

Creating ourselves online

By Lim Sun Sun for the Straits Times

THERE once was a time when we would be admonished by friends, teachers or parents for being too self-conscious. Such criticism was meant to exhort us to be less preoccupied with how we appeared to others when in the public eye. Be it playing a ditty on the piano for relatives, reciting a poem in class or performing in a school skit, we were urged to be less self-conscious.

Our fear of what other people thought of us supposedly held us back from being the best performers that we could be.

When our otherwise private selves were being displayed on a stage, we felt acutely aware of ourselves, our flaws and our insecurities. So we sought to overcome such anxieties with the bravado of a performer and a larger-than-life persona to mask our diffidence.

Fast forward to today, when adopting such a persona is required in our daily interactions, whether mundane or weighty, with an audience of one or one million. Using social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Tumblr, we strive to be the cleverest, coolest and wittiest selves that we can possibly be.

We post "humble brags" calculated to elicit admiration and envy, share carefully doctored photographs to attract retweets and repinnings, and "Like" Facebook pages of worthy causes, wearing our social conscience like a badge of honour.

For this is the nature of self-curation, in that we tacitly submit to the public nature of our digitally connected lives, and strategically present ourselves to our insatiable online audience.

In our era of self-curation, self-consciousness has been turned on its head as we project our personal identity online. Whereas it once held us back, our new-found self-consciousness pushes us forward in a self-centred, almost selfish way.

Ms Amy Cheong's Facebook page was a fine specimen of self-curation. The former membership executive of the National Trades Union Congress was sacked after posting expletive-laden racist posts on her Facebook account.

What appeared to be her own wedding photo served as the backdrop to a distinguished profile, detailing where she worked and studied. Her own profile photo crowned the page, smiling confidently at the camera.

Her racist posts were, at heart, also an exercise in self-curation, because in our digitally connected lives, we no longer angst or vent alone. Annoyed at the noise from a void-deck wedding, she posted a series of status updates that placed her on a soapbox, condemning the event and offering false theories linking divorce rates with such weddings.

This again is characteristic of our era of digital connection, where sharing a personal observation will no longer suffice. One must chip in his two cents' worth to the world of shared online memes, bound together by innocuous but potent hashtags.

Indeed, as we increasingly engage in self-curation online, we find the need to cater to the multiple publics in our lives, both known and unknowable.

We have to manage what cultural anthropologist Michael Wesch terms "context collapse", where the different social contexts we flit through in our lives converge in the online space.

Family, friends, colleagues and distant acquaintances are now squeezed uncomfortably into your online world, allowing everyone to see facets of you that were previously inaccessible to them.

Via Facebook, Ms Cheong's racist rant, likely meant for her close friends, was visible and viewable by her multiple, extended publics. In this regard, she should have been more aware of how her views would appear to others. Yet her sense of self-awareness was warped.

This is because when we go online, we are connected to people in greater numbers and diversity than ever before. But paradoxically, we can also choose to be enveloped by those whose views resonate with our own. The influence of the like-minded is thus amplified.

Research bears this out, with findings indicating that communication and information sharing on social networks such as Facebook are influenced by the degree of homophily - the greater the similarity between you and someone else, the more likely you are to interact with each other online.

So, while Ms Cheong may have been conscious of the self that she was showcasing to people whose views mirrored hers, she was oblivious to the self that she projected to society at large, until of course her post went viral.

That Ms Cheong failed to make the most of privacy settings is obvious. The failure of an educated, Internet-savvy adult to appreciate the ramifications of expressing the views that she did, in the manner that she did, points to the far larger issue of media literacy.

As we wield our shiny smartphones in our efforts at self-curation, we must recognise that our amorphous digital social networks are mapped onto interactions between public and private online spaces.

And that these online spaces remain part of a larger social fabric that rests on norms, values and standards of human decency. In our digitally connected but culturally rooted society, we need to blend an appreciation of the public nature of the Internet with some old-fashioned self-consciousness.

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