I envisage.

The transient nature of issues on social media and the "echo chamber" effect[11] of social media pose challenges in this regard. It is

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[11] See Cass Sunstein, *Republic.com 2.0* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009).

important and urgent to consider for ourselves the questions that American legal scholar Cass Sunstein asks of technology's effects on public discourse:

- What happens to democracy and free speech if people listen and speak only to the like-minded when they use the Internet?
- What is the impact if citizens narrowly filter the information they receive?

Cass Sunstein writes of "information cocoons" and "echo chambers", describing a situation in which people avoid the news and opinions that they do not want to hear. Social media users tend to gravitate towards blog sites, websites and the like where they find that their views are validated and reinforced.

We come again to the prospect, relevance and necessity of self-regulation. Self-regulation will play an increasingly important role in dealing with online bigotry. But we have to be realistic. Determined bigots will not take leave of their prejudices against, and perhaps even hatred of, a targeted group. Furthermore, cyberspace is sprawling; more importantly, it is leaderless and therefore lacks clear reporting lines and lines of authority. It can be overwhelmingly partisan as well. Online engagement will possess an element of futility because the engagement process can be likened to shadow boxing. Clearly, social media is not benign, but let's try to harness its strengths while managing the downsides. As much as the powers-that-be can try to deal with bad speech, how the population at large or the group being maligned responds is also equally important.

Netizens would like to believe that they constitute "an imagined community", to use the term popularised by Benedict Anderson.[12] This sense

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[12] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991). Anderson describes a nation as an "imagined community" – it is "imagined because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion".

of being a community is not surprising since conscientious and proud users of social media often tend to distinguish themselves from mainstream media users. Social media tools like Facebook and Twitter may be effective in increasing participation, but they also lessen the level of motivation that participation requires. As Malcolm Gladwell reminds us:

> Facebook and the like are tools for building *networks*, which are the opposite, in structure and character, of hierarchies. Unlike hierarchies, with their rules and procedures, networks aren't controlled by a single central authority. Decisions are made through consensus, and the ties that bind people to the group are loose.
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> This structure makes networks enormously resilient and adaptable in low-risk situations. Wikipedia is a perfect example. It doesn't have an editor, sitting in New York, who directs and corrects each entry. The effort of putting together each entry is self-organised. If every entry in Wikipedia were to be erased tomorrow, the content would swiftly be restored, because that's what happens when a network of thousands spontaneously devote their time to a task.[13]

For Gladwell, his touchstone is that "weak ties seldom lead to high-risk activism". Gladwell elaborates that, "Social networks are effective at increasing *participation*—by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires. … In other words, Facebook activism succeeds not by motivating people to make a real sacrifice but by motivating them to do the things that people do when they are not motivated enough to make a real sacrifice". This

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[13] Malcolm Gladwell, "Small Change: Why the Revolution Will Not be Tweeted," *The New Yorker*, 4 October 2010; available at http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/10/04/101004fa_fact_gladwell?currentPage=all.

can be disconcerting, especially where social media activity and activism is not accompanied by social responsibility.

Netizens need to go beyond being armchair participants to engaging in real (but not necessarily high-stakes) action. While Web 2.0 lowers the barriers of entry to receiving and sending content, it is not at all clear that the inherent nature of Web 2.0 lends itself to effective self-regulation. Hence, besides the inadequacy of the law in regulating online conduct (as well online action triggering action in the physical world), netizens' virtual ties with each other may not be substantive and meaningful enough for self-regulation to operate effectively and efficiently.

Despite the pessimistic scenario painted, regulation — top-down and community self-regulation — is needed. Beyond laws, community norms, values, and social consensus are needed to regulate cyberspace so that its full potential can be harnessed without the adverse effects extracting too high a societal cost. Therefore, it is more accurate to speak of regulating conduct in cyberspace rather than regulating cyberspace. The use of a community-driven code of conduct has been put forth in Singapore. In March 2012, Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, the Minister of Information, Communication and the Arts noted in Parliament that:

> The Internet is very much a public space, and the community is best placed to determine what online behaviour is acceptable and what is not. … Just as we have social norms to guide our interaction in the physical world, there should also be similar norms to guide our online interaction and behaviour.[14]

In regulating conduct in cyberspace, the approach must be to

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[14] Response by Dr Yaacob Ibrahim at the Committee of Supply Debate 2012 on enabling a safe and enriching online experience, 2 March 2012; available at <http://app.mica.gov.sg/Default.aspx?tabid=79&ctl=Details&mid=540&ItemID=1374>.

ensure that the "generativity" of Web 2.0 is unaffected.[15] It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss regulatory methods vis-à-vis online conduct but regulating anonymity has to be seriously considered as one way of working towards responsible online conduct. There is no reason why our treatment of online anonymity should be radically different from offline anonymity. After all, it is the offline world that has to bear the brunt of the impact of irresponsible online conduct.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that Web 2.0 enables us to communicate *and* to miscommunicate. The key question is not so much what we communicate but rather how we communicate. (Although, with regards to bigoted speech, "what" is being communicated is often the source of the problem). The involvement of technology will always outpace the law – this happens in the area of medical science and it's happening with social media and information technology. In many ways, it is the law that will always have to play catch up.

Social media enables communities to connect: not only to create content but also to send content. The latter enabling function of social media is not given enough attention. As Alterman observes, when people send content, they transform themselves from being "observers of activism to activists themselves with a greater stake as leaders, not just followers …".[16] What he does not mention is the reality that such activists can do good, and they can do bad as well – deliberately or otherwise. It is one thing to let the "fingers do the talking" (communicate), but another thing altogether if you are also involved, and engaging other people for a particular cause. In the former, there is often no real sacrifice made – put bluntly, it's literally talk only. In the

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[15] Jonathan Zittrain describes 'generativity' of the Internet as "a system's capacity to produce unanticipated change through unfiltered contributions from broad and varied audiences". See Zittrain, *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop It* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008), p. 70.

