How to voice critical comments that make a positive difference

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For The Straits Times

In the last few weeks, many Straits Times readers have exercised over the lengthy debate that ensued between an academic and government minister during a parliamentary committee hearing. Singaporean historian Thum Ping Tjin had made a written submission to the Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods in which he asserted that the biggest purveyor of fake news in Singapore was the Government, in particular the late founding prime minister Lee Kuan Yew.

When he appeared before it to flesh out his submission, he was questioned for over six hours by Home Affairs and Law Minister K. Shanmugam, a member of the committee, over his interpretation of historical events such as the 1963 Operation Coldstore exercise. The intense debate drew much public attention, with some feeling Dr Thum had been disrespectful, and had his academic credentials questioned by Mr Shanmugam. A group of more than 200 academics signed an open letter to defend him and his work.

Government leaders, meanwhile, seemed quiet about such serious allegations was not an opinion shared by Mr Shanmugam. "It is important that Dr Thum’s assertion that Mr Lee “was the biggest creator of fake news in Singapore, in all, and Operation Coldstore was based on falsehoods”, as Mr Shanmugam put it.

The whole debate over truth, tact and the treatment of Dr Thum has sadly produced much negative perception of Singaporean journalists. Government from some observers, in and outside of Singapore.

It is not just academics who are concerned about what the episode says about the way critical debate is handled in Singapore. Civil society advocates, journalists, community leaders and citizens who want to make critical comments on important issues in Singapore are also concerned.

AN ACADEMIC’S RESPONSE

How is an academic familiar with academic values and the Singapore context, like myself, supposed to respond to the issue?

I felt the need to stress the fundamental point that facts don’t change. Facts are established by evidence that provide the information for policymakers and the public to make assessments and decisions.

When one intentionally ignores real evidence, then it is not a confirmatory bias.

Second, intellectual honesty is important.

We should pursue accountability, but that does not mean we are acceptable to make unilateral delegations or forgive intellectual dishonesty. We should be fair and firm about positions and issues, but also respect others when they hold different views even if we think they are invalid.

Third, academics and the Government both have important roles in society, and here must be a mutual respect between both parties.

Fourth, society must maintain the freedom for academics and other concerned citizens to express critical comments on public issues. The Government, too, has the right, and indeed responsibility, to engage those views and respond robustly where necessary.

Both the freedom to criticise and the right of a robust reply are important for good governance and a problem-solving democracy. Both must not be trivialised or abused.

Good academics do not shun scrutiny of their claims, and they do not rule out the possibility that they might be wrong.

Empirical disputes need emphasis openness and objectivity to scrutiny and test competing theorising data. Good academics respect this fact. And they change their prior position or conclusion in light of contrary evidence. Academics who are unable to make a positive difference in people’s lives would not only allow but encourage non-academics, including policymakers, to read what they write and examine their conclusions and work on policy, which is an academic’s right.

Society is健全 to what to achieve to ensure that critical debate is not dominated by those who use manipulation, and for critical comments to be constructive, it is important to distinguish empirical fact from unfounded speculation. It is important to carefully present evidence on which to base arguments.

In practice, though, sometimes it is necessary to introduce a character. If someone is deceitful or there is clear intent to cover up facts, a fair assessment cannot be made.

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Character Fourth, be constructive. To comment constructively is not about pleasing particular individuals or groups. That is impression management, populism or political correctness. Commenting constructively means examining and explaining things that may help to solve a problem to solutions to problems can be co-created and practically adopted.

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The first four Cs – competence, character, courage and being constructive – are attributes of a person. Someone who wants to engage better in a critical debate has a better chance of doing so effectively and being rewarded when he or she possesses and practices these traits. But beyond personal attributes, the larger environment matters a great deal in terms of how supportive we are as a society in encouraging critical debate.

Climate The fifth C is thus climate of support. People are more likely to offer constructive and critical comments on issues when there is a sociopolitical climate of support that helps. So we should be asking – why do commentators speak up, or decide to lie down, and what kind of climate for commenting are we cultivating in Singapore?