IPS Institute of Policy Studies

Tweet Tweet:
A Personal View of Social Media in GE 2011

Nikki Soo*

Nikki Soo is pursuing a Master's in New Political Communication and is a former IPS Research Assistant in the Politics and Governance Cluster.

Introduction

As a student of political communication, I was interested in how the different parties reached out to voters during the General Election in May 2011 (GE2011). Clearly, social media in the form of blogs, Facebook, Twitter, among others, played a significant role in providing voters with information – and misinformation – that influenced their votes to a certain extent.

Prominent communications specialist Clay Shirky wrote that with the communications landscape getting denser, more complex and participatory, the networked population is gaining greater access to information. This results in more opportunities for the public to engage in public speech and an enhanced ability to undertake collective action.[1] While often perceived as a truly global network, today's Internet as described by Dr Julia Hoffmann,[2] is also a global patchwork that mirrors persisting global and local inequalities.

Well-equipped with first-world infrastructure and a highly educated and technologically savvy workforce, Singapore is widely acknowledged as one of the most networked societies in the world, both metaphorically and technically.[3] Hence it comes as no surprise that Singaporeans have embraced social media with open arms. Singaporeans from all walks of life now exchange their thoughts, ideas and opinions via platforms such as Facebook, Youtube and Twitter for all purposes. But what about politics?

In the same way that there were those who wondered if the 2006 General Election (GE2006) was the "Internet Election", there are those who are wondering if GE2011 was the "Social Media Election". It is certainly a question that needs in-depth examination of all the material that was shared, not just in terms of quantity but also quality, and how social media might have framed the issues surrounding the political contest. The IPS Arts, Culture and Media research cluster is examining this issue in-depth and will be sharing in October the findings of a landmark survey they conducted. It is nonetheless clear that there were memorable developments in the use of the Internet this time around. The relaxation of legislation on the use of the Internet for electoral campaigning alone would have facilitated that but it would be useful to examine how it might have helped citizens and the political opposition become more involved in the political process, if not tilt the balance in the communications contest to these groups.

Social analytics firm Brandtology and digital agency Tribal DDB revealed that there were 44,000 blog posts, tweets and Facebook updates on Singapore-related material in the first 26 days of April, a 60 percent jump as compared to March's statistics at 27,000.[4] While the figure does not indicate if this is strictly attributable to election-related material, it is likely that there is a link to the biggest political event to take place in Singapore in five years. This paper offers an impression of the use of social media in GE2011. It also suggests how a young Singaporean voter interprets this with regard to the democratic potential of this medium on Singapore's changing political landscape.

The Power of Social Media

Analysts have attributed the success of political campaigns like that of Barack Obama's presidential contest in 2008 in part to the use of social media such as Facebook and Twitter. The strength of social media is supported by the presence of the Internet, broadening the concept of alternative news sources with noticeable effect.

In Singapore, instead of relying merely on print media alone, civil society and netizens are now able to access and contribute to alternative viewpoints from websites such as TheOnlineCitizen.com and TemasekReview.com, blogs of socio-political commentators like Dr Catherine Lim and Mr Alex Au as well as foreign press reviews on sites like The New York Times Online. Likewise, the space for opposition parties and politicians to present their case has increased significantly with these changes.[5]

Additionally, microblogging sites such as Twitter have enabled users to share short, witty thoughts and personal opinions on current affairs in an instant. This was especially evident during GE2011, with trending topics (or hashtags – a topic beginning with a "#" symbol to identify it) such as #sgelections and #GE2011 ranking high at that time. Microblogging has also been amplified by further applications on smartphones such as the Blackberry and the iPhone, enabling simpler and convenient updates anytime, anywhere. Rally attendees tweeted their thoughts, uploaded pictures and videos just as speeches were delivered. Mainstream media agencies also joined in by creating Twitter accounts (@stcom, @TODAYonline, @ge2011 and @cnalatest). The creation of cross-platform applications permit one-stop updating, further simplifying the process. The Twitter page for TODAYonline achieved an impressive Klout Score of 74 out of 100, a testament of its wide and strong sphere of global online influence.[6] The Klout Score measures overall online influence with higher scores representing a wider and stronger sphere of influence.[7]

Instant analyses and individual commentaries provided by netizens' reporting on the election scene threatened to make any bias in the mainstream media appear stark and at odds.

