

Report on Forum on Internet and Media Use in GE2020 8 October 2020

By Neo Yee Win



The panel sharing a light-hearted moment during Q&A.

“Was GE2020 *the* Internet election?”

On 8 October 2020, the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) held the Forum on Internet and Media Use in GE2020 to address the above question. Continuing IPS’ research on media use during general elections since 2011, this forum, which examines the connection between media use, political traits and voting behaviour, was one of the three forums in the Post-GE2020 series. The session was livestreamed on Facebook — an initiative made possible by the IPS Online Series to bring discussions about social issues in Singapore to the public.

The speakers were Dr Carol Soon, Senior Research Fellow at IPS; Dr Natalie Pang and Dr Zhang Weiyu, Senior Lecturer and Associate Professor, respectively, from the Department of Communications and New Media, National University of Singapore (NUS); and Mr Chua Chin Hon, Chief Data Analyst of Analytix Labs. The two-hour session was moderated by IPS Adjunct Senior Research Fellow Mr Tan Tarn How.

The first three presentations were based on a post-election survey that was conducted by YouGov online with 2,018 eligible voters from 13 to 21 July 2020. The last presentation was based on Facebook data collected separately by Analytix Labs.

Opening Remarks

Mr Tan said that contrary to past elections, the COVID-19 pandemic forced political parties and voters to engage with one another online. Several personalities and issues gained a lot of traction online leading up to the election, such as Deputy Prime Minister Mr Heng Swee Keat, Dr Tan Cheng Bock from Progress Singapore Party (PSP), Ms Raeesah Khan and Dr Jamus Lim from the Workers' Party (WP), Mr Ivan Lim of the People's Action Party (PAP), and the government's use of the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA) during election time. As a result, there was much speculation over the impact of the Internet and media on the election. Mr Tan pointed out that Dr Soon, Dr Pang, A/P Zhang and himself had been part of the original team investigating media use during elections since 2011. This year, the academics' take was complemented with the addition of Mr Chua, a former journalist who is now working as a data analyst.

Mr Tan raised four questions to be answered by the panellists:

1. Was there a digital or generational divide between voters as far as media use was concerned?
2. How has online political engagement changed from the last election?
3. Who were the swing voters and what influenced them?
4. How did political parties use social media? How effective were they?

Dr Carol Soon: Generational and Digital Divisions During GE2020

Referencing public speculations of a generational and digital divide during the election, Dr Soon sought to address the following research questions:

1. How were the Internet and media used during GE2020, and how has it developed since GE2015?
2. With the migration of political campaigning online, how did people engage with political parties and candidates?
3. Were there differences in Internet and media use among different generations?
4. What else mattered for the voting outcomes?

The 2,018 respondents were categorised into four main generations: first-time voters (21 to 26 years old), other youths (27 to 35 years old), the "sandwiched" generation (36 to 55 years old), and "boomers" (56 years old and above). Initial analysis found voting to indeed be demarcated along generational lines. Out of the 1,034 respondents who answered the question on whom they voted for, boomers were most likely to vote for the PAP rather than the Opposition, followed by the sandwiched generation, other youths and first-time voters.

How were the Internet and media used during GE2020, and how has it developed since GE2015?

During GE2020, online websites of Singapore mass media were the most popular media platform for information seeking during elections, with over 45 per cent of respondents accessing these sites at least once daily. Television fell from first place in 2015 to second place in 2020, and Singapore online-only news and information websites (e.g., Mothership and Rice Media) followed in third place. Social media platforms like social networking sites and instant messaging (IM) platforms remained at the fourth and fifth place in 2020, respectively, similar to 2015, but their usage was slightly higher based on the increase in mean scores.

In contrast, traditional mass media platforms such as print newspapers and radio fell to seventh and ninth place, respectively, this year. Overall, there was an increase in the popularity of digital sources and a corresponding decline for traditional forms of mass media.

With the migration of political campaigning online, how did people engage with political parties and candidates?

