



“Media in the election: Becoming a ‘normal’ nation”
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Mr Mahizhnan was a speaker at “Understanding Voting and Political Engagement”, a lunchtime talk organised recently by The Wee Kim Wee Centre, Singapore Management University (SMU). Below is a text of his speech as it was presented.

I will confine myself only to the role of the new media and the old media (or the mainstream media as is generally known) in this year’s general election. New media refers to all internet-related and mobile-related media. And I will only try to address three frequently asked questions and finally make one general comment.

Question 1:

One of the big questions asked about this election is “Did the new media win the election for the Opposition and lose the votes for the PAP?”

There is no doubt that the new media has played a crucial role but how decisive a role is yet to be determined as there is no hard data available yet. Some rules and regulations had been relaxed since the last election in 2006 and that made the new media more active than ever before. The volume and range of information and views this time was far more than in 2006, partly because there were far more players and constituencies in this general election.

The use of new media varied from party to party, with the most desperate using it the best. The Singapore Democratic Party had started using it effectively well ahead of anyone else, with podcasting and videocasting well before the elections.

I would like to use a rough schematic invented by my IPS colleague Tan Tarn How, called the “Four Ps”, to assess the online efforts of the parties:

- Presence – Your footprint on the Web;
- Projection – How you project your campaign messages on the Web;
- Preparedness – How well prepared are you to deal with this new base in the new media Unlike with the old media you cannot control the elements involved;
- Positive/Negative effect – Whether your online activities helped or set you back.

Our ‘guesstimate’ is that the Workers’ Party and the SDP did much better than all others, even better than the gargantuan PAP. With the PAP, not all their cylinders fired or sometimes, they fired at different times pulling it in different directions.

Also, a lot of non-party members, that is, ordinary people went into this new media sphere and used it to support or condemn the parties and candidates. Thus, the new media playing field was more level – or levelled – by political actors as well as ordinary people.

The old position was that the media owned you. Or only a few powerful people owned the media. We now have a lot of people who own the media – at least the new media. The relaxation of rules and regulations also did not lead to the new media running amok with falsehoods and smear campaigns by the parties. This just shows that Singapore political parties are normal. Individual behaviour on the Net varied widely but that is to be expected – and normal to the cyberspace.

Question 2:

Did the new media push the mainstream media?

The role of mainstream media in this election has also come under a lot of scrutiny. Past surveys show that there is mainstream media bias and favouritism towards the ruling party. But since 2006, many observers have noted a marked change in mainstream media coverage of the Opposition - more information and less cynicism.

Is 2011 very different even from 2006? Certainly volume went up simply because this was a much bigger election and more needed to be covered. But was the tone and slant much different? Some believe it was so and it appears to be so but we need more hard data – content analysis – to say how much.

What is a really interesting question is “Is this inevitable?” Did the new media push the mainstream media to be more balanced?

While it is clear that the new media had pushed the mainstream media, and that the mainstream media was no longer the sole agenda setter in Singapore, the political coverage of the mainstream media in 2011 and even in 2006, may not have gone this far without internal management decision to move to the centre. Habits of hardcore players – or knuckle-duster politics – could have pushed the mainstream media to stick to their old ways but that did not happen. There was clearly a shift in the political management of the mainstream media. The need to bridge the credibility gap that the mainstream media had long been suffering from must have been an important factor in the calculus and final decision.

Most important of all, the Singapore mainstream media was slowly returning to what it was prior to the 1970s – a normal media environment with a plurality of voices and views and ownership controls.

Question 3:

Did the combination of the new media and the mainstream media make the PAP lose six percentage points in this election? At least, were they the primary culprits, some may ask.

While I am not a political scientist, just from attending the various election rallies and talking to a number of people on the ground I could sense a noticeable ground shift – against the PAP. It remains to be confirmed if the ground shift was fuelled by the media or the other way around. In fact, we had some internal debates about this and we posed two questions to get at the answer: suppose the new media had had such a field day in 2006, would the electoral outcome have been different in 2006? And if the new media had been under the same restrictions in 2011 as in 2006, would the electoral outcome have been different in

2011? I have no answer to that based on hard data but my guess based on media effect studies is that except in marginal constituencies, the effect would have been different but not significantly different. I am sure I will be challenged on this – most of all by my own colleagues – but we are all agreed that this election is at least an Internet-aided election if not *the* Internet Election. There is clear indication that media, especially the new media, and the ground are interacting all the time and constantly feeding each other. The new media reflected what was on the ground much more than what the mainstream media had ever done in the last 35 years or so. The ground also had learnt a lot of new things from the new media and it reacted. And this is very normal in most other countries.

My overall comment:

That leads to my final comment. What is happening in Singapore is that many things are returning to their “normal” state. We had built up the idea of a unique nation to such an extent that it justifies a unique political system of “1.1 parties” in Parliament, and what some people call “*masak-masak*” Opposition in the guise of Nominated MPs and Non-Constituency MPs sitting in the same chamber as the elected representatives of the people. This has been characterised as an invention of the PAP government to give some kind of Oppositional presence in Parliament. What the election results as well as the new media and mainstream media have shown is the normalisation of a unique nation and the process is already underway.

At the talk held on 27 May 2011, the findings of a poll conducted during the election by Malaysian opinion research firm Merdeka Centre were also presented. The other speakers at the event include Associate Professor Paul Anantharajah Tambyah from National University of Singapore (NUS) and member of human rights organisation MARUAH; Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser from the Department of Sociology in NUS; Associate Professor Bridget Welsh from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities in SMU; Mr Siew Kum Hong, activist, former Nominated Member of Parliament and editor of The Online Citizen; and Programme Director at the Merdeka Centre, Mr Ibrahim Suffian.

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