Building culture of respect online

Values we take for granted in the real world should apply on the Net too

By Invitaion

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My first contact with the Internet was probably around 1990, when I became a lecturer at the National University of Singapore. At that time, the most revolutionary thing about the Internet to me was the use of e-mail. It opened another channel of communication, and one that was in many ways more efficient than the letters, telefaxes or telephone.

I recall some use of the Internet for informational purposes, but it was somewhat limited because there did not exist at the time the richness of content that we take for granted today.

Fast forward slightly over two decades and things have changed significantly. There are many reasons for this, but three factors stand out, namely speed, affordability and the mobile revolution.

The "always connected" phenomenon has led many Singaporeans to be deeply embedded in the online world, so it has become a very real and significant part of our consciousness and social interaction. Thus, a 2012 Norton Study found Singaporeans spend an average of 66 hours online per week, with the top activities being social networking, e-mail, instant messaging and information seeking.

Although the Internet is now a very significant (and positive) part of daily life, this level of immersion is a relatively recent development, as the present state of the Internet's evolution can be traced to the mid-2000s. As such, our internalisation and understanding of the impact of the Internet on human interaction and socialisation is still in the process of development.

There are a number of things that can be discerned, and I want to highlight three of them.

First, we sometimes contrast the online world with the "real world". This is understandable. The online world can sometimes seem more distant and artificial as its immediate face is the computer screen or mobile device, and the Internet itself can be perceived as a type of intermediary between us and other online participants.

As such, we sometimes forget that acts in the online world can have both immediate and real-life consequences. This assumes great significance now that everyone is a potential content producer and we should therefore be mindful of the effect of what we do on others. This is obvious when there is the proximity of real-world interaction. It is far less obvious through the mediating effect of technology.

Second, and following naturally from the preceding point, the online world does mirror the real world in certain respects but with important differences. The failure to recognise the differences is what often gives rise to problems.

A simple example is where people have made insensitive or inflammatory comments on social media that have gone viral. Would they have made such comments on the mainstream media? Probably not. Most likely, they thought they were making a comment to a close circle of friends. Perhaps the comment may even have been intended as a bit of a lark. It is the type of "coffee shop" conversation that many of us have encountered.

The difference, though, can be likened to a person making such a remark at a coffee shop through a loudspeaker. Social media will magnify the reach of the comment, and the moment it is picked up by the online community, it has a certain permanence, unlike the spoken word.

Third, behaviour in the online world is distorted by the often anonymous nature of the interaction that takes place. Such anonymity can encourage people to act more extremely than they otherwise would, thereby distorting the social norms that one would expect in the real world.

While the internalisation of values and behavioural norms passed on from one generation to another does determine how we interact with others, it is also clear that society has ways to express its disapproval of anti-social behaviour, and this reinforces value internalisation as a powerful incentive to conduct oneself according to accepted norms of courtesy and respect.

In this regard, I am reminded of an incident related to me by a friend. One day as she was walking on the street, a person of a different race made a disparaging remark about her in a language he assumed she did not understand.

My friend spoke that language fluently though, and when she politely asked the person why he had made that remark, he was at first taken aback and subsequently greatly embarrassed. He apologised profusely and the incident ended very amicably. Clearly he would not have made the remark if he had known my friend was familiar with the language because his rudeness would not have gone unnoticed.

Such social restraints are often not present in the online world because participants can be anonymous. This partly explains some of the less desirable traits demonstrated in the online world. Flaming, trolling and cyberbullying are just some of the more obvious anti-social behaviour that is commonly found.

Such anti-social behaviour is exacerbated further by the ability of like-minded people to congregate easily without transaction costs present in the real world.

It will therefore be interesting to see if, in the longer term, the social norms that prevail in the real world will assert themselves as the dominant standard in the online world or if the online world's social norms will contain material differences.

As someone who believes in the inherent ability of human beings to evolve ourselves into better people, I believe that many of the excesses of the Internet will eventually be ameliorated. We are, after all, relatively new citizens in the online world, and history tends to demonstrate that extremes are transient.

Nevertheless, there is something to be said for those who want to continue to see as open an Internet as possible, to continually remind everyone that a respectful and safe online environment is conducive to the continued evolution of an open Internet.

If netizens are able to self-regulate and moderate effectively, there will be fewer calls for more formal regulation. There is also a danger that some of the extremist behaviour on the Internet may presently be discouraging others from participating more fully.

In this vein, the Media Literacy Council is bringing to Singapore for the first time Safer Internet Day, which originated out of the European Commission's Safer Internet Programme created in 1999. The first Safer Internet Day took place in 2004, and this year's theme is Online Rights And Responsibilities - Connect With Respect. Taking place next Tuesday, this year's global theme should resonate with many Singaporeans, whom I'm sure share the belief that respect is a fundamental as well as the responsibility of all netizens.

A culture of respect also emphasises that the values we take for granted in the real world should apply to the online world. The council intends to leverage on this event every year to remind all of us that it is our collective responsibility to ensure a safer Internet. It is also the council's hope that all of us, regardless of who we care about the online world, will do our part to develop a respectful and safe environment for all so that free speech and exchange of ideas can truly flourish.

And we hope further that those who run sites on the basis of responsible terms of service or moderation policies will do more to facilitate the evolution of a safer and more responsible online world. Thus will the transformative power of the Internet be truly optimised.

The writer is chairman of the Media Literacy Council. He is a senior counsel and was dean of the National University of Singapore's Faculty of Law until Dec 30, 2011. By invitation features expert views from opinion leaders in Singapore and the region.