We, the citizens of Facebook

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ON National Day, more than half of Singapore would have celebrated not just in real life but on Facebook, for a large number of Singaporeans proud to fly the red-and-white are also citizens of Facebook nation.

Singapore, more so than any other country, has taken to Facebook in a way that is uncharacteristically enthusiastic. As of August last year, the average user in Singapore spent the most time per session on the social networking site than any other user in the world – 38 minutes and 46 seconds, according to Experian, an information services company.

Some of that Facebook time is beginning to encroach on offline time – those stolen seconds for status updates, photo uploads and passive, almost reflexive, stalking that we seem to believe no one else will notice.

“When we look at how we have dinner with our friends, most of them are on their phones. They’re not really having a real conversation,” says Pat Law, founder of GoodStuph, a social media consultancy. She is, by her own admission, one of the increasing number of people negotiating the shiny connections to the ether of the Internet that threaten to overshadow the mundaneness of reality.

“During dinner I try to manage myself. (I’ll say), ‘Ok, I’m gonna Instagram this meal first, ok?’ And then I’ll dump my phone in my bag,” she says.

It would now appear as if we are navel-gazing even about our navel-gazing. SocialKit, a Facebook widget, was launched by GoodStuph about two weeks ago. The app lets Facebook users analyse the demographics of their friends and average number of status updates, among other things. Already, the app is being accessed by 100-200 new users a day.

Meanwhile, Facebook’s penetration here has continued to grow. The latest data peg it at 55.6 per cent of the population, or about 2.61 million users. Twitter’s reach here is considerably smaller at 12 per cent of the population aged 15 and above, but high enough to put the country in the global top 10 list.

This preoccupation with our online selves is no longer the domain of unwashed teenagers playing marathon Diablo sessions or self-photographing bloggers. Facebook is now eight years old – many lifetimes by online standards – and its denizens have grown older with it.

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In fact, when asked to hazard an educated guess, Marko Skoric, an assistant professor at NTU’s Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, believes it is the younger-to-middle-aged males who are significantly less inhibited in expressing themselves online.

His 2009 survey of 522 respondents put the mean age of Internet users in Singapore at 33 – significantly younger than non-Internet users at the mean age of 52, but hardly juvenile.

Singapore's increasingly adult presence on social media sites has borne out a series of incidents that are most emphatically no longer child's play.

Just last month, netizens – through a combination of otaku-esque obsession and online resourcefulness – picked away at NParks' purchase of 26 Brompton bikes, setting off a chain of events that resulted in the suspension of an NParks officer.

In a time of the Huffington Post and The Daily Beast, this would not be remarkable in the US, but in a local context, online sleuthing – “CSI” in former parlance – has taken on a highly charged context, its tone bordering on the accusatory, with netizen reactions that are swiftly painted in broad and ruthless strokes.

“Singaporeans expect a pretty high level of service from the authorities and when these expectations are not met, they tend to respond with a lot of vitriol,” says Asst Prof Skoric. “This also indicates that people feel quite powerless to make a real change, and hence resort to venting online instead.”

These are heady times for local Facebook users who, behind a keyboard and mouse, can slouch as tall as any heavyweight entity. Last year, Resorts World Sentosa (RWS) was backed into a corner by netizens and had to temporarily suspend fan postings on its Facebook page after “pre-meditated cyber harassment” by animal welfare activists.

There is, however, a difference between making a change and making noise. In the case of RWS, the ruckus raised by animal welfare activists over the firm's use of wild-caught dolphins for its oceanarium might have stopped just short of change. RWS appears to remain set on showcasing the mammals.

There are two kinds of people who use social media, says Natalie Pang, an assistant professor at NTU’s Wee Kim Wee School. There are “those who use it to seek information but rarely post, and those who use it to seek information and express their opinions”, she says.

The second group of people participate in what Asst Prof Pang calls a “deliberation on public opinion”.

“For such deliberation to be healthy, it needs to be tolerant and accepting of diverse opinions. However, I think those who belong to the second group in Singapore use social media in a rather purposeful way, that is, they express their opinions to reinforce their views,” she says.

For such people, Facebook or Twitter is largely an echoing chamber, and voices that go against the tide are quickly shouted down by expletives and ad hominem attacks. “Whilst social media can be used to seek diverse opinions, it is weak in converting opinions,” she adds.

While a previously reticent nation has gone to town on Facebook with how they feel about everything, even on political matters (these days, everything is one), it is unclear if Singaporeans are becoming correspondingly more outspoken offline.

According to NTU’s Asst Prof Skoric, current research shows that online participation generally has a “small positive effect” on offline participation.

And as forums and Facebook pages brim with inventive after each train service outage or football match broadcast glitch, specialists still struggle with distinguishing between the amplification of anonymity and genuine sentiment.

“This is not going to go away and may actually get worse in case the economy goes sour, for example,” says Asst Prof Skoric.

Online, where “likes”, hashtags and CSI reign supreme, a cacophony of voices is building. It will be alternately baffling, self-contradictory and at times frivolous. But against the crescendo of a nation talking to itself, more people will have to listen.