Social media platforms were most popular, with social networking sites and IM platforms being the two most frequently used platforms to learn about and interact with political parties and candidates — about one in three respondents accessed these platforms at least once daily. Traditional forms of party communication like brochures and newsletters, were used by less than 10 per cent of the respondents at the same frequency.

Were there differences in Internet and media use among different generations?

Dr Soon noted that generational differences persisted in terms of Internet and media use. Boomers used traditional forms of mass media like print newspapers, TV and radio more frequently than other generations. On the other hand, youths used social media platforms like social networking sites and YouTube more frequently than older voters.

However, boomers used IM platforms as frequently as other generations for information-seeking, and more so than other generations to engage with political parties and candidates. IM platforms formed an important part of boomers' election media diet; IM platforms were the third most popular media for that generation. Based on these findings, Dr Soon said IM platforms served as a "generation-neutral medium" and "leveller" that bridges the digital divide across generations.

What else mattered for the voting outcomes?

When asked their primary reasons for voting, respondents expressed the most concern about the quality of candidates, followed by the need for alternative views in Parliament, and parties' track record. Boomers differed slightly from other generations as having alternative views in Parliament were more important to them, over the quality of candidates. Dr Soon said this could be due to them having witnessed the evolution of Parliament and desire to hear from more diverse voices.

Respondents were most satisfied with how the incumbent government handled issues relating to education, transportation and healthcare, and least satisfied with how the government managed population growth and the cost of living. Boomers tended to be most satisfied, particularly towards issues relating to transportation, housing, education, work-life harmony and the environment, while youths were most satisfied with population growth, healthcare and COVID-19 management. In general, the sandwiched generation were the least satisfied generation.

A regression analysis found that generational differences in voting were explained by media use, primary reasons for voting, and issue satisfaction.

People's primary reasons for voting were the strongest predictors of how they voted, with reasons such as "I always vote for the same party" and "party's track record" associated with PAP voters, and reasons such as "having alternative views in Parliament" and "dislike for one party (beyond reasons listed above)" in the case of Opposition voters.

As for issue satisfaction, people who were satisfied with how the government handled population growth, cost of living, COVID-19 and deliberate online falsehoods were slightly more likely to vote for the PAP than the Opposition.

Lastly, the media platforms that predicted how people voted were all Internet-based. People who used online websites of Singapore mass media were more likely to vote for the PAP, while people who engaged with political parties and candidates via social networking sites and their websites were more likely to cast votes for the Opposition.

In her conclusion, Dr Soon said GE2020 lived up to people's expectations of an "Internet election" due to the Internet's role in information dissemination, political engagement, and influence on voting behaviour. Though generational differences persisted in media usage, older voters were catching up with the use of digital platforms, especially IM platforms. Dr Soon said current findings suggest the possibility of an "IM election" in the near future, but before that, its potential for both genuine engagement and breaches in information integrity should be addressed as soon as possible.

Dr Natalie Pang: Comparing Online Political Engagement Between GE2015 and GE2020

Building on her past research about media use during elections, Dr Pang said social media engagement could be understood in three forms: expressive, informational and relational. Expressive engagement refers to the use of social media to express opinions, such as writing online posts and leaving comments on an online page. Informational engagement refers to the use of social media to share and seek information about political parties, candidates and issues related to the election. Relational engagement refers to the use of social media to develop social capital with existing or new contacts during election time.

How has social media engagement changed since 2015?

To understand the changes in engagement, the data sets from the 2015 and 2020 surveys were pooled together by matching demographically similar participants in both years.

Overall, only expressive and informational engagement saw significant increases from 2015 to 2020, but not relational engagement. In other words, people were engaging more by way of expressing opinions and seeking or sharing information during this year's general election, but not in the development of new and existing social ties. Dr Pang noted that this trend did not differ across generations.

Factors for social media engagement — media trust, political knowledge, political talk

General trust in media platforms have increased since 2015, with trust in mass media sources being higher than trust in personal communication via IM. Dr Pang highlighted that, however, the increase in trust in personal communication via IM was greater than that of the trust in mass media, and supported Dr Soon's prediction of an imminent IM election. Dr Pang also said that younger respondents tended to report lower media trust compared with their older counterparts, while older respondents reported greater distrust for personal communication via IM as compared with mass media.

