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Anton Casey case: Where has all our empathy gone?

By William Wan For The Straits Times

Something has gone wrong with us Singaporeans.

The year is barely a month old, and look at what's happened.

In three short weeks, we have made famous Anton Casey and "Heather Chua". The latter, we now know, is a man pretending to be a woman online and trolled his way into the police investigation room.

Meanwhile, Anton Casey, a British wealth manager, is deeply embroiled on several fronts because of his unacceptable social media posts. In one, he had expressed relief that his Porsche was out of the workshop and he could wash off the "stench of public transport". The post went viral, sparking anger online from Singaporeans.

They join an infamous list of social media users whose unfortunate choice of words resulted in rather serious consequences - Amy Cheong, Eve Tan, Andy Chan and a host of others who, at one point or another, said things on their social media pages which outraged a nation.

The incidents reiterate the need for us to reassess our social media habits. The common misconception is that our own Facebook/Twitter/Instagram/Google+ is our own space.

That we keep behaving as though comments and posts to such media are private comments, says something about how habits are hard to break, demonstrated in our resistance to adapt to social media norms.

But that, however, isn't what is terribly wrong with us today.

A more disturbing phenomenon is the concept of social media justice.

Let's not mince words, the offenders' words deserved some kind of punishment, not just for the actual offence they caused, but perhaps for the sheer stupidity of what, how and why they said what they posted.

Whether the punishment was disproportionate to the crime is a matter of opinion.

Anton Casey might have been rather "atas" (Malay for upstairs and used colloquially to refer to an arrogant person); or he was simply being thoughtless and careless - but should his home address have been revealed online to an angry mob?

Amy Cheong might indeed have been racist (or was simply tired and careless), but did she deserve to be hounded online to the point of leaving the country?

These are questions that will solicit a polarity of views.

That, too, still isn't what has gone wrong with us.

What has gone horribly wrong, is our celebration of the justice being meted out.

Let's take the most recent case of Anton Casey.

SMRT Ltd (Feedback), a Facebook page that despite its name is not linked to the official SMRT Ltd, is quickly assuming the role of an online vigilante for Singapore.

Folks there revealed where Mr Casey worked, who his bosses were, gave e-mail addresses for the public to spam their mail boxes and even revealed Mr Casey's home address.

The popularity of the page saw the information spread far and wide, and no doubt was a large part of the reason Mr Casey soon apologised for his faux pas (the other part being the emotional distress that the online furor was causing his family and, most unfortunately, his five year old son, whose appearance drew vicious comments from the lynch mob online).

Many praised SMRT Ltd (Feedback) for their CSI-like crime scene investigation forensic abilities, ferreting out personal information. Many more ended the day feeling that justice was served. After all, Anton Casey got what he deserved, right?

It's not entirely clear when the whole "CSI" culture started in Singapore. Elsewhere, notably in China, online vigilante justice has been common for years. A phenomenon called "human flesh search engine" or renrou sousuo, enlists the help of netizens to find and share information about offenders.

In Singapore, a certain top blogger was probably one of the first few who got the ball rolling two years back when she revealed personal (including family) information of nine men, in retaliation for having called her names not fit for print.

The idea is that all your information online can be made public if one digs hard enough, and there exists within the virtual world a "CSI" community which is prepared to name and shame you if in their judgment, you offend others. The online naming and shaming culture has been propagated and abetted by social media and citizenship journalism websites.

When the fledgling CSI community here goes to work, social media denizens egg them on, and each time, they celebrate the successful

naming and shaming of the offenders. The merits of such a culture are themselves debatable, but the celebration of it is just plain wrong.

At risk of sounding extreme, let me share an example from wartime. It might have been necessary to drop two atomic bombs to end a world war, but it is doubtful if the bomber crew were proud of the actual suffering their action caused. Judges do not exchange high fives for putting that rapist in jail for life, as just as that may be. Bombs and jail sentences may be necessary to keep the order of things sometimes.

Justice should be meted out, but in a civilised society, one need not gloat at the fallen. To maintain a largely civil society, punishment should not be celebrated. That one would revel in another's punishment, whether deserved or not, reveals a nature which lacks empathy, a very important property of graciousness.

Empathy for your fellow human being, no matter how bad that person, is a large part of what makes us humans.

To be fair, while a large portion of the community felt good about the "punishment" for Anton Casey, many also called for forgiveness since he has apologised. So the feeling of gloating when someone gets his come-uppance isn't exactly unanimous.

It is, however, significant enough for us to ask ourselves if we are losing touch with our empathetic nature.

It is indeed hard to reach for empathy and understanding, especially when one gets swept up in the emotions that such offensive conduct invariably brings out in us. Yet we must do so, to resist the tide of least resistance that would sweep us into concurring or even celebrating the condemnation of others who offend people like us.

The herd mentality has historically brought out the worst in human beings, because it stops us thinking as an individual, and doesn't allow us to find our moral compass.

It is also somewhat ironic that many of those who are angry against authoritative figures or the elites for perceived abuse of power, often behave just as badly when they perceive that power has shifted to them - a power that is simply derived from the sheer number of people egging them on. Similarly, those who chastise the Government for groupthink also themselves fall prey to a groupthink mob mentality.

The individuals who write, "like" or "share" an abusive riposte to the offender are often encouraged by the mob approval of their activity. They do not get a chance to get off their computers and reflect upon what they have written. If they did, some may feel a tinge of embarrassment.

Sadly, another online furore leading to a cycle of abuse and shaming will probably happen again before too long.

It is our sincere hope here at the Singapore Kindness Movement that for those of you reading this article, the next time social media justice rolls into action, that you will spare a moment to set aside your emotions and reflect on how you should behave before banging away at your keyboard.

Kindness and graciousness are not reserved for those who deserve it. One can well argue that it is best suited for the least deserving and that is why magnanimity in victory is a virtue. A dose of empathy is needed to appreciate and practice it.

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