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Developing an ICoC and the Role of the Media Literacy Council: The Middle Ground Perspective

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Synopsis

Recent calls for an internet code of conduct and the establishment of the Media Literacy Council are viewed by many netizens as an attempt by the Government to regulate the internet. A middle ground perspective will show that the rationale for such initiatives extends beyond the seemingly obvious.

Commentary

At the HarmonyWorks! Conference in early August, Dr. Yaacob Ibrahim, Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts, appealed to the Singaporean online community to develop an internet code of conduct (ICoC) or netiquette in the interest of inculcating more civilised behaviour in cyberspace. The Minister had made a similar appeal last year following investigations of several Singaporeans who had posted derogatory and religiously insensitive comments online.

The Government has also announced the establishment of the Media Literacy Council (MLC), which is tasked with helping to “promote a safe, secure and civil media environment through public education” and advising “the Government on media issues”.

These initiatives are arguably in response to increases in: (a) trolling, or the posting of inappropriate, uncivil and offensive comments online; (b) its nastier variants, such as flaming and the posting of inflammatory comments regarding religion, ethnicity and/or any sensitive issue; and (c) contentious postings relating to Singapore politics, the public sector and/or the Government.

In the Government’s view, such postings have the potential to create crises that can undermine social cohesion and public confidence in the government sector as well as the Government. And as existing legislation cannot be effectively applied in cyberspace, with the exception, perhaps, of anti-defamation and national security laws, censorship of the internet is not a viable option. Hence, establishing an ICoC and a MLC do have some merit.

However, many in the online community have interpreted such moves as yet another attempt by the Government to regulate the internet. It is useful to examine both viewpoints on internet governance and seek a middle ground where both sides appreciate the other’s concerns.

The online community's view

Since its inception, the internet has been regarded by many as the last bastion of free speech. Therefore, any attempt by governments or private companies to censor or regulate the internet is often met with fierce opposition. In Asia, where freedom of speech is not a universal shared value, cyberspace represents the only space where individuals can freely express themselves seemingly without fear from the authorities. In reality, this is obviously not the case, but as an ideal, the freedom of cyberspace resonates strongly among many, particularly in the Singaporean online community, and hence, they are determined to protect this space from any real or perceived intrusion from the Government.

To many bloggers/users, trolling, while objectionable, is a small price to pay for freedom of expression online. This group would rather avoid having online 'OB Markers' to regulate behaviour in cyberspace, as this would curtail freedom of expression and stifle creativity. They prefer a community self-policing approach to deal with errand bloggers/users that include methods such as: (a) reprimanding and/or seeking remedial action from the offender; (b) ignoring the culprit(s) in the hope that they would eventually be discredited and shunned by other users; or in the extreme case, (c) online vigilante justice, as in the recent XiaXue example. Options (a) and (b) are premised on the assumption that the majority of users are discerning, sophisticated and courageous enough to detect, reject and reprimand the offending blogger/user. However, this might not always be the case. Option (c) is controversial as it could lead to the prosecution of the vigilante.

The Government's view

The Government is compelled to take a wider view of society, and adopt policies that protect all citizens, not just those that are active online. From this perspective, it has to adopt a more pre-emptive and cautionary approach to security matters. Hence, if inflammatory comments cannot be contained in cyberspace and have the potential to ignite problems within the wider community, then logically, online behaviour should be heavily regulated (as it is done in some ASEAN countries).

However, the Government realises that heavy regulation is not a viable solution; neither is permitting inflammatory comments to be posted online unabated. Its compromise solution has been to appeal to users to develop their own netiquette to guide online behaviour and educate current and future generations of Singaporeans on how best to use the internet, with emphasis being placed on how to be discerning about what is posted on social media and other online channels.

Whither the middle ground?

The proposed ICoC may not be the best way to manage online behaviour, primarily since it is difficult to enforce on users and ensure compliance. The only way to get users to abide by the code is to have the international community ratify and accept a universal internet code of conduct, which is virtually impossible. Hence, at this juncture, the ICoC can only be enforced at the micro level between the ISP and the individual customer in Singapore. Even so, enforcement problems will persist, hence, if the ICoC cannot be enforced, it will most likely be ignored by users.

The posting of questionable and inappropriate content will remain as long as the cloak of anonymity that the internet bestows upon its users exists. And as regulation is likely to be unsuccessful, it might be easier simply to promote the golden rule of netiquette: "Do unto others online as you would have done to you" (www.networketiquette.net).

In relation to inflammatory postings, the Government has the mandate to take action against users who deliberately break the law to provoke tensions and instigate conflict. It should, of course, accord due process to the suspect(s) in the interests of transparency and accountability. In fact, the Government's credibility on and offline would be further increased if it becomes more transparent in its dealings.

Timely and relevant objective

The Government's aim to increase public education in social media usage and dynamics through the MLC is necessary, timely and relevant. Individuals, especially the young, should be taught how to interact and engage on social media as well as guard against unsavoury individuals and predatory behaviour. They should also be taught to be more selective and discerning, not just of information on social media but also of information on traditional media. This of course implies the need for the education system to encourage more critical thinking in students.

Any new policy is bound to frustrate as many people as it satisfies; therefore, a better understanding of

competing perspectives and move toward a middle ground must be sought, especially now when communication and media roles are on the cusp of change.

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