With a greater flow of information citizens were allowed to have a better sense of the election from all sides if they cared to look. They re-circulated archived material about politicians and their parties, their track record and their commentaries to provide their take on the context, history and issues that were relevant to the election. Certainly, there was every chance that netizens had their own biases, yet readers were under no illusion that they should expect only dispassionate accounts of what was happening from such material.

Types of Social Media Employed in the 2011 GE

Use of Web 2.0 in Singapore's GE2011 manifested itself in various forms:

- Facebook:

  - A groundbreaking social tool created in 2004, Facebook has more than 500 million active users worldwide, and more than half of them access the site via mobile applications on their cellphones.[8] Out of these Facebook users, there are 2.5 million Singaporeans.[9] These staggering statistics reveal a shrinking world, making it possible to share opinions broadly with one's Facebook connections.

  - In GE2011, status updates, lengthy notes and YouTube videos on candidates' pages showed how they tried to use this social influence to affect audience's thoughts and deliberation processes. Opposition parties used their Facebook accounts for political expression and the mobilisation of people and resources.

- YouTube:

  - A video-sharing website created in 2005, YouTube is easily the most convenient platform presently to share videos. Its fast video buffer time and easy-to-use interface also strengthened its popularity, as proven by statistics. As an indication on the global scale, more than 13 million hours of videos were uploaded during 2010, with 35 hours of video uploaded every minute. Additionally, over 4 million users are connected and auto-sharing in at least one network (e.g. Facebook).[10]

  - In GE2011, mainstream media company ChannelNewsAsia made a commendable effort in recording most of the election rallies and sessions where candidates were introduced by their parties, then uploading them to YouTube so citizens could watch these in their own time. This was a real boon. With numerous rallies taking place at the same time, citizens could watch more if not all the rallies unfiltered, rather than just the one or two that they could physically be present at in one night.

- Microblogging:

  - Tools such as Twitter have only been popularised in recent years. Twitter is most effective if it is integrated into a website, blog or a Facebook account as instant updates and news can be shared via mobile devices. When effectively harnessed, Twitter is also able to serve as a mobilisation tool, gathering people at rallies and constituency visits.[11]

  - In GE2011, most parties used this social media platform as a supplement to their website, providing real-time updates of on-going events such as walkabouts and press conferences. The parties with the largest following by number of Twitter accounts were the Workers' Party (WP) with 7289 followers, People's Action Party (PAP) with 4840 followers, and Singapore

Democratic Party (SDP) with 4798 followers. An interesting point to note is that the Singapore People's Party (SPP) was the only party that competed in GE2011 without a Twitter account. This may have affected the dissemination of their manifesto and political statements.

o The SDP used Twitter to provide dates of its activities directly via a feed on its website and other short updates appeared only on their Twitter page.

Factors That Made Social Media Popular

Three main factors seem to have propelled social media's popularity: cost, speed and audience. Parties and candidates also no longer desperately needed to attract the attention of the mainstream media journalists to gain visibility and rally support.

- Cost

    o The low cost of using the Internet and employing social media during campaigns was especially significant and practical for new political parties in the opposition camp in Singapore trying to raise the funds required to contest the election. As the newest political party, the Reform Party is a prime example. Established in July 2008, they built their reputation by posting updates on their website thereformparty.net and tweeted updates on their Twitter account @thereformparty. A tweet posted on 1 May 2011 read: "MC: We are in dire need of polling agents. Please volunteer by signing up at our office at 18A Smith Street." indicates the practicality of using social media to send a quick plea for help, and a cost-free one at that.

    o Parties maintained a constant presence online at no added costs, ensuring that their messages and updates were consistent. This heightened their relevance, provided a platform for them to build on as well as displayed their commitment as a party towards supporters. The WP sustained a notable multi-faceted online presence with active updates and recirculation of their policy suggestions on their website www.wp.sg, Twitter account @wpsg and their YouTube account http://youtube.com/wpsingapore.

