

GE not "Internet election", says survey

Hoe Yeen Nie

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SINGAPORE: Singapore's recent General Election (GE) was viewed by some as an "Internet election", but a joint survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) and the Nanyang Technological University (NTU) suggests this may not be the case.

The survey of 2,000 respondents was conducted two weeks after the May election and sought to find out the extent to which new media sites such as Facebook and blogs influenced votes.

The survey found media consumption remained centred on traditional media such as television, newspapers and radio, with only about 30 per cent of respondents also looking at new media sites for election news during the GE period.

Traditional media were cited as being more trustworthy sources of news, ahead of alternative sites and even websites of political parties.

Commenting on this, Institute of Policy Studies deputy director Arun Mahizhnan said: "We can see the trajectory of an increasing role for the Internet or new media.

"But because of the overwhelming impact of the old media -- the traditional media -- we have to acknowledge that it still holds sway."

Only about one in three said they got information through social websites, but their media diet included mainstream sources too.

Echoing a survey conducted by IPS last year, the survey found that 95.5 per cent of the respondents consumed some form of mainstream media content.

Compared to the 70 per cent of non-social media users, this group ascribed greater importance to newspapers and television as sources of information, although they did not trust them as much.

The survey found that contrary to the view of the Internet as a "lunatic fringe", this 30 per cent of respondents who read Facebook and blogs were more open to different media influences, and were more knowledgeable and less cynical about politics.

Within this group, more said they voted for the People's Action Party (PAP), rather than for the opposition.

This group mainly comprised younger, more educated males who came from higher-income households.

They also tended to discuss politics more frequently.

NTU Singapore Internet Research Centre director Ang Peng Hwa said: "There's a sense that the Internet is a place inhabited by people who are super-critical, super-cynical.

"What we're finding is that, that's not quite the case.

But there are limits to the findings.

Some have said it is not possible to isolate the impact of the Internet.

Mr Alex Au, who owns the "Yawning Bread" blog, said he feels it is "problematic" to be so narrowly focused on something in which various factors culminate to make a voting decision.

"For example, it has been discussed that the way the Internet itself, in raising certain issues which were not popular and not well-discussed previously, have affected the way the mainstream media have since taken up these issues," Mr Au said.

"It's really going to be difficult, in a simple survey with numbers, to measure such things. But that's maybe the greatest effect."

The survey also found that among the roughly 40 per cent who revealed how they voted, most said they had decided before the election.

Critics said survey authors could have further investigated if the Internet had any role in influencing the votes of the undecided, once the election was officially under way.