Political knowledge has declined since 2015, but this trend is mainly driven by the sandwiched generation and boomers. For first-time voters, political knowledge increased instead.

Respondents did not engage in political talk with others frequently, even though the findings showed an increase in expressive engagement. Taken collectively, Dr Pang said these seemingly contradictory findings imply a change in how people are engaging with elections. Rather than discussing politics in a personal setting, it is more likely that people are turning to social media to air their opinions today.

What was the increase in expressive and informational engagement driven by?

According to Dr Pang, the drivers for expressive engagement differ across generations. For first-time voters and the sandwiched generation, expressive engagement was driven by their lack of trust in mass media. For other youths and the sandwiched generation, expressive engagement was driven by their mass and social media usage, and the lack of political knowledge. For boomers, expressive engagement was driven by their social media usage, trust towards personal communication via IM, and political talk. Citing these findings, Dr Pang raised the need for not just an active citizenry, but also an informed citizenry.

For first-time voters and the sandwiched generation, their informational engagement was driven by their trust in personal communication via IM. This means that people who perceived their networks to be reliable sources of information were more likely to share and seek information on social media. It is hence important to understand the robustness of information shared across personal networks and media platforms.

A/P Zhang Weiyu: Attributes of Swing Voters in 2020

Swing voters refer to people who changed their votes between the incumbent and Opposition in 2015 and 2020. There were two main types of swing voters: first, people who voted for PAP in 2015 and the Opposition in 2020; second, people who voted for the Opposition in 2015 and PAP in 2020. For this study, A/P Zhang analysed the attributes of 105 swing voters and 787 non-swing voters.

This year, a larger percentage of swing voters voted for the Opposition in 2020. In 2015, the votes swung in the opposite direction, with a larger percentage of swing voters supporting the PAP.

In GE2015, 52 per cent of Chinese voters, 32 per cent of Indian voters, and 33 per cent of 1-2 room HDB owners were more likely to swing from PAP to Opposition. In GE2020, these differences disappeared, with swing voters only differing significantly in terms of gender. In 2015, female voters made up 70 per cent of voters who swung from PAP to Opposition, but this year male voters made up 64 per cent of such voters.

This year, voters that swung from PAP to Opposition had the highest percentage of people signing a petition in the last six months and attending e-rallies held by the Opposition. Moreover, they also trusted print newspapers and radio the least. When it came to actual mass media and social media usage for information-seeking and engagement with political candidates though, there were no significant differences across both types of swing voters.

In comparison, voters that swung from Opposition to PAP reported a significantly lower level of interest in the election in 2020.

When asked about their primary reasons for voting, voters who swung from PAP to Opposition were least concerned about the quality of candidates, parties' track records, and government management of the COVID-19 pandemic, and most concerned about having alternative voices in Parliament. They also expressed the least satisfaction and the most negativity when compared with other voters.

A regression analysis found that alternative views in Parliament mattered more to swing voters than online websites of Singapore mass media, radio and television. Other media platforms, like social networking sites, did not seem to predict the decision of swing voters.

A/P Zhang described voters who swung from PAP to Opposition this year as "typical", while voters who swung from Opposition to PAP were "unique".

The first group was "typical" because they were more politically active and preferred alternative views, just like how swing voters are expected to behave. Compared with other voters, they were more likely to have signed a petition, attended e-rallies held by the Opposition parties, and trusted media platforms associated with the establishment like print newspapers and radio the least. They were also the most concerned about having alternative views in Parliament.

The second group of voters was described as "unique" because they did not share the same level of political interest and participation as the first type of swing voters. Overall, they had the least interest in the election, the lowest attendance for e-rallies, and were most concerned about the quality of candidates.

To conclude, A/P Zhang said that the vote swing had more to do with primary reasons for voting, and less to do with the Internet and social media.

