Can cybercampaigns win real votes?

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A NEW local political cliche goes like this: Nothing can replace real-life campaigning and meeting people face to face.

Ask any politician or political observer about new media and politics here, and there's a very good chance he will add that rider to his response.

By and large, most pundits downplay the significance of new media here.
Facebook pages, Twitter feeds and blog posts, they say, do not get you votes.

Mr Eugene Tan, a Singapore Management University law lecturer who often writes on politics, puts it this way: 'The fingers can do quite a bit of talking with the Internet, but fingers and bytes are grossly inadequate in winning electoral battles.'

The question, of course, is why?

Mr Barack Obama is often credited as having used new media to defeat Mr John McCain in the 2008 United States presidential election. His team raised over US$600 million (S$785 million) online on top of fighting smear campaigns, building a political brand and mobilising an unprecedented number of young voters.

Why does no one think that such a scenario will happen here? What is missing in Singapore's political cyberspace?

And given that so many politicians, political parties and socio-political bloggers spend so much time building up a new media presence, wouldn't they expect a big payoff eventually?

While acknowledging that new media might well have been a game changer in the American political scene, observers tell Insight that Singapore's new media landscape simply cannot bear comparison.

The reason is the stark differences in political and campaign culture.
For instance, in the US, much more is at stake when it comes to campaigning.
As Dr Lim Sun Sun, a new media lecturer with the National University of Singapore (NUS), explains: 'In the US, political parties have invested heavily in paid advertising during elections, and fund-raising is also a significant component of the election campaign.

'In recent years, fund-raising online through social media has been very aggressively deployed. Hence, the online machinery in the US is very sophisticated and well-oiled because so much is at stake.'

Singapore, on the other hand, does not permit online fund-raising. 'So the online presence of political parties here tends to be more of information provision or the announcement of campaign platforms rather than the aggressive cultivation of voters,' she notes.

Mr Arun Mahizhnan, deputy director at the Institute of Policy Studies, points to cultural differences as well, adding that a rigid party structure can sometimes get in the way of politicians really exploiting the benefits of new media.

'The interactivity and creativity which are the hallmarks of the new media are not as much in evidence here as in the US and some other countries. There is also greater reluctance here to project their individual positions because of severe party restrictions in most cases,' he says.

Indeed, parties like the People's Action Party and Workers' Party have tended to let policies and national issues drive elections, rather than try to leverage on the cult of personality.

Mr Arun believes the relatively low impact of new media is not a fault of the tool.
People are just using it ineffectively, he says.

'The problem in Singapore is not that online campaigns cannot win real votes, but that many politicians still do not know enough to use the new media effectively. There is a Luddite attitude among some politicians, and they will be missing an opportunity.'

Among many innovations used in the US, he cites examples of politicians who stream live chats on YouTube in which they answer questions from voters.

Mr Arun adds that the legal framework in Singapore governing cyberspace has a chilling effect on public discussions. More liberal laws, he says, will make for a more robust exchange between state and citizens.

Where's the groundswell?
ANOTHER factor limiting the new media's influence here is that the sites tend to preach to the converted.

Where mainstream media channels are regarded as having a general reach, Internet websites have a targeted audience.

Says another NUS new media academic, Dr Ingrid Maria Hoofd: 'The problem with new and social media is that it requires the active involvement of the reader or recipient. Unlike a medium like television, for instance, which truly reaches the masses, new media are essentially narrow-casting tools.'

Mr Tan agrees, noting that people would gravitate towards sites whose editorial slants and political messaging are palatable to them.
As a result, although new media may reinforce or amplify views, it isn't really going to change anybody's mind.

'Often, it's about seeking self-validation for their political views and idiosyncrasies,' he says.
Dr Marko Skoric, an assistant professor at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information in Nanyang Technological University, describes it as creating an 'online enclave', with limited impact on those outside of it.

'Politically engaged people usually end up speaking to other politically engaged people. To reach beyond this would be difficult. The middle-of-the- road people - they care more about what's good for them and their children,' he says.

Yet, even if all these obstacles are overcome - politicians are more creative online, rules are relaxed and new media reaches the masses - the experts say Singapore still lacks a crucial ingredient required for an online uprising: a groundswell of unhappiness.

Says Dr Hoofd: 'One cannot simply spur people into action when the majority does not believe in its cause.
'The best way to convince people of the validity of a criticism or a call for change is still... through face-to-face discussions with people whom one trusts or knows - people who you allow to convince you, or who show you the urgency of the matter by virtue of their living conditions and experiences.'

In situations where new media played a part, like the US elections and the 2006 overthrow of Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, she notes, there was a widespread desire to change the status quo.

An added problem is how new media weakens real-world ties: 'Where previously people may have come together at void decks to discuss problems, now they sit alone behind their screens. New media has in that sense a disconnecting property as well, which again actually hampers true political action.'

Facebook, says Dr Lim, provides an example of this disassociation.

Popularity on that social network is not a good indication of real-world popularity.

'Many people could 'like' or 'fan' or 'follow' for market research or just do so out of sheer curiosity. Interest levels of these 'fans' may also wane once they get tired of the groups or pages that they follow,' she says.

Referring to what happened in Malaysia during the 2008 elections, Mr Arun argues that new media had an impact there because it gave people a window to see that the 'disenchantment with the ruling parties was much greater than the establishment media made it out to be'.
Critics here, he says, have less to crow about.
'That is why despite the known bias of the establishment media, and despite the opportunity given by new media, there are not as many effective contrarian views in the new media... Technology cannot create opinion but can only disseminate it,' he says.

So why do it?
NONE of this, however, suggests that politicians should forget about online campaigning altogether.

When it comes to campaigning, it helps to be a little kiasu ('afraid to lose' in Hokkien).
If one considers the Internet a marketplace of ideas, then everyone wants to make sure they have a shop.

Even if it changes the mind of only one voter, one can say: Every vote counts.

Mr Tan notes that causality (that online engagements influence voters) is hard to prove but there is consensus that cyberpresence is now an integral part of the political engagement. 'So better be virtually present than absent,' he says.

Dr Skoric takes the view that the effects of online political discourse here are incremental and would have a greater impact in the long run.

'It's about changing people, not just the media landscape... The political citizen needs to be cultivated, and these young people are digital natives. Their civic engagement will be through peers on social media,' he says.

There is no doubt that new media use will increase, with more and more political discussions moving online.

But while it may bring about a more varied communications scene and a more diverse marketplace of ideas, its impact is unlikely to be decisive except in the tightest of races.

While quantity certainly matters - more blogs and even greater broadband penetration will help - it's the quality of the engagement and the realities on the ground that will ultimately determine its effectiveness.

So until Singapore's socio-political circumstances change significantly, real-life campaigning and meeting people face to face will always be more important.