

Effectiveness; Online clout

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MPs use social media to extend influence

IN ITS early days, social media was like quicksilver.

Everyone was excited but it was hard to get a grip on it.

But now, a whole new cottage industry called social media analytics has sprung up as politicians, among others, seek to understand the impact of this new outlet.

Web developers have created online tools such as Klout and Kred to analyse an individual's influence among people in his online social networks.

The Straits Times has tried to do something similar. Based on its study of MPs' use of social media, The Straits Times identified three indicators that, taken together, provide a measure of an MP's effectiveness in using social media to extend his influence.

While this does not measure other aspects of an MP's effectiveness - such as how he can mobilise online followers for offline action - it can still give an idea of how adroit an MP is in harnessing social media.

The three factors are: buzz per output, audience reach and positive comment ratio.

The paper then ranked the MPs in terms of their effectiveness score.

The champion, once again, was Aljunied GRC MP Chen Show Mao. He was followed by Minister of State for Trade and Industry Teo Ser Luck. Marine Parade GRC MP Tin Pei Ling and Hougang MP Yaw Shin Leong tied for third place. Fourth was Mr Chan Chun Sing, the Acting Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports, followed by National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan.

Mr Chen's top spot is unsurprising given his savvy use of social media.

For instance, by writing on Facebook in August last year about his invitation to a Hungry Ghost Festival event being withdrawn, he called attention to some of the People's Association's (PA) practices, which led to a national discussion on the PA's relationship with the ruling People's Action Party.

He had said organisers were told by the ward's Citizens Consultative Committee (CCC) that they may no longer invite their MP to the dinners. The CCC is part of the PA, which is a national grassroots organisation.

Professor Ang Peng Hwa, executive director of the Singapore Internet Research Centre, said the incident showed 'a clever use of social media, intentional or otherwise'.

'By merely describing the incident, he leaves the call to play it up or not to the social media users... The younger generation has a strong sense of justice and fairness. So once Mr Chen

described what came across as an unfair situation, that lit up the blogosphere and cyber chatspace.'

But there are other facets of social media effectiveness, experts said.

One is the ability to mobilise followers to support one's agenda, by engaging in various civic and political actions such as charity work or protests, said Dr Marko Skoric of the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information.

One example of this was Mr Teo's appeal last September for volunteer tuition teachers to help needy students in Sengkang, part of his Punggol Central ward in Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC.

Within a few hours, netizens started volunteering on the Facebook thread. Others chipped in with suggestions.

Another aspect is being able to translate netizens' feedback into concrete proposals.

Prof Ang said: 'For netizens, successful engagement occurs when their ideas are heard and then responded to; for the MPs, they have succeeded when netizens respond more favourably and engage them further. We will know how successful MPs like Mr Chen and Ms Tin have been in their online engagement when they surface good ideas in Parliament.'

Other key factors in social media use include: an authentic voice, transparency, empathy, the ability to relate interesting and relevant stories, and respect for netizens - even those who lambast them, media experts said.

MPs must also accept criticisms.

'Not all negative comments are negative - the public complains to politicians because they believe they have the power to make a difference,' said social media strategist Pat Law. While the list of top 10 by social media effectiveness has more backbencher MPs than office-holders, Cabinet ministers come up tops in mainstream media.

Bell Pottinger counted the number of mentions each MP received in five newspapers during the study period -The Straits Times, The Business Times, Today, The Edge and mypaper.

It found Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong in first place, in a reflection of who wields influence in the offline world and therefore makes news.

One reason for the difference is that social media influence tends to be driven by personalities, with charismatic or controversial politicians such as Mr Chen and Ms Tin drawing attention, observers said.

Another reason, said Prof Ang, is that while the mainstream media has been associated with 'traditional powers' such as the Government, 'the new media is associated with the politically weaker, the marginalised, the oppositional'.

He noted that this was a theme in the rest of the study.

Workers' Party (WP) MPs, especially Mr Chen, ranked high in terms of audience size and buzz, showing that netizens tend to pay more attention to opposition MPs.

But it could also be due to WP MPs being more active in posting updates and responses to netizens.

Professor Arun Mahizhnan of the Institute of Policy Studies said opposition politicians have had to develop new media skills because 'they felt short-changed' by coverage in more traditional forms of media.

As for PAP politicians, they have enjoyed a relationship with established media players which 'has lulled them for too long and, unlike Lee Kuan Yew, they are not media savvy', he said.