

Survey: 1 in 3 is a political cynic

Gwendolyn Ng

My Paper, 15 September 2011

An emerging group of media consumers, who get their political news from alternative online sources, have been found to read newspapers and other mainstream media as well.

They have been dubbed "onternauts" by senior research fellow Tan Tarn How of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS).

Onternauts, he explained, comes from a combination of the words "online", "alternative" and "astronauts".

He was speaking at a seminar at the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy yesterday, about the results of the Survey on Political Traits and Media Use conducted from July to October last year.

As part of the survey, 1,092 Singaporeans aged 21 and above were interviewed over the phone. Mr Tan said: "Use of the alternative online media is complementary, not competitive, to the use of mainstream media." The survey found that 12.6 per cent of those surveyed are onternauts.

Mr Tan pointed out that there are few "isolated" onternauts, while the majority are exposed to mainstream media.

Of the onternauts, 93 per cent read print newspapers; 84 per cent watch television; 89 per cent read mainstream media online and 60 per cent read foreign online media.

There are certain political traits that these onternauts exhibit: They are politically more knowledgeable, interested and liberal.

They also tend to be more politically engaged online and off- line, be it posting a comment on a blog or speaking to politicians.

Mr Tan said: "Their engagement is an important door for the Government. How do you engage them? How do you make them understand what you want them to understand?"

He also highlighted that it would be futile if the Government puts out the same message in the mainstream media as well as online.

He explained: "It's not going to change them, because they are already getting these messages, either online or offline."

The study also found that 30 per cent of Singaporeans are political cynics, defined by their distrust of politicians.

More men than women were found to be cynics. There was no significant difference when it came to demographics such as education, income and age.

These cynics are more likely to use online alternative media and foreign websites. They also prefer to use interpersonal channels like face-to-face meetings to discuss politics, the survey found.

One of the study's researchers, Dr Zhang Weiyu, suggested that the Government and policymakers take advantage of the online and interpersonal channels to reach these people.

Dr Zhang, an assistant professor at the National University of Singapore's Department of Communications and New Media, said: "We need to encourage interpersonal discussions directly between politicians and citizens... We find that interpersonal talk has a big influence on political psychology."