The impact of new media on GE 2011

Hoe Yeen Nie, Imelda Saad
Channel NewsAsia, 13 May 2011

SINGAPORE: The 2011 General Election saw the use of new media in a myriad of ways.

The relaxing of online election advertising rules, allowed political parties a way to reach voters directly.

There certainly was a deluge of information online from slick party political videos to hours of raw video footage posted by just about anyone with a smart phone.

While the relaxation of rules on new media opened up more avenues to reach voters and even the occasional humour, some observers say this may only have had limited impact on the overall electoral results.

However, it managed to reflect ground dissatisfaction over policies.

Arun Mahizhnan, Deputy Director, Institute of Policy Studies, said: "The internet certainly helped communicate this sentiment on a scale that was unprecedented, and with the speed, as well as the sharing of views.

"It is this synergy between the internet and the ground sentiment that made the final impact. Whether Aljunied would have been won without the internet, I still feel it would have been very close, but the internet certainly put it over the line."

Ravi Philemon, Head of Community Outreach at socio-political blog, The Online Citizen, said: "If you go by what's reflected on the internet, you would think the opposition would win hands down. But that did not happen."

Observers note that some parties were relatively conservative in their use of online tools.

While there were fears that the internet could be the equivalent of a political "wild wild west" - they said some netizens acted responsibly, as watchdogs, for example during Cooling-Off Day.

Some say new media contributed to the political awakening of the average Singaporean and correspondingly, a rise in social activism.

But what is needed is also a basic understanding of the electoral process among citizens.

Blogger Alex Au for example, wrote opinion pieces which included an article about his experience as a counting agent.

"I think what's lacking in Singapore is a more in depth understanding of the process of democracy. We have a lot of urban myths about what happens behind the scenes when I think that should not be the case. An institution is strong only when people understand the workings of the institution and as citizens, whichever party you favour, it is in all our interest to ensure that the institution and the processes are strong.

"And there is no better way of achieving that then to give participants a close look at how it works, to understand who it works and perhaps to see some flaws and fix them and then take ownership of that process. That was one of the thing that I want to do this election."

Socio-political website, like the Online Citizen deployed its own citizen journalists to cover election related news.

"We want to be a platform for the average Singaporean, for his views, for his opinion. Although it may seem like TOC is leaning towards one side, we have not supported any political party," said Mr Philemon.

Despite such assertions, observers note there needs to be more balanced views online and one observer said he couldn't find any socio-political websites that were non-partisan in nature.

Professor Ang Peng Hwa, Director, Singapore Internet Research Centre, Nanyang Technological University, said: "We're trying to do this research project and were trying to look for a place where a pro-PAP blogger post would blog. Somebody who is pro-PAP, where would he post? We couldn't find a pro-PAP blog. The only pro-PAP blog was the PAP itself! So it wasn't a level playing field in its sense.

"Ideally what you want is really good debates over ideas and issues, not just being polemical. I mean you want both sides to be present and having a good debate and ideas really get worked out that way and online you don't see that.

"Mainstream media is definitely more balanced compared to the online media. Online media tend to be partisan whereas the mainstream media tend to present both views to the extent that they can. The norms of journalism definitely apply whereas you get the feeling that even the news online, except for those official mainstream media news sites, were more views of the writers rather than really news."

As for future elections, observers say they expect voters to turn to both traditional and new media as the twin source of information.

"I don't think the mainstream media missed. I can't think of anything major they missed out. But just in terms of being more detailed, you definitely will get more information online," said Professor Ang. "It's like a groundswell so I expect the next round in the next election, what you're going to see people want to have more of these jokes. I think more of these jokes will come up. Singaporeans are very creative right? So I think you will see more people getting online, if nothing else, to get the jokes. Jokes have become the killer apps!"

Mainstream media outlets with online content also saw traffic jump.

MediaCorp's online platforms had 49 million page and video views over the 12-day period from Nomination Day (April 27) to Results Day (May 8).

Tweets on @ge 2011 had some 12,500 followers.

While viewers stayed glued to their TV sets on Polling night, with MediaCorp channels registering a 20 per cent increase in viewership.

Channel 5 saw the highest viewership growth of 52 per cent for viewers above four, with 1.15 million people tuned into the coverage.

This was followed by Suria, with a 44 per cent increase, reaching 260,000 viewers while Channel NewsAsia, with analysts in the studio, attracted over 670,000 viewers (674,000), which is a 41 per cent increase.

Channel 8 viewership grew 15 per cent with 1.44 million viewers and Vasantham attracted 114,000 viewers.