

## Impact of New Media on General Election 2011



### WELCOME REMARKS

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It is customary on occasions such as this, a conference on the Internet, to speak of the rapidity with which our world is changing. And of course like most clichés this has the merit of being true.

If one compared life in the 16<sup>th</sup> century with say life in the first century before Christ, one wouldn't notice much change. Julius Caesar, who died in 44 BC, would not have found say the Elizabethan court of late 16<sup>th</sup> century England astoundingly different from his Rome. Indeed, he might have noticed a slight deterioration in standards of living. Shakespeare's London was a dump compared to classical Rome.

Between 1600 and 1900, however, we would find quantitative as well as qualitative changes of staggering proportions; and between 1900 and now, even more staggering.

But all this is over deep time – over hundreds, if not thousands of years. How about the short and medium term? Things change fast indeed – the Singapore of today is very different from the Singapore I remember of the 1960s, for instance. But still, I think it would be true to say that things in general change more slowly than we might initially have expected.

Some of you my age might remember the Jetsons, a cartoon series of a space age family. People zoomed around in little personal aeroplanes, which they flew as we would drive cars; and everyone had a personal jet-pack. You would strap it on as you would a backpack – and off you go. I remember being addicted to this cartoon series, not least because I thought it was a perfectly realistic portrayal of what life might be like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Well, it is 2011 now, and I'm still waiting for my jet-pack.

I don't mean to be facetious. Consider this: By the time the Jetsons was created in 1962-63, Yuri Gagarin had already orbited the Earth in Vostok 1 in April 1961. By the time we saw the Jetsons in Singapore – around 1967-68 in my memory; we got TV late in Singapore in those days – by that time, the Apollo programme was well on its way. Soon, on Christmas Eve 1968, we would get our first glimpse of planet Earth from space (the famous "Earthrise" photograph that astronauts of Apollo 8 took from moon orbit – I can't describe to you how exciting it was to see the blue planet thus for the first time, hovering out there in the distance: us seen from elsewhere); and soon after that, just seven months later in July 1969, man walked on the Moon.

From earth orbit in 1961, to moon orbit in 1968, to the moon landing in 1969 – barely eight years. Do you see now why it should have seemed altogether reasonable to a teenager watching all this in the 1960s to assume that man would have got to Mars by now, begun colonising space – and each of us would be equipped with a personal jet-pack? But alas, there is still no jet-pack and man is still stuck in this tiny corner of the universe, our little solar system.

And it is not only the jet-pack that I'm peeved at not possessing. There is also the personal air-conditioned suit I was told was a cinch, just round the corner. This may be the air-conditioned nation – but there is alas still no personal air-conditioned suit. And, more seriously, how about the green Sahara – which I remember reading was a distinct possibility, with nuclear plants powering desalination plants to produce enough water to drench the vast African desert? Never happened. How about the solar powered car? Not yet. How about superfast planes – they would take off vertically from Singapore, zip through space 3-4 miles above Earth, and land in London within three hours? Still on the crank's drawing board.

And again, I emphasise, I don't mean to be facetious. There is a serious point here. And the serious point was first made by Arthur C. Clarke, the great futurologist and science fiction writer: The short-term impact of any new technology, he said once, tends to be grossly overestimated; while its long-term impact tends to be vastly underestimated.

The examples I gave earlier bears out the truth of this insight: We overestimated how far space technology would take us in the short term. We overestimated the possibilities of nuclear power. We overestimated solar power. And so and so forth – the examples can be easily multiplied. Even the great master, Arthur C. Clarke was off. You remember Stanley Kubrick's 1968 movie, 2001 Space Odyssey, the screenplay for which Clarke wrote? Well, it is 10 years since 2001, and we still don't have that or anything that resembles the technology that seemed possible in 1968. Life, they say, is stranger than fiction. Yes, in the long run. But in the short run, fiction is stranger than life. And I believe one might say the same of the Internet – and its effect on culture, on politics, the subject of this conference. As the results of the survey that IPS conducted will suggest, we may well have exaggerated the impact of the new media on our culture and politics. But equally important, the survey results also suggest that there are a couple of powerful, long-term, secular trends, which leads one to emphasise the other half of Arthur C. Clarke's insight: We cannot predict as yet what the long-term impact of this new communications technology might be, for we lack the imagination to do so.

And it is worth remembering that this wouldn't be the first time we overestimated the short term impact of a new communications technology and underestimated its long term impact. When Johann Gutenberg developed the movable type in 15<sup>th</sup>-century Europe – the Chinese did so earlier in the 11<sup>th</sup> century, during the Song Dynasty – the initial reaction in Europe was one of horror in many quarters. Print will destroy 'the invisible cathedrals of memory', it was said, for the wide availability of printed books would make unnecessary the representation of ideas and stories in images, like those seen in the stained-glass windows, frescoes and mosaics of churches. Nobody could have imagined then the universal education that we have today – impossible to conceive without print – the vast repositories of knowledge that is the modern library, newspapers, books and what not.

Or go back further in time, to the invention of writing itself. In Plato's Phaedrus, we find the very invention of writing faulted. The King of Egypt reproaches Thoth, the god who invented writing, telling him: 'This discovery of yours will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust in the eternal written characters and not remember of themselves.'

Well, the alarmist King of Egypt overestimated the short-term impact of writing – and underestimated its long-term impact. I would suggest we may be doing the same with blogs, Facebook, Twitter – the latest writing technologies: vastly over-estimating, in panic perhaps, their short term impact; and under-estimating their long-term consequences, for we cannot predict where they might lead to, for better or worse.

Given their rapid growth, it is not surprising that the new media should vary widely in quality. But then we might say the same of books, too – not to mention, newspapers and television stations, even of writing itself. In each instance, the lousy and indifferent far outnumber the good and distinguished. Would anyone wish one could disinvent writing as a result?

It would I think be fair to assume that this is going to take a while to shake out – for the online media to find its footing, for traditional media to get used to the new kids on the block, for consumers of media to learn to distinguish between varieties of online sites and make value judgments of each, to disaggregate the different sites according to quality and reliability – just as we today would distinguish, say, the New York Times from The Sun – time for the pattern to become obvious. In the meantime, there will be tussles and conflicts, some pushing and shoving, alarms.

It is to get a sense of the lie of the land now that the Institute of Public Policy set in train this massive study of the Internet and the GE – the largest such project that IPS has coordinated, involving more than 15 researchers from four universities. One part of the study consists of a survey of 2000 people, with questions coming from the various researchers involved in the study. The other part of the study involved the gathering of a vast archive of all that was said or written online about the GE, and subjecting these to analyses.

There are altogether eleven sub-studies in the whole project. Some used the survey findings, others the archive of Internet material on the GE, some both, some their own data. This conference will be only the first appearance of these papers, for they would be revised after this conference and collected in a book scheduled to appear by May next year.

I invite you, the conference participants, to subject each of the speakers today to tough scrutiny. Challenge them, push, probe – beginning with the first speaker, Tan Tarn How, a Senior Research Fellow at IPS, who will present the exceedingly interesting headline findings of the survey.

Thank you.