

GE2015 was not an 'Internet Election', survey finds

Channel NewsAsia, 4 November 2015

Despite growing access to the Internet and the acceleration of mobile Web use, Singaporeans have yet to experience an "Internet election" or "social media election", according to a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies.

After interviewing 2,000 citizens of voting age, lead researcher Carol Soon concluded: "Our results show that GE 2015 was not an Internet election. Comparing social media and mainstream media, people still consumed and trusted mainstream media more."

The survey, released on Wednesday (Nov 4), found that 69.6 per cent used social networking sites for election-related information during the polls.

While this was an increase from the 30 per cent at the 2011 General Election (GE), the number still lagged behind TV (88.8 per cent), print newspapers (80.2 per cent) and online websites of mass media (76.1 per cent).

Respondents named TV stations and their websites as their most trusted source for election-related information with a mean score of 3.03. Social networking sites came in sixth on the list with a score of 2.57.

A separate IPS survey by Dr Gillian Koh also revealed TV as the most important communication channel for 78 per cent of 2,015 respondents, with print garnering 73 per cent and the Internet 71 per cent.

Out of the 1,335 individuals who cited the Internet as important or very important, 69.5 per cent named Facebook as their top channel.

Dr Soon said another factor was the low online participation during the elections.

"Most people participated in election-related activities once a week or less, and when it came to the kind of activity they were passive, such as surveillance - following, sharing, commenting - or finding out what others are saying, as opposed to using the Internet or social media to mobilise or change opinions," she elaborated, pointing to how respondents indicated they almost never started discussion threads, wrote posts, or made videos online.

Additionally, Dr Soon said that with almost half of the respondents (47.3 per cent) making up their minds on who to vote for before Nomination Day, it suggested the Internet may not have had a big influence on the final results.

SOCIAL MEDIA EFFECT?

Dr Soon observed that leading up to Polling Day, there were a lot of expectations over the impact of social media, given the volume of online chatter and viral videos generated.

"But we've found clearly that it was not a social media election," she reiterated.

"Although there was some impact, it basically reinforces the fact that social media use is just one part of a larger picture: People use it to find out more information about issues that matter to them, and to form their own attitudes and opinions with regards to these."

“There could also be the formation of echo chambers. If you flock to groups of people who already agree and share opinions with you, this helps reinforce beliefs and there’s probably not much changing of the mind that goes on.”

Nonetheless, Dr Soon said it was worth noting that comparing social media users (79 per cent) to non-social media users, the former group tended to talk more about the election, were more interested in election issues and participated more offline.

If social media has such an effect, then this is what political parties should be looking out for, Dr Soon advised.

“Perhaps social media is one way to reach out to those politically interested, who are searching for more information, so in terms of outreach and mobilisation there is some potential.”

ONLINE CLOUT

When it came to the parties’ online presence, the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) was the “all-rounder” with the best use of online features and greatest impact, according to IPS researcher Tan Tarn How.

Mr Tan reviewed the five 5 parties with the most candidates - the PAP, Worker’s Party (WP), Singapore Democratic Party, Reform Party and National Solidarity Party.

He found that the PAP had the largest increase in Facebook posts since 2011 with 100 per cent of its content there of “primary” nature - either specially-crafted or value-added posts sourced from elsewhere.

The PAP also started early, ramping up its Facebook posts during the Budget and staying ahead of the other parties until the end of the hustings period.

It also had the top post on Facebook, with 7,387 likes and 7,438 shares for a video of Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam explaining the tax system.

Mr Tan’s study also ranked the PAP’s website as the best in terms of providing information, mobilising supporters, creating communities and facilitating social media integration and interaction.

On Sep 9, two days before Polling Day, the PAP had the most Facebook followers (164,000) and was tied for most Twitter followers (35,000) with WP.

WP and the PAP also used more platforms than the rest, namely through Instagram and mobile apps.

“Financial resources certainly provide an edge when it comes to engaging people online or putting out information,” said Dr Soon. “So with more money and manpower, larger parties are able to put out more information that is attractively packaged and presented, and as a result may resonate better with voters.”

When asked if this meant that social media is not the political equaliser it is often made out to be, she added that in the pre-Internet days, smaller parties faced even larger disadvantages.

“So what social media can do or has done is to perhaps close the gap, but the fact is it remains,” said Dr Soon. “For smaller parties to close the gap, they need to try to attract more volunteers and mobilise more supporters who can then perhaps help expand the kind of outreach they do online.”