[16] Jon B. Alterman, "The Revolution Will Not Be Tweeted," *The Washington Quarterly*, vol. 34(4) (Fall 2011), pp. 103-116 at p. 104.

latter, there is ownership of the cause or activity, there is action beyond the keyboard with the commitment and investment of time, effort, and belief.

The challenge in multi-racial societies like Singapore is how to ensure that bad speech is kept to a minimum, and when there is bad speech, how do we ensure that it does not divide us. The crux of the matter is how we go about instilling a sense of social responsibility. Too often, the discussion about speech, even in cyberspace, is expressed in the language of rights. But rights have little meaning if no one has the responsibility of protecting those rights. So rights have to come with responsibilities. To assert one's rights also entails the fundamental requirement of exercising those rights responsibly.

Given that Singapore is a multi-religious society, the overarching philosophy that underpins the legal and policy thrust in issues that relate to multiculturalism must be encapsulated in the staunch belief that freedom – be it freedom of speech or freedom of religion – intimately requires a thoughtful and calibrated intersection of rights, regulation, and responsibility. This "3R" approach may well be the best approach to tackling bad speech on social media. As bad speech will always be with us, the problem as such is not bigotry *per se* but the mindless knee-jerk reactions to it or the lack of a meaningful response to the provocations. Governments cannot, on their own, defeat bigotry. It is the people who will determine whether bigotry will prevail and destroy what we have.

Racial and Religious Offence:
Why Censorship Doesn't Cut It

Associate Professor Dr Cherian George

The Internet has provided a public platform for the best of human characteristics to be displayed, but also for the worst. We don't know whether the Internet makes things worse by encouraging anti-social speech, or whether it just publicizes what used to be said in private. What is clear is that, in the past, gatekeepers of the mainstream media – newspaper editors and broadcast news producers – acted as filters to make sure that any offensive speech from the ground could not reach the wider public. The Internet bypasses these gatekeepers, which means that the journey from thought to private utterance to public statement is almost instant.

No matter how hard we work at developing media literacy, we should not expect to be rid of all racially offensive speech online. There are two broad ways to respond to these breaches. We can reach out horizontally and together with our fellow citizens repair the damage by persuading others to reject harmful ideas. Or, we can reach up vertically to government, getting the authorities to act against irresponsible speech by using the law. The advantage of the latter is that it seems more efficient, punishing those who cross the line of acceptability and violate social norms, and deterring others from doing the same. The horizontal approach works through persuasion rather than the law, so it is slower and not foolproof.

All societies use a mix of approaches to address offensive speech. In international law – at the European Court of Human Rights and in other jurisdictions – there is a growing feeling that legal solutions should really be a last resort and only used for the most extreme speech – speech that incites violence in a very direct way, or that is part of a campaign that violates the rights of minorities to live free of discrimination. In contrast, simply insulting and offending others, even if feelings are very hurt, is not seen as something

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that should invite a legal response. Using the law to protect feelings is too great an encroachment on freedom of speech.

Singapore draws the line differently. Our laws are written very broadly, such that any sort of offence, even if it does not threaten imminent violence, is seen as deserving of strict regulation. This probably reflects a very strong social consensus that race and religion should be handled delicately. So, we tend to rely on strong government. The state protects racial and religious sensibilities from offence, using censorship when there is a danger of words and actions causing hurt.

Thus, for several years now, we have seen many examples of offensive online speech prompting police investigations. In 2005, three young bloggers were convicted under the Sedition Act for racist comments. There have been other cases since then where the police have been called in to investigate offensive speech.

These cases are striking in two ways. First, it is interesting that in almost all cases, state action was instigated by complaints from members of the public. This is quite unlike political censorship, where action is initiated by the government, often with great resistance and opposition from netizens. In a string of cases involving racial and religious offence, however, it is the netizens who tend to demand action, sometimes acting like a lynch mob.

Second, it is striking that in many cases, the offensive messages were spread further by those reporting the offence. In one case late last year, a blogger posted a religiously offensive image on his own Facebook wall to warn others that this image was making the rounds. One of his so-called friends took offence and circulated it more widely on the Internet in addition to making a police report. In the case involving a Christian pastor's offensive sermon, most Singaporeans who have seen the video did not see it on the church website where the video was originally found, but via Hardware Zone, one of Singapore's most popular forums. It was put there not by the pastor

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himself or his church members, but by someone who wanted action taken against the pastor.

What is the justification for strong police action against any form of speech? Why do we sometimes feel that it may not be enough to counter bad speech with good speech in free and open debate, and that we must instead use the law to stop the bad speech? Surely, it must be because we think the bad speech is so dangerous that it can cause immediate harm. Or, it's because we don't trust the public to respond rationally, so we don't know if good speech would indeed triumph in open debate. Usually, if we call in the authorities, it must be because we have a mental picture of offensive speech being like lighting a match in a combustible atmosphere. It is dangerous and there's no time to debate the merits of that match – we just have to put it out.

The irony of most of the cases that we have seen in the past few years is that the people demanding government action – as if the offensive words were explosive – were also those who helped to spread them. It was as if they were helping to spread a fire while calling for the fire brigade.

Unless these complainants were just plain irrational or irresponsible, which I do not think they were, their conduct must mean that they did not actually believe that the expression was really that dangerous, in the sense of prompting violence through reprisal attacks or riots. In reposting the offensive words or pictures, they showed that they actually trusted the public enough to respond sympathetically. They had faith that enough people would add their voices to the outrage that they themselves felt when they saw the offensive images or videos or words. And they were right: in every case, when these offensive messages were publicised, the overwhelming sentiment was that these messages were wrong, were anti-Singaporean. People who may have shared those thoughts were quickly reminded that they were not in line with Singaporean norms. The public debate reinforced our multi-racial and multi-religious foundations.

