

The normalisation of the political cyberspace since the 2011 GE

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ONE key question concerning the upcoming election is how the “political Internet” in Singapore has evolved since the last election in 2011.

The answer: In the last four years, the biggest change is the “normalisation” of political cyberspace. By that, I mean that the online world has become more like the “normal” offline world, where there is a wide range of views with most opinion clustering round the centre.

It has happened in these ways:

- a) While the early Internet was almost exclusively used to express anti-government and anti-ruling party sentiments, the political Internet in Singapore is now home to a much wider spectrum of political views and players, and this is even more so since 2011. The alternative sites such as The Online Citizen (TOC), TR Emeritus and Yawning Bread are still around, but have been joined by new players. What’s more, some of these new and influential websites are politically in the centre such as Mothership, The Middle Ground and Inconvenient Questions. They are best called independent mainstream sites — “independent” in contrast to Singapore Press Holdings and MediaCorp (though some of their financial backers are not known publicly), and “mainstream” in offering news very similar to SPH and MediaCorp, though slightly more critical of the government. At the opposite end to TOC are new strongly pro-government/PAP sites such as Fabrications Against the PAP, Fabrications Led by Opposition Parties, and Singapore General Elections 2016 (slogan “Singapore is vulnerable. We cannot afford to fail. We need proven leaders.”)
- b) The independent mainstream websites are giving the anti-establishment ones a run for their money. Mothership trumps The Online Citizen in readership, according to the figures provided to me by both sites.

Indeed, the surprise is that TOC’s readership slumped from 1 million page views a month during the 2011 election to a fifth that, though it has since climbed back to almost that number. The Middle Ground, set up only in June as a reincarnation of the defunct Breakfast Network, has reached an impressive 300,000 views a month. The Real Singapore, before it was asked to shut down earlier this year and reborn as States Times Review, was the most popular political non-mainstream media political site, though a big question was whether people read it for entertainment rather than for true or serious political news or useful insights.

- c) The online websites of the mainstream media such as The Straits Times and Channel NewsAsia continue to dominate as online sources of political news. They have more readers than the alternative news sites. They were also more trusted than alternative news sites for election news, as we found in an IPS study in 2011.

- d) Social networking sites are so pervasive that platforms such as Facebook are used by Singaporeans of every political persuasion. The comments on Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's page are overwhelmingly supportive rather than critical of him. When Mr Lee Kuan Yew died and during the height of Amos Yee's saga, ordinary citizens (or at least pro-Mr Lee) came out in large numbers. Furthermore Facebook is a conduit for many articles from both independent and established mainstream media, therefore cementing its reach.
- e) The popularity of politicians online reflect their popularity offline. Prime Minister Lee's over 800,000 likes dwarfs Mr Low Thia Khiang's 22,000+ and Dr Chee Soon Juan's 6,000+. Almost all MPs and other politicians have Facebook pages.
- f) There is increasing financial backing and hence professionalisation of the websites, especially the mainstream ones. The Middle Ground has four full-time journalists and two staff in the business end. Inconvenient Questions has seven staff and outsources its video production. Mothership is able to pay a handful of full-time staff and has a budget to advertise. The Middle Ground and Inconvenient Questions are led by ex-professional mainstream media journalists. The Online Citizen struggles to get funds, paying its staff rates that range from "semi-formal to exploitative", according to one of its editors Howard Lee. Inconvenient Questions, The Middle Ground, Six-Six and Must Share News have formed a GE Online Alliance to pool resources.
- g) A number of sites offer articles that are completely one-sided (that is, totally ignoring the different perspectives in an issue) or loaded with emotive language. But the more serious sites are rather balanced and level-headed, irrespective of where they stand in the political spectrum, as my colleague Carol Soon and I found in a recent study. That is, partisanship has not stopped them from being "rational" (an example of a partisan media outlet that is rational would be The Straits Times). Being rational and partisan makes sense, because the best way to convince others of one's argument is to be rational rather than to rant.
- h) Since 2011, Singaporeans online are more willing to speak against the government, said editor Richard Wan of the alternative website TR Emeritus in an email to me. This willingness to speak up against the government is but a reflection of a similar trend offline. But it should be noted people are also more willing now to speak up for the government online. In the past, supporters of the government would practically be shouted at into silence. Overall, the willingness of speaking up for or against is part of the normalisation process where the online world becomes more and more like the offline one.

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