

More social media use, but impact on GE2015 uncertain: IPS study

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WHILE there might have been a noticeable trend in increased social media usage during the 2015 General Elections in Singapore, this does not necessarily mean that it has a significant impact on how voters voted, shared researchers at the symposium on media and internet use during GE2015 organised by the Institute of Policy Studies yesterday (27 January).

Researchers also suggested that increased social media usage might not necessarily lead to more knowledge about the elections and electoral process, although greater intensity of use appeared to encourage more political participation, both in terms of online discussion and offline activities such as attending rallies.

The results were part of a series of analysis made using results of a survey conducted by IPS four days after polling day on 11 September 2015, which involved about 2,000 participants.

Informational, expressive and relational usage

Dr Natalie Pang from the NTU Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information focused on three main activities that social media users engage in – to find information, to express themselves and to build relationships with other users.

She noted that there was a higher likelihood for post-retirement users to go online to seek information about the elections, while the lower education groups are more likely to use social media to express themselves.

Dr Pang also concluded that in general, more Singaporeans were engaging in relational uses of social media, which suggested that they might be using social media to learn more about the views of other in relation to the elections, rather than as a means of airing their own opinions.

A participant at the symposium asked Dr Pang if the study group might consider separately studying platforms like individual and group blogs as compared to social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, as the level and type of engagement on these platforms might differ in intensity and tone.

Dr Pang acknowledged the differences, but said that survey participants were asked to identify the platforms they use as part of the study.

Addressing the knowledge gap

Dr Debbie Goh from the NTU Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information also noted that lower education groups tend to use alternative media sources to increase knowledge about the elections, candidates and political parties.

However, this does not mean that the increase of personalised communication, which Dr Goh defined as the production and sharing of political content based on personal interests, necessarily translate into better knowledge about the elections.

Dr Goh noted from the study that increased use of personalised communication led to only a marginal increase in political knowledge, and for some groups even a decrease.

She also noted that this increase in knowledge tend to be centred around party candidates, but less is known about topics like party slogans and the election process.

Citizens feeling other citizens' sentiments online

Nevertheless, Dr Elmie Nekmat from the NUS Department of Communications and New Media noted that increased social media use allowed Singaporeans to learn more about the opinions of others which in turn affects their views on issues such as housing, public transport and population.

Dr Elmie noted from the study that such opinions, particularly those aired on social media platforms that are open to public viewing, have very little effect on voting patterns.

Vote swing patterns

Associate Prof Zhang Weiyu from the NUS Department of Communications and New Media tried to analyse the vote swing phenomenon during GE2015.

Using results from the survey, she noted that there was a swing of votes from the ruling People's Action Party to the opposition (4.7%), as much as there was the much touted swing towards the PAP (8.2%).

She also noted a discrepancy where those who changed their votes between 2011 and 2015 also tended to attend election rallies of the parties they eventually voted against.

However, when queried why the figures do not seem to add up to the national swing of close to 10% in PAP's favour, Prof Zhang acknowledged that survey participants might not be giving an accurate picture, but the results were all they had to go on to get an understanding of the vote swing.