

## Online vigilantes going too far?

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Singapore (The Straits Times/ANN) - Singapore's Internet community ought to police itself better if it wants to safeguard its freedom online and not invite the authorities to step in and stop atrocious behaviour, new media experts say.

Two recent cases have exposed the ugly side of Singapore netizens in the way they have pursued and attacked individuals they decided deserved to be punished.

Last month, Briton Anton Casey found himself at the receiving end after posting disparaging remarks about "poor people" on the MRT and having to "wash the stench of public transport" off himself.

Most agreed that what he did was offensive, but the online attacks targeted him, his former beauty queen wife and their young son. Casey took his family to Perth, claiming they had received death threats. He then lost his job as a senior wealth manager after he and his employer "parted ways" in the wake of the controversy.

Last week, 24-year-old undergraduate Quek Zhen Hao found himself the overnight focus of attention, after two videos - showing him tailgating, overtaking and braking dangerously in his car - were circulated widely online.

In one video, he is seen confronting another motorist who drives away - only for Quek to chase after him.

Netizens called him "public enemy", "ugly" and an "Ah Beng". He was also subjected to what netizens call CSI - named after the television series Crime Scene Investigation - when personal information about him, his family and girlfriend was dug up and shared online for all to flame.

Quek apologised for what he did on the road, but said he had become a victim of "cyber Ah Bengs" himself.

"My girlfriend's photos have been taken from her Facebook account and posted on the forums," he told The New Paper. He said his family and girlfriend had been harassed, claimed he had received death threats, and pleaded with netizens to remove his parents' address from the Internet.

Is it all going too far, when an alleged wrongdoer ends up appearing like the victim of an online mob attack?

The state of online conduct in Singapore is troubling, said Dr Michael Netzley, a media researcher and the academic director of executive development at Singapore Management University.

"Any time somebody appoints himself judge, jury and executioner, we have a drastic problem," he said.

Dr Netzley, who has researched digital media across Asia, compared online "CSI" activity here to what is known as the "human flesh search engine" in China, where netizen mobs turn on individuals and make their lives a misery by posting their personal details online.

The bullying has driven some victims in China to the brink of suicide, he said.

International communications and social media expert Lars Voedisch wondered whether some netizens were taking justice into their own hands because they felt helpless, feeling official authorities were not doing enough.

"It's actually quite cowardly behaviour, independent of being lawful or not," said Voedisch, who has worked in Singapore for more than 10 years.

Social media lawyer Lionel Tan, of law firm Rajah & Tann, said anyone who feels threatened online can seek legal advice to find out if the threat constitutes criminal intimidation under the Penal Code. These should not be mere insults, but comments that threaten injury to the person, his property or reputation. The victim can lodge a police report.

"People have to realise that the laws of Singapore apply to whatever is done or uttered, whether offline or online," said Mr Tan. "They shouldn't have the impression that different rules apply in the online world. There's no complete freedom - even though it may feel like it. Don't continue to think the online world can't be governed or policed. It can."

He said the authorities could step in to encourage good online conduct or introduce laws to let victims of cyber bullying seek redress.

Dr Netzley said: "What I don't want is for the Government, at some point, to decide that they've had enough and are going to start tracking people online. But any time you push the limits online, you invite the Government to make restrictions.

"People must do better at self-regulation, and there needs to be more citizens willing to speak up and say, 'This is wrong'."