Social media's influence in S'pore politics here to stay

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IN AN interview with Asean journalists earlier this month, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reflected on governance and social media in Singapore.

On the latter, he said that people were spending more time on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and he wanted to have an online presence there too. While these platforms were not conducive for making speeches, there would be people on Facebook "who will not be reading speeches and this is one way to reach them".

Like the PM, other government ministers and members of Parliament are also using Facebook to reach out to Singaporeans. On their public profiles, they comment on economic and social issues, and post photos of them interacting with residents at constituency visits.

Some 3.6 million people - or around 66 per cent of the population - in Singapore use social media, according to 2015 statistics from global social media agency We Are Social. This is up from 50 per cent in March 2013.

When the Internet first became popular in the 1990s, there was much hype on how it would expand the communication repertoire of governments and politicians.

That has now become an understatement of the century. Globally, social media has transformed government-citizen and politician-voter interaction, and it is here to stay.

Why is this so?

The nature of social media reinforces dialogic communication which, according to organisational communication experts Michael Kent and Maureen Taylor, happens when parties have a sustained two-way dialogue, leading to a cooperative and communicative relationship.

First, social media intensifies "propinquity" - a sense of nearness and immediacy - between politicians and the public.

In the case of Facebook, highly interactive features, such as status updates, RSS feeds and the "Timeline", aid information sharing. Its "downloadability" through mobile devices creates an unprecedented round-the-clock connection between politicians and the public.

In a Pew Research Centre survey conducted in October last year, voters for both United States Democrat and Republican parties said that social media helped them to form deeper connections with the candidates they support.

This means that for politicians in Singapore, comments on their Facebook posts become part of an ongoing, and on-the-go, exchange of views.

Politicians and the people now converse in the present about issues, rather than after decisions have been made.

The result is government-citizen and politician-voter engagement on Facebook seems more timely and relevant to online users compared with other platforms, such as the online feedback portal Reach and ministry websites, which put out information but are not interactive.

Second, social media strengthens empathy which Dr Kent and Dr Taylor state is another prerequisite in order for dialogic communication to take place. In a public relations scenario, achieving empathy involves creating a setting which encourages stakeholders' participation and openness among dialogue partners.

On Facebook, text, pictures and videos provide invaluable information for the public who are now privy to not only their ministers' and MPs' priorities and personalities, but also their personal lives.

What is more, there are no exclusionary devices that prohibit participation as everyone has the autonomy to start a discussion thread or provide feedback on issues raised by politicians on their profile pages.

The above accounts for why governments elsewhere have upped their online presence.

The US government invests heavily in paying for social media-related services and funding research grants which help them understand Americans' online habits.

In 2010, the US media reported that the Congressional Research Service found that the government had spent at least US$945 million (S$1.3 billion) on advertising and public communications, including social media.

Politicians in Asia, such as Chinese President Xi Jinping and Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, too, are embracing social media to close the affective gap between them and their supporters and attract possible converts.

Mr Modi even embarked on "e-diplomacy" when he joined Weibo to connect with the Chinese before making his diplomatic visit to Beijing. As reported by the Wall Street Journal, he attracted 33,000 followers within 48 hours of his "birth" on Weibo.

Opportunities come with risks. Social media poses two key challenges to governments and politicians.

The lack of entry barriers to social media allows users to express their opinions in a variety of ways - from "liking" and "sharing" posts to posting friendly or terse comments. Politicians have to navigate online clutter and make sense of the information and signals they are sent.

There is also the question of how ministers can translate "likes" into meaningful responses which aid them in understanding the public's sentiments concerning policies. Here, big data analytic tools will prove useful.

While greater propinquity makes politicians seem more "real" - when in the past they were seen as unapproachable authoritative figures - it also blurs the line between what is private and public. Although genuine communication should be spontaneous and unscripted, the confluence of politicians' private and public lives places them in untenable situations when their personal opinions are perceived by the public to be inappropriate for a political figure or representative of the government's position.

Thus, it is understandable if politicians shy away from social media. However, that would mean losing a valuable opportunity for engaging with the public which is spending more time online. Besides accepting and embracing the inevitability of social media use, politicians will have to be more comfortable with transparency and accept that they will make and learn from mistakes in communication.

Social media has opened new avenues of engagement that were not possible via "old" media, such as the newspapers, television and traditional websites.

In the long run, dialogic communication on social media can help legitimise government decisions, promote a co-sharing of the ownership for shaping policies and increase citizen trust.

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