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This then raises the question: Why the need to involve the police at all? If Singaporeans are grown-up enough to defend their society against offensive speech, why have calls for prosecution and censorship become the automatic response? I wonder if this is an example of the well-known habit of unthinkingly relying on government to solve all our problems even when, with a little bit of effort, grassroots action could do the job.

One problem with the culture of expecting police action whenever we feel insulted or offended is that this mechanism can be overused and abused. Those most likely to complain against any expression are the least tolerant members of each religious or ethnic community. Very quickly, therefore, the most dogmatic and extreme spokesmen set the tone for the rest of society.

Yes, we need to beware of offensive speech that is part of a deliberate campaign of hate-mongering. But let us not be naïve. It is not just giving offence, but also taking offence, that can be used as part of a political game. Usually, what looks like spontaneous and visceral reactions to offensive speech – angry demonstrations and so on – are orchestrated by activists who spot a political advantage in an outpouring of anger. In Singapore, I doubt that every netizen who demanded action against this or that offensive message was purely driven by concern for Singapore's multiracial fabric. I am quite sure that in some cases, they simply saw the opportunity for some kind of political advantage against individuals or groups that they have an ongoing political feud with.

There is also overwhelming evidence internationally that the effect of outlawing blasphemy – which many well-meaning Singaporeans might intuitively feel is a good idea – backfires by allowing religious majorities to persecute religious minorities. Since offensiveness is subjective, it is possible for the dominant group to claim that its beliefs are being blasphemed by the peaceful religious expressions of a minority group. It can thus use the law to marginalise religious minorities. We already see this in Malaysia. In

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Singapore, it should not be up to the state to decide which religious beliefs or schools of thought within a religion deserve legal protection. Possible victims of such a move might include Singapore's small Shia Muslim minority, which has long felt marginalised by the dominant Sunni school.

Another problem with this vertical approach, of reaching up to higher authorities, is that it perpetuates a dependency on government and does not do much for building horizontal trust, that is, trust between citizens. Such trust is ultimately the best defence in a world where we will never be able to control 100% of the messages 100% of the time, even if government regulators were given more powers.

Horizontal trust is important, because that is what helps us put things in perspective when we face provocations. Most offensive messages are not, by themselves, threatening. They are like a lighted match. Whether there is an explosion depends on the context. It is mistrust that acts like an accelerant, like combustible gas in a confined space. Increasingly, we cannot control the text – the match. But we can influence the context. By building horizontal trust, our society will become more resilient against the inevitable frictions and frustrations of living among people of different cultures.

I believe that in many cases, Singaporeans make police reports when they encounter offensive speech not necessarily because they want the speaker to be punished, but because they want a strong public signal to reaffirm our multi-racial and multi-religious principles. They want reassurance. They want to bring the weight of moderate public opinion to bear on a dispute, plus perhaps get a clear signal from the authorities as to what constitutes acceptable speech. If so, why not just demand such statements instead of legal action? Even better, why not mobilise and organise civil society against such breaches?

The next time people encounter racist or religiously offensive speech, it would be nice to see swift responses from credible and respected

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civil society groups, Members of Parliament, and other ordinary citizens. If the speaker does not get the message, organise boycotts, for example, and give him or her the clear message that our society isn't going to take such offence lying down. The more we can respond ourselves through open debate and grassroots action, without the need to ask law and order to step in, the stronger our society will be.

Malay Youth, Subcultures and Multimedia

Assistant Professor Dr Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir

In this paper, I will examine the relationship between Malay youth and multiculturalism in Singapore through the lenses of two subcultures – hip hop and youth gangs. Youth subculture is thus deployed as an entry point to explore Malay youth consumption of the social media. Before I begin, I would like to briefly introduce a new subfield that is being used widely in terms of business and market research, and is now being developed in the social sciences. It is called *"netnography"* – a term derived from the words "Internet" and "ethnography". Using this approach, one can analyse symbolisms and meanings that the youth attach to their social actions and how they affect social relations as manifested in youthful performance, sociability, and the exchange of information in cyberspace (del Fresno, 2011). We can also see and determine, for example the consumption dependence of online consumer groups (Kozinets, 2010). Anonymity and the lack of ownership are some obstacles for researchers who are interested in employing netnography as a research method. However, rather than circumvent the relevance of new media which presents itself as a valuable resource of ethnographic data, this method of inquiry has become an increasingly influential component of a mixed methods approach to studying youth. For example, researchers combine the more conventional approaches, such as conducting interviews and surveys, with observations they decipher from the Internet.

Youth in the Digital Age

It will be instructive at this juncture to present some statistics pertaining to consumption of the Internet in Singapore. In 2007, the Infocomm Development Authority of Singapore revealed that 74% of Singaporean households had access to the Internet. User penetration was highest among youths from the ages of 15 to 24 years old at 98%; 78% used the Internet at home at least once a day. A *Straits Times* survey conducted in 2008 showed that 94% of youths maintained a profile on at least one social networking

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website, and 16% were into blogging. Given the numbers, no one can argue the centrality of the new media in the everyday life of this particular social group.

Hip-Hop and Malay Youth

The first subculture that this paper explores is hip-hop culture. Hip hop has a strong presence among Singapore Malay youth. This is a sentiment echoed by a popular hip-hop group called *Triple Noize*, winners of a national talent time show held in 2002.

> *"Ah, dats because 80% of the hip-hop supporters are from the Malay community!! Also, got one time kiter ader (when we) perform kat(at) somewhere in Geylang then most of the mackik2 (Malay aunties) there got excited lah! They are soo supporting & that minute we know that they are acherly genuine supporters..."*

The above quote is based on an interview carried in a popular website called anakmelayu.com. Besides cutting albums in Malay, various initiatives have been mooted to cater to the Malay majority hip-hop market, one of which is *Beats Society*. It is an organisation founded by Imran Ajmain to promote a new breed of hip-hop artistes. The organization was set up in 2004 to raise the awareness of hip-hop here. Imran explained that the "majority of hip-hop listeners happen to come from the Malay population".

