

Rise of the online activists
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Internet opens up avenue for many Singaporeans to champion causes
THE Internet has made activists of Singaporeans.

Many see social networking sites, forums, blogs and online videos as ways to champion their causes. The Straits Times has found more than 30 local causes online run by greenies, geeks and everyone in between. The National Volunteer and Philanthropy Centre said new causes run the gamut from groups supporting the rights of migrant workers to those focusing on specific health issues such as glaucoma.

Blessingsinabag.com, for example, was started by a student wanting to clothe poor Third World children.

And iwant2bike2work.org is run by two men who are promoting cycling.

Cyberspace's many communication tools make it 'a very efficient facilitator of what happens offline', said Mr Tan Tarn How, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, who has researched the Internet's impact on society.

Environmental groups, especially, have exploited the Internet. Of the 30 groups found by The Straits Times, more than 10 belonged to major green groups, whose updates can be found at <http://www.WildSingapore.com>, which highlights the best green news and pictures of all the blogs.

They push for everything from saving Singapore's sea shores to a more eco-friendly lifestyle, even using the social networking facilities on Facebook.

Other activists are seeing payoffs too. Dayoff.sg, a cause started by a group of Unifem (United Nations Development Fund for Women) volunteers here, has this message to push: Employers, give maids a day off.

Its online viral campaign - so named because it uses online networks to reach out to the masses - includes videos, websites, a Facebook group and e-mail lists.

'There is not much money, so we go online, which keeps costs very low,' said the president of the Unifem group in Singapore, Ms Saleemah Ismail, 39.

Other than being an economical form of marketing, the Internet is also opening up a platform for alternative groups, as Mr Tan pointed out, 'where they were not allowed to in the physical space'.

The Internet's immediacy and connectivity have a galvanising effect on people, he said. 'It allows people to be emboldened, not only to think but to act.'

The Singapore Queer-Straight alliance (SinQSA) is one such example. Formed last month by heterosexuals to bridge the social gap between gay and straight communities here, it seeks to change misconceptions through dialogue.

The group's four founders met online, and now seek to use the Internet to engage the community.

One of them, Mr Ho Chi Sam, 25, said: 'Going online beats knocking on doors, especially for our cause. Communication via the Internet is the initiation, the follow-through and the follow-up for most of our discussions.'