Mr Chua Chin Hon: Facebook Usage by Political Parties during GE2020

To analyse political parties' Facebook use, Mr Chua drew upon 8,000 election-related posts produced by 15 public pages between 22 June and 11 July 2020. He also used over 32,000 COVID-related Facebook posts from seven local media outlets between 1 January and 12 July to gauge the “flight to safety” effect, whereby voters turn to the party in power during times of crisis. The total number of Facebook interactions was tabulated by summing up the likes, shares, comments and user-expressions of “love”, “wow”, “haha”, “sad”, “angry” and “care”.

Despite earlier hints about a possible election in 2020, political parties were mostly inactive on Facebook till polls were called on 23 June. On average, the four key political parties — PAP, WP, PSP, and Singapore Democratic Party (SDP), posted approximately eight times more on Facebook per day during the election period, compared with pre-election time. Between 23 June and 8 July, the PAP posted the most frequently with an average of 12 posts per day. The record number of posts per day was held by SDP, which posted 34 posts on 8 July, the last day of campaigning. Videos dominated the type of posts during the election period, accounting for nearly 62 per cent of the 530 posts published by these four parties.

Mr Chua said the Facebook posts revealed four key signals missed by the parties. First, Facebook data revealed that public interest in COVID-19 had dipped by Nomination Day, after peaking in April 2020. Though there were speculations of a “flight to safety” that could have driven votes to the incumbent government, it dissipated by the time of the election, thus allowing voters to be equally open to competing political messages. As such, GE2020 was a COVID-19 election only in form, but not in substance.

Second, the Ivan Lim incident reflected the ineffectiveness of PAP's core message on jobs during the campaign. On 27 June, Ivan Lim-related Facebook posts pumped out by the seven media outlets (i.e., The Straits Times, CNA, TODAY, Lianhe Zaobao, Lianhe Wanbao, Shin Min Daily News and Mothership) had nearly nine times more Facebook interactions than those about the launch of the PAP manifesto.

Third, total Facebook interaction for PAP's campaign peaked too early, losing steam well before Cooling-Off Day. In contrast, total Facebook interaction for WP's campaign — to deny the PAP a “blank cheque” — peaked right before Cooling-Off Day. Mr Chua attributed this “enthusiasm gap” to the ways both parties paced and closed their campaigns. While WP wrapped up its campaign with a resounding message for voters to “make your vote count”, the PAP campaign did not close as strongly and memorably. Even Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong's Fullerton Rally speech on 6 July did little to boost PAP's overall Facebook interaction.

Fourth, the “Sengkang surprise” (i.e., Sengkang become the second Group Representative Constituency to be won by an opposition party) could have been predicted by the massive gap in Facebook interactions by the PAP and WP teams. While the PAP team in Sengkang GRC consistently registered minimal public interest, WP garnered at least eight times more Facebook interactions, most notably during Dr Jamus Lim's appearance during the live political debate and the police report on Ms Raeesah Khan. Though user interaction could

have been contributed by voters residing out of Sengkang GRC, the great disparity between the reactions to PAP and WP implied that WP garnered greater name recognition when compared with the PAP.

In conclusion, while political parties improved their social media content production and distribution, they should have monitored social media data for reactions towards their election hypothesis or campaign strategies. Mr Chua said Singapore politics remains a “low signal” environment due to the lack of public polls and passive media environment. His key message for political parties is to accurately pick out the correct signal from the noise on social media, rather than rely on a “fire-and-forget” approach.

Panel Discussion

Methodological clarifications on political knowledge and media platforms

During the question-and-answer session, a few forum participants asked about the methodology for assessing political knowledge and trust for media platforms. For the first question, Dr Pang and Dr Soon clarified that respondents did not self-report their own level of political knowledge. Instead, it was tabulated by taking the total number of correct answers out of six questions relating to general knowledge about Singapore politics, such as the retirement age, GST, and prominent political figures who ran for the election.

On the question of media trust, the survey listed examples of media for each category of mass and social media. For instance, examples of “Singapore online-only news and information websites” included Mothership and Rice Media. Dr Soon that these examples were added to minimise the ambiguity and limitations of the survey questionnaire.