Meritocracy?

The hugely popular *Singapore Idol* singing competition for youths aged 16 to 28 years old, which is a spin off from its British counterpart, *Pop Idol*, has thrown up a few surprises. Despite making up only about 17% of the population, all three Singapore Idols to date are Malay Muslim youths: Taufik Batisah (2004 with 62% of the votes), Hady Mirza (2006 with 70% of the votes) and Sezairi Sezali (2009, percentage win withheld). In 2007, a similar singing competition was held in Singapore for those aged 25 to 65 years old called *Live the Dream*. Again, the winners for both the solo and group categories were Malay Muslim males and they were voted through Short

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Message Service (SMS). Many of these individuals pride themselves on a hip-hop background with the first *Singapore Idol* heading a local hip-hop group of his own.

> *"You look at Singapore Idol Taufik and Sylvester, a year ago no one knew them but they had talent, they had grit, they won Singaporeans' hearts. Taufik's mother is a cleaner and was not able to attend many of his performances because she was busy and worked very long hours, but from that background with his ability and talent, Singaporeans recognized it, and you can organise your friends to vote for your favourite but in the end, I think, the right man won. So Singapore must be a land of opportunity for all of us."*
>
> *Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, December 5, 2004*

Hence, looking at state rhetoric of the meritocratic nature of the competitions, firstly, it can be postulated that these Idol results demonstrate a generational paradigm shift in that the youth are increasingly "colour blind" and look beyond the social categories of religion and ethnicity when judging others. On the other hand, there are also those who argue that the success of the Malay boys symbolizes the "sacrifice" and enhanced striving of the community in trying to create role models who are deemed acceptable in mainstream Singapore society.

> *Why do you think Malay families spent hundreds of dollars voting for two Malay boys in the Singapore Idol singing contest? And do you know that Malays who voted for other competitors were frowned upon by the community?*
>
> Nur Dianah, *Straits Times*, August 10, 2008

The production of hip-hop in Singapore is more popularly constructed from a selective social problem perspective, replenishing the rhetoric of the "Malay Problem" (Kamaludeen, 2007). It does not engage in larger issues of citizenship rights, inter-ethnic dynamics and state-society relations as reminiscent in critical hip-hop music elsewhere. You can see this if you take a look at the songs of arguably the most popular Malay hip-hop

group in Singapore, Ahli Fiqir, which in Malay means the expert thinkers. For example, the song *Samseng* mainly focuses on the backwardness of the Malay race, specifically criticizing Malay youth who are embroiled in gang life. Besides 'gangsterism', the group also made references to the longstanding drug problems in the community, and blamed deviants for giving the community a bad name. Also, there are attempts to use hip-hop culture as a rehabilitation strategy to tackle social problems involving "at risk youth" and to address "Muslim Terrorism" by using hip-hop as counter-terrorism strategy.

There is a disjuncture between the sanitised and commercialised consumption of hip-hop that we see and hear in mainstream media and the lived reality of Malay youth hip-hop practitioners on the ground who are attempting to reconcile their seemingly colliding local and global identities. Mattar (2003) observes that the Internet allows Malay youth consuming hip-hop culture to traverse national and ethnic boundaries by mixing their local identity and adopting a global identity, for example through the deployment of Ebonics (Black language), the East Coast-West Coast antagonism, etc. Hence, we can see that those who are intent on practicing a more "authentic" form of hip-hop culture are turning to the virtual world to exercise their identity.

Tatooing and Malay Youth in Gangs

In 2007, Malay Muslim leaders expressed concern about a disturbing trend among young Muslims in the community. Malay youth were seen to be turning to 'gangsterism' in disproportional numbers and in some areas they were thought to have replaced the dominant Chinese gangs. One study showed that a significant 34% of juvenile rioters were Malay, even though Malays only make up 15% of the Singaporean population. It also showed that, when placed in Singapore's demographic profile, relatively more Malays (24%) were joining youth gangs.

The constraints of this paper do not allow me to broach this aspect of youth culture in great detail, so I just want to focus on their tattooing practices within the context of gang culture. As you can see of the pictures

posted in the social media, these tattoos are often adorned with a certain degree of pride. Tattooing is often an important aspect of Chinese gang membership in the ambiguous cultural context of a multiracial society. We can approach this from a theological point of view and tell the Muslim youth gang members that tattooing is not permissible in Islam through evidence from the Quran and hadith. And we will be naïve to think that the youths in these groups do not know these arguments. Youths are exposed to many discourses, with religion being just one of them. With many Muslim youths discovering a youthful, popular and chic "Islam" that is a potent mix of Muslim themes and global consumer culture, it has become increasingly plausible to reconcile a formal rejection of tattooing as *haram* (forbidden) as well as an implicit acceptance of tattooing as another aspect of popular youth culture.

The embodiment of Chinese tattoos constitutes a sacrifice that the Muslim youth undergo to bring about a greater sense of solidarity and coherence with dominant members of the Chinese gangs. In addition, this practice blurs the dividing of racial categories along the lines of Chinese/Malay/Indian/Others that is prevalent in Singapore, because exhibiting tattoos with a foreign or western design is often done with some degree of pride. Clifton Sanders (1988:395) argued that "the tattoo is both an indication of disaffiliation from conventional society and a symbolic affirmation of personal identity". In this sense, tattoos are used to establish a new communal affiliation for the individual. In rebelling against the status quo, the body is used as a site to indicate to the community that a change in social status has taken place.

In the case of Singapore Muslim youths in Chinese gangs, a transformation of their identity does not automatically lead to an enhancement of their social status. Ironically, these tattoos can also be interpreted as signs of subservience and a pledge of allegiance to an alternative social order. This situates the Malay gang members in a double bind. The "status frustration" experienced by these members extends into the illegitimate sphere. On the one hand, exclusively Malay gangs such as *Orang*

Melayu Enter Gangster Area (OMEGA) have been clamped down on by the state and deemed by the authorities as no longer operational. On the other hand, these youths are still likely to experience social immobility if they participate in Chinese gangs. Malay youth also acquire tattoos to claim a sense of belonging to Chinese gangs. Among these young men, it is common to see "Chinese" motifs and inscriptions such as dragons and Chinese poetry tattooed on their bodies. Some have even gone through initiation rites that involved paying homage to Chinese deities.

