

Use new media wisely: Vivian

It can boost ties and understanding but also cause division and hatred

Kor Kian Beng

The Young Sikh Association, which has hosted a website since its 2003 inception, has started a Facebook group. But this online presence is mainly to publicise its events.

So its president Hernaikh Singh, 45, has been wondering whether to launch a blog for more interaction among its 500-plus members, of whom over 30 per cent are non-Sikhs.

He knows the benefits. But the associate director at the Institute of South Asian Studies has one worry: the need to moderate the blog regularly so that no extremist or disparaging comments are posted against people of other faiths.

"As a responsible organisation, we do not want to end up creating issues that could have an impact on our mission and objectives," he said.

Such concerns were highlighted by Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, when he spoke yesterday at the inaugural Community Leaders' Conference.

The event was hosted by OnePeople.sg, a national body that champions racial harmony.

He told 200 community, religious and youth leaders at the Woodlands Regional Library how they can use new media to boost community relations, while being alert to possible perils.

"The new media is a very sharp tool. When used properly, it could lead to greater understanding, appreciation and confidence; but it could also cause division, suspicion, violence or hatred," he said.

He cited the example of terrorism. While radicals and terrorists push their ideologies and draw recruits using the Internet, he said, the authorities also go on the Net to counter radicals and stop the spread of their networks.

He listed Singapore's efforts, like the Religious Rehabilitation Group website (www.rrg.sg) which counters radical ideologies in cyberspace.

The websites under the Islam-

ic Religious Council of Singapore (Muis) promote correct religious practices and help Internet surfers tell apart radical websites from legitimate ones.

He said: "As community leaders, we need to be watchful and foster a vigilant online community."

The message: Singapore will not tolerate those who incite disharmony.

That is why Singapore prosecuted three bloggers in 2007 under the Sedition Act, he said. "Let me say categorically that we will not hesitate to do so again if need be."

But new media also engages the youth. Young people actively contributed ideas for Singapore's successful bid to host the Youth Olympic Games next year, for instance. "They have an interest in helping to shape Singapore," he said.

Another plus of new media: spurring a civic-conscious Singapore by sharing ideas and sparking discussions online.

The OnePeople.sg portal launched at the event yesterday can help achieve that goal, he said. A joint enterprise with the National Library Board, it aims to be the first stop for students, researchers and the community seeking a range of expert resources on racial harmony.

He said the Government will continue to use a light touch and be pragmatic in e-engaging Singaporeans.

This can already be seen through recent measures, like relaxing the ban on party political films on the Internet and responding to online forum letters.

"The political landscape on the Net will evolve with the times. However, the true measure of involvement is the degree of participation and ownership of Singaporeans in nation building, problem solving and in shaping the future," said Dr Balakrishnan.

The event ended with a dialogue chaired by Mr Felix Soh, Singapore Press Holdings' digital media editor.

He advocated a zero-tolerance approach to negative comments in sensitive areas like race, language and religion.

Questions centred on how community leaders should react to unreasonable online comments and how to encourage older Singaporeans to embrace new media.

kianbeng@sph.com.sg