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Citation

CHAN, David, "Let's get the psychology of debate right" (2018). *Research Collection School of Social Sciences*. Paper 3389.

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Let's get the psychology of debate right

By David Chan

Published in Straits Times, 2018 April 28, p. A40

How to voice critical comments that make a positive difference

In the last few weeks, many Singaporeans have been exercised over the lengthy debate that ensued between an academic and a 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 disrespected, and had his academic credentials torn to shreds by Mr Shanmugam. A group of more than 200 academics signed an open letter to defend him and voice their concerns.

Government leaders, meanwhile, said keeping quiet about such serious allegations was not an option and they had to debunk Dr Thum's assertion that Mr Lee "was the biggest creator of fake news in Singapore, a liar, 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 Singapore and its 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 held 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, expected to respond to the issue?

First, I want to stress the fundamental point that facts do matter. Facts are empirical data that provide the information for policymakers and the public to make assessments and decisions about policy and public actions. When one intentionally ignores relevant data or does not share them, it is not a confirmatory bias but an integrity issue.

Second, intellectual honesty is important.

We should pursue accountability, but that does not mean it is acceptable to make unfounded allegations or forego intellectual honesty. We should be firm and fair 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 there must be mutual respect between both parties.

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 disciplines emphasise openness and objectivity to scrutinise and test competing theories using data. Good academics respect facts. And they change their prior position or conclusion in the light of clear contrary evidence.

Academics who want to make a positive difference in people's lives would not only allow but also want non-academics, including policymakers, to read what they write and examine their conclusions and recommendations. But they expect fair and cordial treatment in the review and interaction, especially if they see the context as a consultation or feedback-giving session.

So we need to be clear what the academic community's issue for the Thum case ought to be.

The issue is not whether Dr Thum's claims about Operation Coldstore can be questioned by non-academics in a Select Committee hearing.

They can be questioned and examined, and should be, especially when they were made in a formal submission to the Select Committee, but even if the allegations were made in an academic outlet.

What matters is how the questioning was carried out in the committee hearing, which was meant to be both a public consultation and an evidence-gathering effort.

Given the interrogative and cross-examination style of questioning, it is natural for observers to be concerned, and we can debate what impact the whole Shanmugam-Thum exchange will have on academics' public comment in future.

FRAMEWORK FOR CRITICAL COMMENTS

What impact could this episode have on public debate, especially on the propensity of fellow academics to offer constructive, critical comment in future?

We need to learn from the Shanmugam-Thum debate and understand the underlying psychology of critical comments so that we can have effective public discourse and public engagement.

How can one engage in debate and make critical comments in a constructive and fair manner that will allow one's views to be received and heard? I would like to propose a framework to encourage such interactions.

THE FIVE Cs

When engaging in critical comments in an interaction, we can consider the five Cs.

- **Competence**
First is competence of the person. A critical comment is more credible when made by someone competent. Competence refers to the knowledge and skills relevant to the issues at hand. Formal qualifications and job titles such as university professor or a Cabinet minister are proxy indicators of relevant competence. But whether a comment is valid or not depends on the factual basis and soundness of the argument.
- **Character**
Second is character. In principle, an individual's character is separate from the validity of his argument. Which is why there is a fallacious counter-strategy called *ad hominem*. This approach avoids genuine discussion of the topic by attacking an individual's character traits and detracting attention from the substantive issues. In practice, though, sometimes it is necessary to consider character. If someone is deceitful or there is clear intent to cover up facts, mislead the public or sow discord, then it is legitimate to bring up character issues when engaging in critical debates, to prevent an invidious erosion of public trust and cohesion from calculated moves by manipulative characters. Where there is evidence that character is an issue, it should be brought up explicitly, and not via innuendo or through vague accusations that come across like unsubstantiated character attacks.
- **Courage**
The third C is courage. Speak up courageously. This does not mean being uninhibited in explicating whatever happens to be in one's mind. That is impulsivity, maladaptive forthrightness, or poor situational judgment ability. Commenting courageously means offering analyses and inferences in a way that is factual, objective and scientifically defensible. It means speaking the truth, while aware of the potential cost, which could involve unhappiness and retaliatory actions from either the authorities or the public.
- **Constructive**
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 matter so that concrete solutions to problems can be co-created and practically adopted. Being

constructive also means putting in the effort to make sure the critical comment is not misconstrued; and being mindful of what is said or how it is said so that the critical comment is more likely to be well-received and considered seriously. The first four Cs - competence, character, courage and being constructive - are all attributes of a person. Someone who wants to engage better in a critical debate has a better chance of doing so effectively and being well-received when he or she possesses and practises 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 courageous and constructive comments on issues when there is a sociopolitical climate that supports them. So we should be asking - why do commentators speak up, or decide to give up, and what kind of climate for commenting are we cultivating in Singapore?

These crucial questions deserve specific and explicit answers. It is not sufficient to make general assertions that the climate in Singapore encourages or discourages critical comments.

To get clearer answers, interact with local and foreign academics working in Singapore, and also concerned others such as civil society advocates, journalists and community leaders. Find out their actual experiences and expectations. Among these responses, some will reflect Singapore's reality better than others. But all responses are relevant because people's perceptions are their subjective reality, which in turn influences their attitudes and actions.

To identify and answer questions on climate, seek information on any concrete events and evidence regarding actions taken against someone for making critical comments.

More importantly, address issues of mutual trust in benevolence between academics and Government. This is about one's belief that the other will mean what it says and say what it means.

It will be most unfortunate if only negatives, and no positives, can come out of the ongoing public debate over critical comments.

The worst thing that can happen is if we let ourselves be driven by a harmful cynicism, consumed by conspiratory beliefs, choosing to pick out arguments that confirm our biases, and engage in other counterproductive behaviours. Then a negative spiral of self-defeating attitudes and actions may result in our society.

An alternative way is possible, based on the five Cs of having competence, maintaining good character, being courageous and constructive as well as fostering a climate supportive of healthy criticism.

Such a climate can be reasonably sceptical, but must be guided by intellectual honesty, humility and practical intelligence. This will enable us to address differences in a civil, healthy manner and move forward cohesively, even if disagreements continue to exist. This is essential not just

for the parties involved in the arguments, but also the many others observing and making conclusions.

Whether we are academics, journalists, policymakers, civil society advocates, community leaders or concerned citizens, there will be situations where we have to make critical comments or respond to such comments. Focusing on the five Cs will help reduce negativity, produce positivity and co-create solutions.

We will all be better off if we get the psychology of debate right, not just the politics.

David Chan is director of the Behavioural Sciences Institute and professor of psychology at the Singapore Management University.