Regulating Internet ‘not the solution’

New council’s focus is to educate public on responsible behaviour

By TESSA WONG

THE chief of a new council promoting media literacy is a man who prefers to show, not tell.

In an interview with The Straits Times yesterday, Professor Tan Cheng Han made it plain that the way to a more civil Internet is to point out websites that promote responsible behaviour instead of regulating it with a code of conduct.

He gave two reasons for eschewing regulation.

One is Singapore’s size.

Not being a major world power, Singapore needs to have a "brand value". And as a small country, it depends on connectivity and openness to the rest of the world to thrive.

The other reason is the Internet’s architecture, which "makes it difficult, if not impossible, to fully regulate it", said Prof Tan, 47, chief of the week-old Media Literacy Council.

His remarks sought to assuage fears among some in cyberspace that the council, convened by the Government, will impose rules to govern online behaviour.

In particular, netizens were worried that a code of conduct will be introduced to regulate online speech.

But Prof Tan said such a code is not the main aim of his council. Developing and promoting cyberwellness education is.

The 21-member council, which includes academics and professionals from social services, was set up by the Media Development Authority to educate people on how to use the Internet responsibly and advise the Government on media issues.

Prof Tan also believes the Government has no intention of using a code of conduct as a regulatory tool.

“Our Government is very pragmatic, and I think it knows that it can’t be done. Furthermore, my understanding is that this code as mooted by them is non-binding and voluntary.

“I don’t think it was ever on the cards that netizens must comply or else face criminal sanctions,” he added.

What is on the cards for his council is to highlight websites with responsible practices that others can be encouraged to adopt – and netizens can play part in urging sites to do so, he said.

He cited The Online Citizen and TR Emeritus as two sites with good moderating policies.

Both discourage users from making remarks that are defamatory, abusive, racist or religiously offensive, among other things.

Another way is to "encourage the online citizenry to contribute projects towards making the online space a better place”, said Prof Tan.

“They could harness the Internet and social media to rally support for social causes, develop innovations, and facilitate collaborative learning,” he said.

One example that caught his eye was how some activists used social media to campaign for changes to the mandatory death penalty. He said it may have contributed to the recent changes made by the Government.

“This shows the Internet can be a force for good... It provides a forum for robust debate,” he added.

Last month, the Government said it would lift the mandatory death penalty for certain crimes, and give judges discretion in certain instances of drug trafficking and murder.

Prof Tan, who was deputy chairman for the now-defunct Advisory Council on the Impact of New Media on Society, is confident the Internet’s positive attributes will, in time, "be enhanced and the negatives will diminish”.

He said: "Issues like online scamming or libel can be managed as we understand the Internet better and more people become digital natives.”

But while he believes freedom of expression is important, he also said there must be limits, like laws against defamation and remarks that can incite hatred of a race or religion.

The Government is considering laws to combat cyberbullying and other forms of Internet harassment.

However, in imposing any limits, the "burden of proof" lies with the Government, said Prof Tan.

“It must show that by not limiting speech in this context, it would lead to adverse consequences in society,” he said.

tswong@sphe.com.sg