A step forward for self-regulation online

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

By PHIA MEI PIN

What can we take away from the case?

This is an important learning moment for our society.

First, it was heartening to see the public express its strong disag-

agreement with the sentiments. This epis-

dode has reaffirmed how Singaporean
es are very, very firm in their views that there are certain out-of-bounds markers we ought not to transgress, including racial and religious tolerance.

Anything contrary to this gets a very strong reaction from Singaporeans.

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

versation through loudspeakers.

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

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

Ms Cheong's employer fired her within a day, and many
government leaders have condemned her actions. Are these
effective reactions?

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

My sense is, in Singapore, we are constantly worried about the racial and religious divides.

While we've made great strides, our lead-

ers are worried about the thin lines that have the potential to erupt. This race to the thin line is not driven by a genuine scholarship, but more by an inclination towards an abundance of caution.

They feel that this is one of the issues that we always need to be careful about, no matter how we engage with each other.

But they feel that it is better to do more, rather than to do less.

And I think we understand why.

This incident has shown us that when somebody behaves very badly, people will react. People will tell that person off, and tell that person that what you've done is not acceptable. Of course, some of the ways that we say it are a bit unfor-

tunate as well. But it's a new medium of communication, let's give it some time to mature.

What can regular members of the public do to encourage a better social media environment?

As in the real world, show your approval of anti-social behav-

iour and also try to be fair-minded and courteous even in disagree-

ment.

After all, most people do disagree with you are more like-

ly to at least see your point of view if you put it across politely.

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

On the flip side, if you're in positions of authority or in public education programmes for school-go-

ing children, this is certainly one of the things that we ought to do.

The MLC can also work with other organisations and commu-

nity bodies to ensure there are suitable educational programmes for parents or other adults who are interested in finding out more about the pitfalls and good things about the online space.

by LeSLy KOH

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What's it all about?

In the wake of Ms Cheong's posting, which was widely shared on Facebook, there has been a backlash over the noise from a Malay wedding being held in a void deck near her home, which was filled with expletives and insults at the couple.

The posting went viral, kicking up a storm of angry posts online, and by Monday lunchtime, Ms Cheong was getting calls from the police, seen to the door by her employer's zero-tolerance policy on racially offensive behaviour.

What's the buzz?

Mr Teo Cheong, the post fuelled constant debate that went well beyond the issue of racism.

But even before the initial flare died down, however, many started to question the response — both online and offline — that the offending post had drawn. Thousands of comments had cropped up.

Some defended Ms Cheong's sack, one man saw fit to file a police report; NTUC felt it was necessary to sack her.

All these reactions became a proxy for a broader debate, with some wondering if Singaporeans had overreacted, whether Ms Cheong's actions were overly punished, and whether companies as a principle should always sack employees for their online behaviour.

And if we are not enough-twists, it was followed by the discovery that Ms Cheong was even more innocent than she had been, being Singaporean, but a permanent resident here, bringing yet another element — the foreigner issue — into the mix.

Why it matters

The numerous questions being raised are all pertinent as well as timely; indeed, the case of Ms Cheong teaches us on a number of key issues that may well feature in the ongoing national conversation.

First, whether Singapore is as sensitive as it is to issues of racism, or whether there are deep, hidden, under-thetables lines waiting to be divided, is a perennial question that needs to be addressed as discrimination efforts continue.

Was Ms Cheong impulsive and impatient, or did her words reveal an intolerance of the country's multicultural and multiracial make-up?

While optimists believe the latest case to be an isolated incident, some fear that it has eroded the once-tolerant and inclusive that respectable policies have yet to remove.

Then there's the issue of overreaction. While few would disagree that Ms Cheong's post was wrong, some are now asking if the reaction had been too drastic. Were media or the reaction itself the real issue? Did Ms Cheong really have to be sacked? Were there really a need for a police report? Are Singaporeans just too intolerant?

These questions come amid discussion on privacy issues over social media and online behaviour, and whether more education is needed on social media etiquette.

Finally, there's the issue of human resource principles.

Some observers believe Ms Cheong's actions were especially harmful to an organisation that champions equality and fights workplace discrimination.

But it has also raised questions over whether an employee needs to answer to his boss for his actions or online comments, and whether employers should be held accountable for their employees' online behaviour.

In the age of social media and corporate branding, it's an issue that would probably prove a source of much discussion for employers.

What's next?

MS CHEONG's case is not over yet. Following the filing of a police report, the post is still being investigated, with lawyers noting that she could face a fine and even jail, in the worst-case scenario.

She has since turned her attention to what happens to Ms Cheong and how Singaporeans react to these online and offline actions that could provide more glimpses into the psyche of Singaporeans, its multiracial values, and its extent of tolerance.

And with no signs showing other cases of racist posts on social media, the case of Ms Cheong is unlikely to be the last.

"SOUNDBITES"

We have inculcated a kind of sensitivity and sensibility about what can and should be said, which is why there was a huge reaction against Amy Cheong. It shows something large in a very positive sense.

— Sociologist Daniel Goh, on the response and Singaporeans’ sensitivity to issues of race