

Chances poor that public will take to the Net during polls

Tan Tarn How

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FIVE years ago, the Internet took a test in Singapore - and flunked miserably.

The occasion was the 2001 election, the first in which the World Wide Web promised - or, depending on your point of view, threatened - to be a liberating force that would level the playing field in the electoral game and ring in more freedom of expression for all.

The Net, after all, is not just a new technology. It is also supposed to be a disruptive one. It lets people do new things, or simplifies how old things are done.

But the Net failed to live up to the hype. Nomination Day came and went, then the hustings and Polling Day.

Through it all, the Internet was not so much a sideshow as a non-event.

There are three possible reasons it ended up a damp squib.

One is regulatory. That is, the Internet fizzled because of the laws cobbled up just before the election to limit electioneering and to curb expression online.

Parties were allowed only the items on a short 'positive list', including posting their manifestoes and histories, announcing events and hosting moderated forums.

Voters also interpreted the law as banning all expression of praise or criticisms of candidates or parties. (Last week, it was finally clarified that fair comment was fine but not blatant endorsement.)

No doubt, these proscriptions had a chilling effect. But research shows there are other reasons too.

Dr Randolph Kluver of the Nanyang Technology University found in a study that the opposition parties 'themselves did little with the few mechanisms available to them' in exploiting the Net.

Even the Singapore Democratic Party, whose leader, Dr Chee Soon Juan, declared that it would 'depend on' its website in the battle for votes, had a poor cyberspace presence.

The best websites were none other than the People's Action Party and that of its youth wing.

In the end, the online world merely reflected the state of the offline world, namely, the dominance of the PAP.

The Internet tilted the field playing field further, reinforcing rather than disrupting the status quo.

The ordinary voter probably did not use the Net as a tool for democratic expression for fear of running afoul of the law.

The cloak of anonymity the Internet allowed did not seem to be sufficient encouragement. Perhaps they believed that official monitoring meant the cloak was more apparent than real. Or they found it meaningless to exercise their right to free speech behind a pseudonym.

Another, more likely, reason is voter apathy.

Just as the opposition's Net ineffectiveness lay in their real-world weakness, Singaporeans stayed away because they were not interested.

The Net is a tool like a word processor: If you have nothing to write, then all its wonderful features are useless to you.

The third reason of the Internet failing the test is less pessimistic than the first two.

Perhaps the technology then was not developed enough to be truly disruptive.

Five years on, blogging is held up as the 'killer application' for citizen participation. The Internet has always been hailed for the ease with which it enables anyone to be a reporter, pundit and publisher. Blogging is the technologies that truly realise that dream.

Not many know that Singapore, despite its small population, is in the global blogging big league by at least one measure.

Take www.technorati.com, which searches through blogs much like

Google searches Web pages.

'Daphne Teo', 'Dawn Yang' (both controversial local bloggers) and 'Tammy NYP' (of the mobile phone sex video fame) have been among the 10 most used search keywords globally.

And it is not all fun and games, either. 'NKF' topped the rankings at one point last year. The number of new blog entries a day with the words 'Singapore election' ranges between a dozen and 30, hitting about 100 twice in the last three weeks.

Some Singaporeans, led by well-known bloggers Lee Kin Mun (mr brown) and Benjamin Lee (Mr Miyagi), have started the website, tomorrow.sg, a daily log of the best Singapore blogs.

Its usefulness is in 'aggregating' - collecting many people's information and opinions at one place, like a newspaper draws from numerous sources.

Other tools have also come of age. These include video via the Web (made painless with the high-speed Internet connections) and 'social software' for starting petitions, conducting surveys or forming groups.

The National Kidney Foundation (NKF) petition is a potent demonstration of how an ordinary person can start a huge ball rolling with almost no effort except for having a brainwave and using a ready-made tool.

When the different technologies come together, even more possibilities emerge.

Take sgrally.blogspot.com, set up by an anonymous person to make available rally videos sent to it by anyone.

The legality of doing so is made moot with identity hiding. Contributors who want safety in numbers can use www.pledgebank.com to find pledgers for 'I will send in my rally videos if 20 other people will join me'.

tomorrow.sg can highlight the videos, and bloggers can e-mail them to the world at large.

Citizen journalism - where the man in the street collects, reports, analyses and disseminate information - can also make a difference when used with other tools.

In the United States, some voters set up websites where they ask questions of candidates, who are then forced to respond.

Whistle-blowing may become a factor. This was how the fatal dunking in the armed forces was exposed, via a message to an online forum.

This time round, will Singaporeans take to the Internet during the polls?

More interestingly, will the parties be forced to react to happenings online?

I am a sceptic. Tools make things easier. But people have to put in effort to use them, however slight. Most Singaporeans have little care for politics except when politics is turned into entertainment. The elections won't change this fundamental fact.

In other words, if the Internet fails again, it won't be the Internet which actually flunks the test.

The writer researches media and cultural policy at the Institute of Policy Studies.