In an attempt to reconcile both a Muslim identity and a subscription to a Chinese gang, an innovative Arabic inscription of the numerals *salakau* ("369" in Hokkien) have also been posted on YouTube as part of a tribute to the gang (John, 2007). On the other end of the spectrum is the all-Malay gang OMEGA. Members of OMEGA see themselves as champions of Malay and Muslim rights (Nafis, 2008). The OMEGA gang members are marked with tattoos on their arms, usually of the Greek letter omega, and they refer to each other as "*jam tangan*," which means "wrist watch" in Malay. The cultural appropriation is clear here. A prestigious symbol of an elite consumer society, an expensive watch, has been ironically chosen as the gang's code name. The Swiss symbol connoting high culture is thus inverted to refer to marginalized members of an illegitimate sphere.

Here, I have pulled out from YouTube two videos from Singapore's first and second Singapore Idols with the greatest number of views, and I have placed them side by side with the contributions from less visible Malay youth gang members. All four videos were posted between 2007 and 2008. The popularity of these videos begs the question: *Who are the Malay Youth Idols*? Are they these mainstream state-sanctioned community-approved individuals on the left, or are they those invisible peripheral individuals who exist at the margins of society? Either way, whatever your response to this question, it is essential that more has to be done to understand the social realities of the Malay Youth. Looking at Malay youths, the practice of subcultures, and the use of social media presents us with an opportunity to do this.

Connecting Virtual Voices

Mr Zaqy Mohamad, MP

It is certainly interesting to talk about the social media, and about how it connects the virtual voices of the Malay/Muslims to the larger Singapore community. The Malay youth, as we have seen, make use of the social media to express a sub-culture which they have adopted as their identity. Also, having engaged with the community, I realize that it is not only the youth who are making social media useful in expressing themselves, but also the middle-aged group, those in their 40s and 50s. The latter group is also active on the Internet, using it as a platform to express their grievances, their views on political and social developments, and their reactions to government policies that affect their everyday lives as Singaporeans.

Singaporeans are politically intense in terms of what they have to say. But only now does information flow more freely and there is a high volume of social media usage. There are groups and individuals coming together and voicing their opinions. One thing is clear: there is a sense of rationality among Singaporeans, channeled through the social media.

I use the online space as a *"sentiments platform,"* an indicator like the stock market. The sentiments of netizens on issues is an indicator of public sentiment – whether their views are based on sound fundamentals or otherwise. That is why I use the online space as a means to sense the views and opinions of the netizens, and to find out where and how I can reach out to them and address their concerns.

In Parliament, there were times when I raised issues of the Malay/Muslim community, issues that were raised on the Internet. It is

interesting that after three to four days of being raised online, the discussions on these issues just die off. The discussions do not really follow through, unlike the issues posted by the other communities which tend to go viral. Therefore, there is no viral information transmission when an issue is confined particularly to the Malay/Muslim community, and is not an issue of national interest.

On a lighter note, the pervasiveness of online media cannot be ignored. Much of the mainstream news is taken from the online media. The rate of usage of online media is growing and netizens in Singapore are educated. Therefore, the news in terms of information delivery is more efficient, although very few users check whether the information is right or wrong.

As a Member of Parliament, I have wondered whether posting online on policy issues relating to housing, transportation, education and other social concerns is effective in terms of policy engagement. The challenge today is the expectation that the Government should reach out and discuss policies using social media. It is very difficult to discuss policy concerns in this way. We have evolved in terms of online connectivity, but the medium may not be ideal in communicating and exchanging ideas, especially for complex policies where you need to get into depth to explain rationale, exceptions, challenges in implementation, etc. Personally, I have found it better to engage offline, in more personal, face-to-face exchanges.

Certainly, there is an online space for engagement and sharing, and to look for ways to bring the community together. I urge the Malay/Muslim community to look for ways to use this online connectivity to connect aspirations of the Malay/Muslims. Let us collectively think of ways in which the Malay/Muslim community can be actively involved with policy issues and

with issues that will decide the structure of government policies. It is time for the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP) and its subsidiary, the Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA) and other organisations to find ways to channel online views back to the public, and find ways to harness personalities online to work for the community.

The use of social media is not just to defend our Malay/Muslim community from irresponsible postings against us, but to bring involvement to certain causes and bring the community together.

Questions, Answers and Comments

The following questions, answers and comments are compiled from the Question and Answer session of CIR 2012 seminar moderated by Mr Mohd Nizam Ismail, Chairman of RIMA.

Mohd Nizam Ismail:

We've had a very interesting discourse. Let me give you some of the most important themes from our panelists. Firstly, the laws are insufficient to deal with the kinds of issues on the Internet; the other point from Prof Eugene Tan was that bad speech will remain. Prof Cherian George discussed what we can do to chase away bad speech, and he used the analogy of firefighters, and how we should look to ourselves horizontally and become citizen firefighters, and not look for state intervention. Dr Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir's paper was about the issue of Malay identity in virtual space, and how our Malay youth use and adopt different subcultures, whether it is hip-hop or gangsterism. Also, from Mr Zaqy Mohamad's perspective, the Internet is used to cater to sentiments, and offers an opportunity to engage groups in cyber space. We shall refocus our minds on the issue of multiculturalism on the Internet, going back to Mr Azmoon Ahmad's point that, unfortunately, there are instances where the Internet is used irresponsibly. We can discuss these points in the Question and Answer Session.

Participant:

Do you think that a more controlling Government would actually allow non-restricted social media? Because it serves a practical purpose, and aside from what Prof Eugene Tan pointed out about the community of netizens, going online is politically significant. How do you look at it?