- Speed

    o The speed and frequency at which political parties were able to update their websites, Facebook pages and Twitter with information also contributed to social media's popularity. A prime example of this would be WP's rebuttal to the last minute distribution of leaflets by the PAP to residents in Nee Soon GRC before Cooling-Off Day. The WP posted a rebuttal on their website minutes to midnight, just before any of these materials would have been disallowed because of the Cooling-Off Day rules.[12] The instantaneous nature of the rebuttal reflected the inherent power of the Internet as a fast-paced tool.

    o On Polling Night, mainstream sources took up to three hours to publish and confirm reports such as election results, on their respective websites,[13]

whereas netizens could read reports and updates from the ground well ahead and felt immersed and engaged with great immediacy.

- Audience

  o The casual, less serious tone of social media resonates with younger voters, a notable feature especially with 200,000 new youth voters in 2011. Socio-political commentator Catherine Lim noted, "The rise of a younger, more articulate electorate, the power of the Internet and the social media allowed free discussion on usually censored topics."[14] There was also a reduced barrier to offer and share opinions. Using a phrase of Dr Ho Khai Leong, author of *Shared Responsibilities, Unshared Power* (Eastern University Press, 2003), there is no longer a need to be a "super-citizen", where one who has to rustle-up all the necessary data and have a good command of English in order to have a "right" to engage in political expression or policy discussion. This levelling quality of the Internet has overturned a political culture that has held for a long time since Independence, even if it places a similar if not higher level of responsibility on readers to treat material online with critical analysis.

  o On 4 May 2011, the Prime Minister (PM) Mr Lee Hsien Loong chatted with younger voters through Facebook. Answering questions over an hour, he used Internet phrases such as "Don't flame me" and "TTFN" (meaning "ta ta for now", or see you later), indicating that he felt it important to engage netizens and in a style that was different from that usually associated with the Establishment.

  o Social media is a new way of getting involved in a cause one feels strongly about, even if it might not always provide the first impetus to so.

Impact on the 2011 GE

The usage of the Internet and social media in GE2011 made an impact in several ways. This included heightened interest in the election rallies, press conferences and online comments on various profiles. Some of the most memorable instances are as follows:

1) The "Nicole Seah" Effect

As one of the youngest candidates, Ms Nicole Seah shot to election "stardom" immediately after she was introduced as part of the National Solidarity Party (NSP) team contesting in Marine Parade Group Representation Constituency (GRC). Seen as a direct contender to the PAP's candidate in the same GRC, Ms Tin Pei Ling, Ms Seah's popularity was evident from the number of Facebook "likes" she received. Within seven days of her introduction, she gathered a total of 67,000 "likes" on her page, whereas as a contrast, then Foreign Minister George Yeo took three years to receive around 20,000. After Polling Day, her number of supporters rose to approximately 100,000.[15]

Despite the attention given to Ms Seah, being well-liked online did not translate to victory at the polls, but it did serve her "suicide team" of unknowns surprisingly well. The NSP

garnered 43.36 percent of the votes in Marine Parade which meant that the PAP team helmed by the well-loved former Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong won by a vote share below the national average.[16]

Social networking posts analysed by HP Labs Singapore's sentiment analysis software indicated that the NSP had garnered the most positive posts out of all seven political parties, even if it did not win a single contest at the polls.[17] It did draw attention to her party and increased political awareness among youths.

Increase in electoral knowledge within civil society, especially young adults could be partly attributed to social media. On average, the rate of tweets increased from about 20-30 per hour to about 100 per hour on Polling Day. Of course, the extent of using social media via mobile phones has greatly extended the reach and distribution of content all over Singapore.[18]

While online popularity polls may have favoured the opposition (for instance, comparing the 98,493 Facebook "likes" for Nicole Seah and Tin Pei Ling's 7,396), the results did not reflect this. The majority of Singaporean voters thought carefully about their choice, with more voting for the PAP team in Marine Parade as a whole, rather than basing their vote on individual candidates on both sides of the fence.

