# Social media: Mini-movements to encourage civil discourse wanted

**Ong Siow Heng**

For The Straits Times

Information technology promises "the best of times" with its universal access to knowledge and news. The attendant social media revolution enhances debate, content creation and idea sharing, bearing the prospect of unprecedented civil discourse for (borrowing again from Charles Dickens' A Tale Of Two Cities) an "age of wisdom" and "the spring of hope".

Lamentably, this revolution is easily subverted into the "worst of times". Civil discourse quickly descends into incivility, with scurrilous slurs and offensive stereotypes prominent on many online forums. Making matters worse, instantaneous sharing enables the unthinking re-post of unverified information.

Social media's cloak of invisibility and mask of anonymity offer impunity in antagonistic disregard for societal values, conventional politeness and even basic accuracy in passing on information. The current state of social media culture hints at an "age of foolishness" and a possible "winter of despair".

We could call the current state of social media a mixed blessing and have done so. But there is cause for urgent concern.

The mob mentality enjoys merciless rule in online disputes. This cyber bullying includes racial affronts, sexist snickers and rampant rudeness. Ignoring the hurting victims, some defend this simply as online vernacular. Such leniency suggests despair of ever evolving a better culture of cognitive and affective empathy.

The ethos prevalent in social media can impact society at large. Online chauvinism will dictate the norm when impressionable readers imitate its antisocial bravado, expediting its spread to offline mainstream culture.

Meanwhile, society is cheated of opportunities to grow and learn if people with good ideas are repelled or intimidated by an online culture of destructive criticism.

Social media culture cannot be left to sort itself out – no society ever emerged spontaneously stronger from a discordant revolution. We have the opportunity to do something about antisocial aspects of social media or to walk on by.

Many netizens, taking discretion to be the better part of valour, circumnavigate sites where they know blatant bigotry and rude language predominate. But retreat into intellectual cliques, while comfortable, leaves antisocial culture to prevail unchallenged.

## WHO IS IN CHARGE?

Various organisations are concerned for the vulnerable on social media. Schools teach media literacy, respectful communication and societal values. Religious institutions conduct courses on interfaith harmony and response to bigotry. Website administrators discreetly expel uncivil commenters.

But these measures alone cannot stem the tide of online violators. And they may create the impression that official channels are merely promoting an agenda, not reflecting society's values. Clearly there is a need to complement current measures.

The Singapore Kindness Movement springs to mind when we think about organisations speaking out against hurtful and harmful discourse. Its blog publicises its willingness to help worthy "self-initiated voluntary projects" by ground-up movements focusing on kindness or relevant social issues.

Ground-up initiatives seem to be particularly applicable to the problem at hand as existing efforts are by the usual, albeit relevant, authorities and institutions.

Beyond a ground-up approach, resolving unsavoury aspects of social media culture should be from the inside, that is, by netizens who care about civil society.

While leaving problems to be fixed by "those in charge" conforms to our experience as citizens of a well-managed state and products of protective families, in the autonomy of social media, all netizens are "those in charge".

Today's netizens are the beneficiaries of all the advantages of social media. As heirs to the social media estate, they have a natural imperative to cultivate and nurture it.

How can concerned netizens take ownership of social media culture?

We could take a lesson from a past example when ownership of community culture was claimed by ordinary citizens, acting individually.

Last year, radio station Kiss92 featured a segment where the hosts made jokes charged with racial stereotypes. Numerous objections by individual netizens ensued, followed by apologies by the hosts, who were surprised that people had taken such strong offence.

The whole incident shows that speaking up by individuals can be effective in arresting unacceptable behaviour, as well as in alerting those who may be oblivious.

Applying the example, in any instance of incivility or inaccuracy, the enlightened netizen must speak up.

Always question politely if any startling news or suspicious complaint has been verified; politely remind online contributors to check news before passing it on.

Encourage true tolerance of diversity by being politely intolerant of divisiveness. Individuals speaking up from the inside would be an interesting ground-up movement.

Admittedly, the downside of speaking up from the inside is the risk of rude rejoinders. The netizen who values online civil society will soon develop the calloused skin of the peaceful warrior.

Besides individuals, groups of concerned netizens could make a difference. This is a golden opportunity for young netizens to help construct the online ethos, rather than witness its continued descent in default mode.

Social media is still a new world, requiring the brave and the creative to design a new civilisation and culture.

Resourceful netizen groups could aim to assist fellow netizens to speak up. At a basic level, the silent majority may simply be at a loss as to how to respond when they encounter objectionable commenters online. This may be addressed with a starter kit of useful suggestions so as to eventually evolve an online culture that builds community through caring communication.

Creative netizen groups could produce humorous video clips, witty punchlines, clever slogans and a range of emotional appeals to persuade more netizens to speak up.

Innovative netizen groups will find numerous publicity opportunities and incentivising options yet to be explored. Socially responsible institutions and businesses are likely to lend their support to such meaningful mini-movements.

Our young netizens are educated in creative problem-solving. They have witnessed and participated in countless different movements aimed at creating positive change. Having inherited social media, they should be encouraged to think about revolutionising social media culture as their legacy to the future.

stopinion@sph.com.sg

• The writer is professor of corporate communication (education) and dean of international affairs at Singapore Management University.