



TNP PHOTOS:
PHYLLICIA WANG

Former President S R Nathan talks about social media trolls and how to deal with them

You can't stop Internet trolls

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He gingerly placed a hearing aid into his ear. Then, he smiled, signalling for the interview to start.

Age may have slowed down former President S R Nathan's movements – he will be 91 this year – but his mind remains very sharp.

"I used to go for walks, but in the last six to seven months, I haven't been able to walk.

"My health isn't good, so I don't walk at all. I'm in and out of hospital," he said, adding that he goes to the hospital twice a week.

But he still keeps his days occupied, spending three days a week at the Singapore Management University (SMU), chatting with students, lecturers and people who want to meet him.

If he finds time, he also goes to the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies.

His recently launched book, *S R Nathan In Conversation*, in which he talks about topics ranging from politics to new media, is also a testament to his lucidity.

In an interview with *The New Paper* in his office at SMU, Mr Nathan shared his views on social media, something he has never and will not use but that he acknowledged the power of.

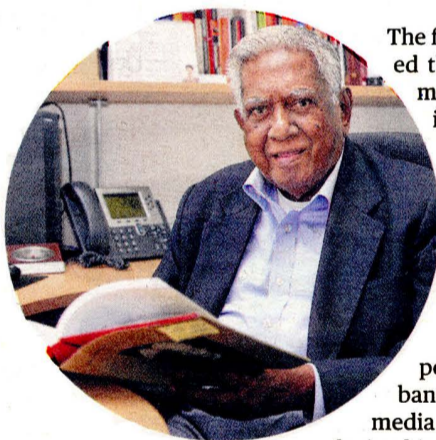
One thing that struck him was how fast news, whether fact or myth, gets out there, thanks to social media.

In the past, rumours circulated in coffee shops, he said. Today's equivalent of that is social media, except that word spreads further and faster.

"You see, in a coffee shop, I talk to you, you go home. In social media, you write what you and I have spoken, you press the button, it goes to 1,000 people! It's irresponsible.

"For instance, in a character assassination, if one does that and is anonymous, do you know how much damage he would have done?

"Once you press the button, you can't take it back," he said.



The former President conceded that the powers of social media can be overwhelming, but he is not bothered by it.

"It doesn't worry me, the sun will rise tomorrow morning, the sun will set today," he said, with a shrug of the shoulders.

He has never felt compelled to jump on the bandwagon despite social media already gaining traction during his term as president.

"Now, I don't need the youth's attention. I don't have much time left, I'm 90 years old," Mr Nathan said.

TROLLS

As for public figures active on social media, like Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, trolls are unavoidable, said Mr Nathan in reference to the PM's live Facebook chat two weeks ago.

One asked: "Are you AM Lee in the morning?" Another asked for the 4D number of the day.

Mr Nathan calls such people "pasang kaki" (Malay for to trip someone).

"They think they are the only ones who know everything. The world always has those. They will be always there. You can't change it," he said.

When asked if he thinks there is any way to control the perpetuation of myths on social media, Mr Nathan pointed to his heart and said: "Your conscience.

"Those who do it must be honest with themselves, that they don't use the social media to that purpose."

Excerpts from the interview

ON NATIONAL SERVICE

I think it has become second nature. Everybody accepts it. Nobody tries to wriggle out of it. And many parents take pride in the fact that one of their children has become an officer. If their son doesn't get into the Officer Cadet School, they feel disappointed.

ON SOCIAL MEDIA

I'm not criticising everyone who writes on social media – some of them are responsible and genuinely believe what they are saying is for the good.

But for some, it's a kind of sport. "He's walloping so-and-so, I'm very happy, I'll join in." This is a new phenomenon and the technology is changing so fast you can't keep pace with it.

ON SALE OF CHEWING GUM BAN

This is just one of the many measures that foreigners laugh at, just as they laugh at our campaigns. But these people come from settled, mature societies.

We were a new society, with no tradition of social discipline. The campaigns were just the beginning of a process of education. Gradually, cleanliness and social order become a habit.

ON NEWSPAPER READERSHIP AND THE YOUNG

I don't know if they see any merit in being branded an informed person. During our time, we wanted people to say of us, "He's informed, his opinion is good, it's worth talking to him."

For them, no. For them, the culture is different, more about entertainment, lifestyles, glorifying themselves.

ON TODAY'S POLITICAL CHALLENGE

It's not easy to draw the line when it comes to political debate. The slightest things can stir up acrimony, but silence can be equally damaging.

Many of us speak in English, but there are large numbers of people who don't speak English or rarely tune in to English-language television. It's easy for the arguments to get lost in translation.

ON SINGAPORE'S FUTURE

With so many voices wanted to be heard, so many voices demanding that the helmsman steers in their direction, Singapore is going to become increasingly difficult to govern.

With no natural resources to back us up, our future is full of risks. Can the ship keep afloat and remain on the right course? I am confident it can. But all sides have to understand that bitter contention and divisiveness will lead us to irreversible decline.

S R Nathan In Conversation costs \$39.90 (including GST) and is available at all major bookstores.