IM content and research challenges

Referencing Dr Soon’s prediction of an “IM election”, a participant asked the panel to share examples of the content circulating on IM platforms during GE2020.

Dr Soon said they could be news articles, memes, petitions, and links to social media platforms outside of IM, with much of the viral content produced by citizens instead of political parties. Dr Pang added to Dr Soon’s examples and said the messages that went viral mentioned specific candidates or resembled “morning greetings” images often circulated in group chats.

Further research on IM would pose several challenges, mainly that of privacy. Dr Pang said quantitative research would be insufficient in establishing causal relationships between IM content and user behaviours due to the ethical issues in studying private IM networks. Similarly, from a data analytics perspective, Mr Chin said the issue of privacy makes IM platforms more difficult to access and analyse compared with public platforms like Facebook. Moving forward, A/P Zhang said the current survey questions asking respondents to describe their political engagement on IM would be useful in shaping initial understanding of IM use for future research.

Online interactions and voting behaviour

Another question raised by the public was if online interactions necessarily translate into votes. According to Mr Chua, Facebook data tends to be “noisy” and would not translate into actual voting behaviours. Moreover, social media data is but one of the means to assess public sentiment. As such, only inferences, not conclusions, can be made.

Neither did the attendance of e-rallies significantly predict voting behaviour. This is despite high attendance of Opposition parties’ e-rallies by Opposition voters, as found by A/P Zhang. In other words, Opposition voters may have attended e-rallies by the Opposition parties, but the e-rallies were still insufficient in predicting the swing.

A/P Zhang added that people who used more mainstream media platforms like mass media online websites of Singapore mass media, radio and television were less likely to swing either way. For voters who saw a change in their mainstream media usage, it is less a matter of changing their platforms than remaining equally critical towards all of them.

Media trust and the effect of POFMA

The panellists were asked if POFMA exerted an impact during GE2020. Though the IPS study did not specifically ask about POFMA, Dr Soon said it was likely that respondents thought of POFMA when they rated their satisfaction towards the way the government handled “deliberate online falsehoods”, given the recency of incidents involving the legislation. However, besides POFMA, participants could have thought of government measures in developing media and digital literacy when considering how the government managed the issue of deliberate online falsehoods. This question garnered a split response from the public. About 40 per cent of respondents were ambivalent, while the remaining 60 per cent were divided relatively equally between strong agreement and disagreement with current government measures. In the regression analysis, “deliberate online falsehoods” also turned out to be a significant predictor for voting behaviour. However, its effect on voting was smaller than people’s primary reasons for voting.

Other takeaways from GE2020

Mr Chin said political parties remained overly fixated on traditional forms of communication, such as physical rallies in past elections and legacy news outlets, when they should fully utilise the available media platforms for maximal effectiveness. He hoped that data analytics could be adopted as a tool to assess public sentiment and campaign effectiveness during campaigning itself, such that important signals from the public would not be missed.

A/P Zhang reiterated the importance of the media in changing people’s minds. Although the desire for alternative views in Parliament mattered more than media use to swing voters, the two factors are highly intertwined.

For Dr Pang, the findings were not as surprising as they were encouraging. The increase in expressive engagement from past elections reflects an empowered citizenry, which is especially important in mediating polarising and contentious issues. As citizens continue to participate actively, we need to find out how we can stay civil and informed while being expressive, she said.

Finally, Dr Soon echoed Dr Pang's heartfelt sentiment about an empowered and active citizenry evidenced finally in GE2020. Instagram, a platform once associated with food and fashion, was now host to user-generated content by what were likely young voters attempting to educate one another. The real surprise for her, though, was her findings on increased IM usage. Even back in 2015, countries like South Korea had leveraged on IM platforms, such as Kakao Talk, to build relationships with voters. Political parties in Singapore could learn from these countries and design messages with interactivity and two-way engagement in mind.

To access the forum recording and presentation slides, please visit the [IPS website](#).

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