

Look Beyond Punitive Measures Against Internet Trolls

The Straits Times Forum Online Story (January 21, 2014)

THAT the Government is investigating two people for allegedly making racist remarks on social media should come as no surprise ("Another under probe for racist remarks on Internet"; Jan 12).

But one has to wonder how the Internet community can move beyond the reliance on punitive measures against hate speech.

At the moment, there appears to be a predilection for reporting the matter to politicians.

Already, there is growing intolerance for misinformation, disinformation and cyber bullying, and new regulations are expected soon.

Legislation might be effective against derogatory discourse on race and religion, but should we rely pedantically on the law for deterrence?

The Government has adopted a combative stance, with the Prime Minister stating that Singapore must fight back against Internet trolls ("PM outlines new approach for online engagement"; Nov 23, 2013).

So how do we encourage constructive self-censorship and community cooperation?

Media literacy programmes in schools should move beyond convenient dichotomies - of absolute rights and wrongs - to help young users make sense of a "messy" digital environment. They should also learn how to discern between fact and fiction.

Prominent community websites can promote best practices and, at the same time, allow themselves to be moderated and policed by their own readers.

If given the time and space to grow, these networks would be capable of crowding out needlessly derogatory posts and maintaining a safe environment for discourse.

So the next time someone perpetuates hate speech, the first instinct would not be to sensationalise it or report it to politicians, but to state the facts, disengage appropriately and move away if need be - to deny these transgressors the attention they crave.

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