   2) *"Live and Repent'" Statement*

A highlight on the Internet in GE2011 was former Minister Mentor (MM) Lee Kuan Yew's comment that voters in Aljunied had "five years to live and repent" if they chose the WP team there instead of the PAP. With the help of the Internet, this comment was circulated and led to indignant responses and fiery discussions on the Temasek Review, among others[19].

This negative sentiment was acknowledged by the Prime Minister, Mr Lee Hsien Loong at a lunchtime rally on 3 May. In his final rally, then Foreign Minister George Yeo, who was contesting in Aljunied, acknowledged the reactions and said that that a "transformed PAP" was needed. He added that it was plain that this election revealed the "outpouring of pent-up emotion" and "resentment against the government" from voters, which only served to create "greater anger, greater resentment in many people."[20] Despite his appeal to voters, the PAP team in Aljunied lost.

Contrast with GE2006

It is important to note that most of the technology and social media platforms used in GE2011 were not present in the last election as most of the tools used, apart from blogs, were only developed and popularised after GE2006. At the time, Internet sources and technology were mostly limited to blogging and podcasts. In recent times, blogs commenting on social and political issues in Singapore have gained prominence and exposure in light of regulatory obstacles placed upon the media and more broadly on online discourses.[21]

In 2006, there were restrictions on Internet campaigning and electioneering, with a ban on "explicit political content" and a requirement for political-inclined blog(ger)s to be registered. However, to the government's credit, this ban was not enforced too stringently, perhaps in

view of its futility and the potential that it might end up discrediting the government.[22]   The regulations were liberalised for GE2011.

Conclusion

Sociologists Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld postulated in 1948 that mass media alone do not change people's minds. Instead, they argued that there is a two-step process at play. Opinions are first transmitted by the media, and then they are echoed by friends, family members and colleagues. It is at this second social step that political opinions are formed, and this is how the Internet and social media in particular, can make a difference.[23] Allowing not only formal opposition parties and candidates the opportunity to create their own material and mobilise support is one important point of democratising the political contest. However, what really matters is examining how ordinary citizens could go online and try to influence their own peers, friends and colleagues by sharing what was of interest to them, or publish their own views and creatively produced political material to be players in the political contest, in their own right.

After GE2006, the Singaporean blogosphere has rapidly gained currency and even legitimacy in discussions and debates within popular, state and academic circles as a possible alternative site for public participation and information.[24] The use of social media is changing the nature of political communication and has some implications on the type of platform that might feature prominently in the next general election after 2011.[25]

Yet a wider audience and greater participation might not automatically translate to a democratic debate – 71 percent of Twitter posts do not generate a reply.[26] While social media may be gaining traction in political campaigning, it is evident that it will not do to rely entirely on it alone. With large numbers of constant updates, it is easy for social media users to skim through them, or miss out several updates in a sea of others. Also, netizens are not held to ideal standards of journalism nor should anyone expect them to, but by that same token, the material generated will need to be received with critical analysis. Politicians and parties from both camps can be equally frustrated if they expect posts or various material to be "factual" or "responsible". What they can count on is a point-of-view which they can engage.

From a political communications angle, social media has introduced a whole new ball game to the political landscape in Singapore. Some have taken to it better than others. By allowing netizens or the political opposition to generate questions and discussion, it is evident that social media will continue to grow in importance. It will certainly be interesting to properly design a method of tracking to examine if it will affect decision-making at general elections; to examine how Katz and Lazarsfeld's two-step process holds. Given the success of social media's position in GE2011 in Singapore however, political parties would be well-advised to maintain their online presence and relevance if they have the resources to – not simply through monetary resources but through the time and habit of creating important content. With the social media landscape continually shifting, it would be foolish to assume that the same tactics which worked this year will work in the next election. Indeed, the true test of the ability of political parties to harness social media can only be properly analysed over a longer period of time, perhaps by the next general election. It will also be intriguing to note what the ruling party, the PAP, might do between now and the next election in this new

communications space to maintain its primacy in the minds and hearts of Singaporean voters. Surely it isn't a space that works only for the underdog.