Eugene KB Tan:

Ultimately, the online community affects and is affected by national and social issues. Mr Zaqy Mohamad himself uses social media as an indicator of public sentiment on issues and concerns of the day. The operative word is "indicator". On regulation, the combination of top-down and bottom-up regulation is needed. More importantly, where self-regulation is concerned, dialogue, confidence and consensus-building are needed to build bridges in more ways than one.

Zaqy Mohamad:

Today, there are many online citizen groups. The Government could do more to understand the offline sentiment. The Government needs to engage and be open. There are a lot of details of policies, and it is still people to people.

Participant:

My question is with regards to the role of social media in terms of minority groups. Coming from a Shia background, sometimes I see postings from the mainstream Muslim group in Singapore that is insensitive to the rights of minorities. What are the things that minorities can do to voice our concerns? How can these challenges be addressed?

Cherian George:

The obvious solution is to take legal action against the offences. But this is not recommended because often the people who offended others think they are just expressing their views. Within one group of Muslims, you find that expressing what you believe is seen by another group as offensive. Your expression of your religious belief is offending them. So, the solution can never be simply censorship. The solution must be the opposite. Protection of our religious freedom, paradoxically, requires the state to protect freedom of speech. Freedom of religion and freedom of speech should go together. In many countries, there is blasphemy law which ends up as a way for religious

majorities to persecute religious minorities. Dominant groups can claim that any religious expression by minorities is blasphemous.

Eugene KB Tan:

We should prioritise individual rights over group rights. Individual rights give rights to an individual to practice the individual's faith. *Shia* religious leaders and *Shia* members should try to explain to other Muslims about *Shia* practices and beliefs so that they would gain a better understanding and remove any misgivings.

Participant:

How can the state come to intervene?

Zaqy Mohamad:

At a group level, freedom of speech means to have mutual respect and some engagement. There is multiracialism in Singapore. There is sensitivity. Bring two parties together to discuss, through mediation. I don't want another riot in Singapore like in the 1960s, which was followed by years of mistrust. It doesn't affect the nation physically, but it will bring emotional scars.

Participant:

The question of blasphemy is not new in the history of religion. For example, in Christianity, the Roman Catholic Church practiced a blasphemy law such that if anyone went against them, they would be burned alive as a witch. They wanted to keep the flock to themselves. Islam is an open religion. If you accept Islam, you have to practice it. If you don't accept, you are not bound by its law. Muslims who signed the Amman accord had recognized the five major schools of Islam, including the Ja'afari Shia School. Why do you feel threatened if you are faithful to what school you are in? You should have confidence in what you believe; you shouldn't see others as a challenge. If it's good, then follow, if it isn't, then don't follow. I had the opportunity to hear the

speech given by the Deputy Prime Minister of Turkey, where he said that Turkey has shown that Islam, democracy and secularism can exist together.

Participant:

I would like to hear the idea perhaps in the Singapore context. There has been a lot of talks on the regulation of the Internet and social media, maybe there is a way to turn this around into deregulating the mainstream media, and would that to some extent reduce some of the pressure of using the non-traditional media to air views and opinions which get little or no airtime in the mainstream media?

Zaqy Mohamad:

It is always the "elephant in the room" that the Government is not acknowledging social media and this has drawn a lot of attention. There is a study of this strange trend that the Internet seems to be the mirror of what people see offline. Offline, everyone who is not pro-PAP is afraid to raise their hands. It's the opposite on the Internet, where anyone who is pro-PAP is afraid to show themselves because they will be treated like a leper. This has grown since a few years ago, and grew more intense during the last GE. Singaporeans who felt that their independent thought was suppressed offline, sought revenge online. This is not normal or natural as in the case of Malaysia, where the law is similar, and people still find that the offline space is more hospitable for a vibrant civil society. You would find that the online space is more for anti-government views. The reason why the Internet discourse is so overwhelmingly anti-government in Singapore is because people feel the restrictions offline. The way for Singapore to make the online space more balanced is to make the offline space more balanced. This is an obvious solution, but the Government has not taken this step because some officials feel that the online space is more anti-government and that's why they imposed more restrictions on it.

Eugene KB Tan:

The outreach of social media in Singapore is potentially very wide and deep. In Singapore, religious issues have become more sensitive due to increased religiosity and a lack of ability to engage on these issues. We need to approach these issues in a balanced way. To say that such issues don't exist won't work. Social media should be used as a platform for a balanced discussion. There is a need to engage those issues. We have a mature society, and enlightened discussions on sensitive issues have to become the norm.

Participant:

I perceived the characterization that your mainstream media readers are more aligned towards the government and that the alternative media is more aligned to online sentiments. Is it time to find a balance between the mainstream media and the online media?

Zaqy Mohamad:

There are a lot of similarities between the online media and mainstream media. You can see the online media reporting headline stories and scandals much earlier than the mainstream media. But I have seen the balance changed, at least to my observation. Today, there are more stories which are available in the online space than in the mainstream media. There is a lot of leeway as compared to five or ten years ago. My own view is that the mainstream media has to maintain a certain level of creativity and provide other views, and not to totally take one side or the other side. People think that most of the media have complete freedom of speech, but the truth is that they are just looking at the truth from both sides, not just covering government announcements. I think the bottom line is that you should trust the voters, they are not dumb, they will read online and offline, and make their judgement. You can also ask who checks the facts. You have to listen to both sides. This will create balance. I don't believe that you should regulate what to release and what not to release. Let the Ministries put more data and information online so that voters can judge for themselves. It is also time for

the Government to become more active online to reach out to wider communities.

