



Social media is polarizing the world

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Doesn't it seem that people are now more opinionated than ever before? Don't you know people who will dogmatically defend their opinions to death, as if it makes one iota of difference to your relationship or anything else that really matters?

Everyone has opinions about everything these days. Take something as innocuous as a facemask. Even this life-saving accessory of 2020 became contentious.

We should remember that opinions are like, um, our rear ends. We all have one. But please don't eagerly volunteer to share yours – it's not polite.

We live in a world more polarised by opinion than ever before. In the United States, the political divide is ripping apart families and friendships, while in the United Kingdom, bitter bickering over Brexit is fracturing the country.

The vast majority of Americans believe political discourse is now far more ugly and negative than in previous years, surveys show. So toxic is the political climate that 62% of Americans now say they avoid saying certain things because it might offend others, according to a survey done by the Cato Institute, an American think tank. Then there's France, where we saw how dangerous it can be to express a viewpoint. So many subjects are contentious these days – immigration, vaccination, pseudoscience, religious policies, corruption.

Locally, so much is "sensitive". What amazes me is the blind loyalty of some Malaysians to politicians convicted of crime and corruption.

Here's the thing. Facts and arguments don't always shift people's opinions. "Confirmation bias" means people choose to uphold information that supports their beliefs and reject whatever contradicts them. We live in delusion, with opinions often based on feelings rather than reason.

And it appears we're more opinionated than ever. Maybe I'm fantasising but I recall a time when we didn't war over words so much and every damn thing didn't turn into a battleground of opinions.

That time was before the advent of social media. News was more objective then, or at least news producers tried to be. Nowadays, we're bombarded with opinions. TV news anchors shamelessly editorialise news. DJs rant on radio shows. And social media? That's one big battleground, where people constantly fire off rockets of fury and rage, and heartlessly tear apart some poor victim for some immaterial indiscretion.

Online, there are no social consequences from confrontation, especially when people are anonymous or using an online persona. We're not even interrupted mid-sentence! Keyboard warriors can become like drivers behind the wheel of a car, flying off into unreasonable rages.

The ugliest corner of social media is the comments section. I've seen shocking racist vitriol among Malaysians there – stuff we'd never dare say in person.

Social media has been described as an “echo chamber” – users control content through liking, subscribing and blocking what they like or don't like, thus creating a space that echoes back their opinions. In these “filter bubbles”, or information bubbles, the person is enveloped with information that validates their beliefs and biases. Thus, racist rhetoric and hateful ideas get amplified.

This is where it gets very dangerous. Studies have shown echo chambers exacerbate rage, accelerate radicalisation and enable recruitment by extremist groups. Isis, for example, has actively used social media for recruitment and support, such as their “one billion campaign” on YouTube appealing for support among Muslims. Recent analyses of policy documents in Britain show nearly all terrorism cases there have a “digital footprint”.

The “truth” has often become a battered casualty online – “post-truth” and “fake news” are today's bywords. False, slanted or decontextualised information abounds on the Internet.

The “infodemic” of misinformation was a problem in the Covid-19 pandemic response. And then there are anti-vaxxers who reject all scientific or government advice, no matter how strong the evidence is – anything beyond their bubble is not trusted.

Disturbingly, in a huge data breach, Facebook profiles were acquired by a firm using data to influence elections. Cambridge Analytica was accused of influencing outcomes in UK's Brexit referendum and the US presidential election in 2016. Social media was also used by political parties – by “cybertroopers”, specifically – in Malaysia in the last election. Fake news, polarised politics and political meddling – social media companies clearly have much to work on (which is why some people refuse to have a Facebook account).

In the meantime, we have a moral obligation to examine and confront our own biases (yes, we all have biases). If you know you're prejudiced against a particular race, go meet someone from that race who embodies a challenge to your negative ideas. That's my opinion – and please tell me how you fare.

In face-to-face contact, we can read intention and build connections through nonverbal cues and eye contact, thus enabling empathy; conversations can break virtual walls by identifying common traits or interests and a shared humanity.

Real life also sets immediate boundaries on behaviour. As Mike Tyson once said: “Social media made y'all way too comfortable with disrespecting people and not getting punched in the face for it.”