*****

The views expressed are the author's and do not represent those of the Institute.

If you have comments or feedback, please email ips.enews@nus.edu.sg

Lee Kuan Yew
School *of* Public Policy

National University of Singapore

[1] Clay Shirky, "The Political Power of Social Media: Technology, The Public Sphere, And Political Change," *Foreign Affairs* (Jan/Feb 2011): 1

[2] Julia Hoffmann and Arif Kornweitz, "New Media Revolution?" *Media Development* (Jan 2011): 7

[3] Terence Lee and Cornelius Lan, "Blogospheric Pressures in Singapore: Internet Discourses & the 2006 General Election," *Asian Research Centre Working Paper* No. 150 (August 2008): 2

[4] Amos Yeo, Penn Olson The Asian Tech Catalog, *Singapore General Election: 44 000 Social Media Updates in April,* 30 April 2011, http://www.penn-olson.com/2011/04/30/singapore-general-election-social-media/ (Accessed 2 Jun 2011)

[5] Suzaina Kadir and Zulkiefilmansyah, The Jakarta Post, "*Why the 2011 Singapore election is worth watching,*" 7 May 2011.

[6] ENP Newswire, *"2.42 million viewers watched Mediacorp's production of Singapore's General Election results,"* 12 May 2011.

[7] Klout: The Standard of Influence, *"Understanding the Influence Metric: What is a Klout Score?"*, http://corp.klout.com/kscore (Accessed 27 Jul 2011)

[8] Facebook, *Press: Statistics*, http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics (Accessed 2 Jun 2011)

[9] Bernard Leong, "Where & Why did Social Media succeed & fail in GE 2011?", 8 May 2011, http://www.bernardleong.com/2011/05/08/where-why-did-social-media-succeed-fail-in-ge-2011/ (Accessed 3 Jun 2011)

[10] Youtube, *"Press and Blogs Page,"* http://www.youtube.com/t/press_statistics (Accessed 2 Jun 2011)

[11] James Gomez, *"Social Media and Opposition Parties: Networking for Singapore's General Elections,"* 18th Biennial Conference of the Asian Studies Association of Australia (5-8 Jul 2010) 8

[12] TODAYOnline, *"WP Cries Foul Over Last Minute Leaflet Sent by PAP,"* http://www.todayonline.com/SingaporeVotes/EDC110506-0000075/WP-cries-foul-over-last-minute-leaflet-sent-by-PAP (Accessed 1 Jun 2011)

[13] Amos Yeo, Penn Olson The Asian Tech Catalog, *"5 Ways Social Media Has Impacted the Singapore Elections,"* 11 May 2011, http://www.penn-olson.com/2011/05/11/social-media-singapore-general-election/ (Accessed 3 Jun 2011)

[14] Marwaan Macan-Markar, Inter Press Service, *"Singapore: Social media challenges govt grip,"* 30 May 2011.

[15] Bernard Leong, *"Where and Why did Social Media Succeed and Fail in GE 2011?"* 8 May 2011, http://www.bernardleong.com/2011/05/08/where-why-did-social-media-succeed-fail-in-ge-2011/ (Accessed 2 Jun 2011)

[16] Channel NewsAsia, "GE Results," http://www.channelnewsasia.com/ge2011/results_grcs.htm#m (Accessed 25 Jul 2011)

[17] Digital Life, *"Online popularity alone won't get you elected,"* 11 May 2011.

[18] ibid

[19] Temasek Review, "Lee Kuan Yew: Aljunied voters have 5 years to 'repent' if they vote for WP," 30 Apr 2011, http://www.temasekreview.com/2011/04/30/lee-kuan-yew-aljunied-voters-have-5-years-to-repent-if-they-vote-for-wp/ (Accessed 25 Jul 2011)

[20] Chitra Rajaram, "GE: We need a transformed PAP, says George Yeo," 5 May 2011, http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/specialreport/news/1127032_162/1/.html (Accessed 25 Jul 2011)

[21] Lee, 7

[22] Lee, 8

[23] Shirky, 6

[24] Lee, 8

[25] Gomez, 3

[26] Hoffmann, 8