Participant:

In the context of today's seminar, Community in Review, whatever is being discussed here should be linked to what the topic of today should be, either you talked about the Internet, hip hop culture, whatever, I think you are talking out of context, and are talking in general. The political situation in general is explaining government policies, how they approach this and that. These are irrelevant matters. We should somehow connect it with the progress of the Muslim community. The differences between different sects of Islam are to be settled internally at another forum. This is not the forum for that. So what should be discussed here should be linked to the topic. Because what I see here are people talking about general issues, people getting offended by the Internet, fire fighting, I think as far as for today, they are irrelevant.

Mohd Nizam Ismail:

There was a context about minority groups, disadvantages and how they react to unfair comments on the Internet. I think a lot of the questions have been linked to the use of non-mainstream media and how it affects various aspects of our life.

Eugene KB Tan:

We must remember that the Muslim community exists within the larger community. Sometimes to just dwell on your own community can be self-defeating because it tends to heighten the sense of your being under siege. I am a Catholic, and very often, non-Catholic Christian groups would come by my home hoping to speak to me about Jesus Christ. This is despite my having a crucifix above my door. So I would ask them: Can you tell me who's on the crucifix; isn't that Jesus Christ? I just gave this example to show that religious insensitivities don't just happen to Muslims.

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Participant:

I wonder whether a study has been done on the improvement of Malay aspirations being represented in the context of multiculturalism. If yes, then is there improvement, and if not, are there efforts being made to conduct studies to improve that?

Mohd Nizam Ismail:

This is a very good question. This is with regards to whether the new media has allowed Malay Muslims' aspirations to be heard.

Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir:

The findings of a 2004 survey of 218 youth participants revealed that Singaporean Muslims are the most likely ethnic group to utilize the Internet for religious and other activities. They were the most active people who search for information and activities of their own religion, search for information on other religions, communicate with people of other faiths, and purchase goods and services related to other faiths online. This finding is interesting because the fact is that the Muslims lag behind in terms of education and other social indicators such as household income, but still, Singaporean Muslims are the most active group utilizing the Internet for the purpose of religious activities.

Zaqy Mohamad:

There are a lot of opportunities for the communities nowadays, which weren't there previously. The good thing is, there is more discussion. For example, if you find insensitive postings, within an hour, I will probably get a posting in my Facebook. This shows how well the Muslim community is connected. It is how we should start using this network to generate movement, to generate more progress because the tempo is already there. When we look at some insensitive comments, some of them are not fast and furious. They are not like social extremists online who always hide their names. Singaporeans normally will come out. I've had groups ask me to meet up and, when I asked how many members they had, they said 200. It's quite

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sizable. This gives a sense of a platform which we never had before. Technology has provided more opportunities. The Internet has become not only an outlet for frustration but a means of finding job opportunities for the Malays.

Participant:

Last year there was an offensive posting, I can't remember when. In response to that, there has been a code of conduct. Some oppose the code of conduct because it relies on the vertical regulations again, which I personally think are not good for the community in the long run. In a certain commentary, someone suggested a code of conduct which includes warnings and community service. What do the panelists think about this?

Cherian George:

I am in favour of an online code of conduct. But I absolutely believe it should be bottom up, or not at all. The reason why there should not be any regulatory agencies involved, why neither the Media Development Authority nor anyone associated with the government should step in, is because it has to be adopted voluntarily, and it needs to be practised out of social responsibility, not out of fear of government sanctions. Of course, as a result, it won't be 100% effective. But, I don't think the target that we should be aiming for is zero instances of glitches. We are not going to have 100% "clean" bloggers. We must take it for granted that there will always be offensive speech online. The realistic target that we should aim for is where most of the speech is civilized and within Singapore norms; and when there are glitches, there is a clear signal from the ground that these glitches are socially not acceptable. So this should be voluntary. It is good enough if you can get major independent websites and forums to adopt an ethical code. This ethical code could be something like; we agree that if it's insulting a religion, etc., we will remove it. But it must be strictly voluntary. The moment you introduce any sort of official sanction to those posts, I don't consider that a code of ethics. It is government regulation. It would be great if netizens could come together. Unfortunately, there is distrust of what the authorities

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are up to, so we are not getting that voluntary effort. So unfortunately, that's where we are stuck.

Eugene KB Tan:

Even as individuals, we do have to regulate ourselves as well. But we won't know when, how, and what sort of abuse we, as individuals or a member of a group, would get. A code of conduct for online users can help establish certain norms, standards, and values which the community on its own thinks necessary to maintain. I think the online community would want to be seen as a credible source of public opinion and information.

Participant:

I want to find out especially if the law allows Telcos, Internet service providers, to provide identities of whoever is claiming anonymity. You can say anything racially sensitive, and remain anonymous, but if it provokes such trouble that the society feels uncomfortable, added to the law enforcement that already exists, Telcos at large can give the IP addresses and identity of the persons. Is there a provision on that?

Mohd Nizam Ismail:

Yes.

Participant:

There is bigotry through the use of social media, not towards specific races or religions but towards people of nationalities such as foreign workers like the one that recently appeared in social media websites like The Online Citizen (TOC), Temasek Review, Straits Emeritus. We see a lot of resentment and anger within posts in this forum towards persons from India, China, Malaysia, etc. This context has provided a platform for increased ignorance. My concern is that this right wing extremist view can potentially influence an individual's action e.g. Andreas Breivick in Norway, who was Islamophobic, anti-feminist, anti-immigrant, after he had gone through these forums, he got very motivated and through support he got online, went on a

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spree, killing people. As Singapore is a young nation, I think our social fabric is at risk of unraveling if we allow this kind of behavior to carry on. On the comment by Dr. Cherian George on reaching out vertically and horizontally, sometimes when offensive remarks are made, we try to reach out vertically, not so much so that action should be taken but sometimes for our leaders to speak out about injustice. I want to hear the views of the panelists on bigotry on nationalities.

Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir:

In terms of minorities reaching out vertically, if we were to look at it from the perspective of youths, this strategy has its limitations because having understood the social sanctions behind not posting, we still see the youth posting anyway. So the more constructive kind of question is, why we post, and who consumes it? Understanding these dynamics will help us to arrive at the various motivations of different social groups. This is because society and social groups are fragmented. Hence when we talk about a code of ethics, there are groups which subscribe to different codes of ethics. Youth gang members, for example, thrive on the negative comments and feedback they garner in the social media as these further enhance their bad boy image. With regard to portraying migrant workers unfavorably in the social media, my sense is that this is not so much about the desire to flame migrant workers out of xenophobic tendencies but more borne out of the locals' anxieties about the state of housing, jobs, and wage depreciation in Singapore.

Cherian George:

Sometimes we ought to reach out vertically because we want politicians to speak out on the issue. They have the role of setting the tone, especially in Singapore society. But there may not be a need for legal action. To me, it's not about 'To Post or Not to Post' because there'll be posting anyway. The question is really whether to prosecute or not to prosecute after you post – and my answer is no.

Regarding the question on how we treat non-Singaporeans, it's an uncomfortable situation. When the politicians speak out against xenophobia, they are seen as justifying their immigration policy, which has its flaws. Again, this calls for ground-up action, for sensible Singaporeans from all groups to come out and say that this kind of treatment of foreigners online is insulting and simply unacceptable; that you can't say such things about immigrant Chinese and Indians and think that the rest of society is behind you.

It's especially important for the ethnic minorities to speak up against racism expressed to other groups. What we should be promoting is tolerance and respect in general – not just tolerance of my own group or respect for my own group. These values are part of the cultural capital of our society. If we play this game that it's okay to express intolerance and racism towards some immigrants, you can guarantee that those same ugly energies will one day turn against us. This applies to religion as well. Smart religious leaders around the world don't just defend their own religion, they go out all the way to defend other religions that are under threat, because they know that, if there is a sentiment against one religion, the same kind of energy can turn against them one day. So ethnic minorities, especially, should have a vested interest in standing up for tolerance and standing up against racism, including against other immigrant groups.

Zaqy Mohamad:

On the internet regulations, I agree that the word "regulations" shouldn't be there. It should be community-driven. When I went to Parliament last week, there was a term to put more protection on individuals because of the threat of the cyber community. The Internet regulations are to be strengthened in terms of data privacy and individual privacy laws, which already exist in the West. In Singapore we don't have it yet, the existing provisions are not sufficient, because it puts more protection on individuals than on groups.

Cherian George:

I think verbal abuse against immigrants is a serious national issue.

Mohd Nizam Ismail:

It's actually not the case of only minority groups being subjected to unkind comments; for example, there was the recent case of a student at NUS who made unkind comments on Singapore as a whole. So the general point is that bad comments exist and the issue is how we react to them. There is a bigger context that is facing the community. I hope everyone's aware that we are organizing a convention this June on bigger issues facing the Malay/Muslim community.

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About the Panelists

Assistant Professor Eugene KB Tan is an Assistant Professor of Law at Singapore Management University (SMU). His previous distinguished appointments include Lecturer-in-Law at SMU; Senior Tutor with the Department of Political Science, at the National University of Singapore (NUS); Research Associate at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies; and Foreign Service Officer at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Singapore.

Professor Tan recently became a Nominated Member of Parliament. Some of his other current appointments include Associate with the Centre for International Law at NUS; Member of the Advisory Panel of National Youth Council Academy; and Board Member of the Centre for Non-Profit Leadership.

Associate Professor Dr Cherian George is an Adjunct Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, as well as an Associate Professor with the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), where he heads the Journalism Division. He is also a Research Associate at the Asia Research Centre at Murdoch University, Australia.

Before moving to academia, he spent 10 years at the *Straits Times*. Professor George remains active in professional journalism, as the editor and publisher of "*What's Up,*" an independent monthly current affairs newspaper for schools. He is also the Director of the Asia Journalism Fellowship.

Assistant Professor Dr. Kamaludeen Mohamed Nasir is an Assistant Professor with the Sociology Division, School of Humanities and Social Sciences at NTU. His recent books and articles include *Muslims as Minorities: History and Social Realities of Muslims in Singapore*; *Muslims in Singapore: Piety, Politics and Policies*; *Rethinking the 'Malay Problem:' Image, Rhetoric and Social Realities*; and *Defensive Dining: Notes on the Public Dining Experiences in Singapore*.

Mr Zaqy Mohamad joined local politics as a Member of Parliament (MP) in 2006. He currently serves as an MP for the Chua Chu Kang GRC. He presently serves in the Public Accounts Committee and Government Parliamentary Committees for the Ministry of Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Manpower and the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports. He is also the Vice Chairman of the Young PAP. Outside of politics, Mr. Zaqy is the Sales Head for Dimension Data Singapore, a global technology company of the NTT Group.

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Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs

The Centre for Research on Islamic and Malay Affairs (RIMA) is the research arm of the Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP). RIMA's transformation from a research division of AMP to a full-fledged research centre in February 1998 underscored the growing emphasis on research to support the provision of services, as well as to promote intellectual discourse and discussion on issues and developments affecting the Malay and Muslim communities.

Today, RIMA's mission is to undertake strategic research aimed at providing thought leadership in contemporary Malay and Muslim affairs. Our vision is to be a centre for research excellence for the advancement of the Malay and Muslim communities. To this end, RIMA conducts research programmes in a number of key areas, which currently includes economics, education, religion, social, Muslim expatriates, leadership and civil society.

In the course of our work, we are guided by five core values:

1. INDEPENDENCE: We are non-partisan and objective in our outlook and research;
2. CONVICTION: We are focused in our commitment to advancing the interests of the Malay and Muslim communities;
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Association of Muslim Professionals (AMP)

Association of Muslim Professionals was established on 10 October 1991, as an important resolution of the First National Convention of Singapore Malay/Muslim Professionals which was held on 6 and 7 October 1990. The Convention was attended by 500 Malay/Muslim professionals who met to brainstorm new directions for the community. AMP was formed with core programmes in education, human resource development, social development and research.

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