

## **Four warning signals from GE2020 social media data not heeded, says data analyst**

**The major political parties are said to have treated social media mainly as distribution channels for their messages.**

**Grace Ho**

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Several outcomes of GE2020, such as the loss of Sengkang GRC to the Workers' Party (WP) and the overall swing towards the opposition, could have been less surprising if political parties had paid greater attention to warning signals from social media data, said Mr Chua Chin Hon.

Mr Chua, the chief data analyst at AI solutions company Analytix Labs, said the major parties - the People's Action Party (PAP), WP, Progress Singapore Party (PSP) and Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) - treated social media mainly as distribution channels for their messages.

They did not extensively use data from the platforms to test their election hypotheses or campaign strategies, he said, adding that this "fire-and-forget" approach towards social media will prove increasingly costly in future general elections.

Speaking at an online forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies on Thursday (Oct 8), he said that there were four "missed signals" before Polling Day:

### **1. COVID-19 DESENSITISATION**

By Nomination Day on June 30, user interaction with Covid-19 Facebook posts had plunged from its peak in April.

"The 'flight to safety' instinct, if it existed, likely dissipated along the way," he said, referring to the belief that voters would be more inclined to support incumbents during a crisis.

"By the time the hustings were in full swing, the electorate was significantly open to competing messages."

### **2. IVAN LIM INCIDENT**

Former PAP candidate Ivan Lim, 42, who had been walking the ground in Jurong group representation constituency and was expected to be fielded there, withdrew his candidacy after allegations were made about his conduct at work and as a national service commander.

News of his withdrawal blew up on June 27, the same day the PAP manifesto was launched.

That day, Facebook posts related to him by seven local media outlets had 62,730 user interactions, or almost nine times more than those for the launch of the manifesto. The outlets were: The Straits Times, CNA, Today, Mothership, Lianhe Zaobao, Lianhe Wanbao, and Shin Min Daily News.

"Some say that online users are always going to be drawn to drama and controversy, and social media reaction for an election manifesto is always low," said Mr Chua.

"These are fair points. But when you have an interaction gap of this size, it should have rung some alarm bells for the PAP that its message on jobs just wasn't registering with voters as well as it might have thought."

### **3. ENTHUSIASM GAP**

User interaction with Facebook posts on the PAP's key message on jobs peaked well before Polling Day, while the opposition's message - to deny the PAP a "blank cheque" - peaked just in time, Mr Chua said.

The final fillip came in the form of emotive video appeals from former and current WP chiefs Low Thia Khiang and Pritam Singh to Singaporeans to "make their vote count".

"In contrast, the PAP didn't close out its campaign on a particularly strong or memorable note. It might have been even lower if not for PM's Fullerton Rally," he said.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong held a lunchtime e-rally on July 6 that was streamed live on Facebook and YouTube.

The "Fullerton Rally" is a tradition of the ruling party, and was started by its founding party chief and Singapore's first prime minister Lee Kuan Yew in 1959 to reach out to workers.

"In the context of United States politics, parties always try to close their campaigns on an emotional high, so that their supporters feel that extra bit of motivation to go out and vote," said Mr Chua.

While Singapore politics is not stage-managed to that extent, he added, it could be something worth considering in the future.

### **4. SENGKANG SURPRISE**

In a sample of 325 Facebook posts analysed for the Sengkang contest, the WP Sengkang team had about 32,700 Facebook interactions a day throughout the campaign period, while the PAP team there had around 4,200.

Interest peaked after the live TV debate between WP's Sengkang GRC candidate Jamus Lim and Foreign Minister Vivian Balakrishnan on July 1; and when fellow WP candidate Raeesah Khan came under police investigation less than a week later over her online comments on race and religion.

The findings, said Mr Chua, come with the caveat that not all who reacted to the WP's posts are necessarily Sengkang voters, or even Singaporeans - as there are no publicly available tools to parse Facebook interaction data by geographic region.

"But when the gap is this big, there is no doubt that the WP Sengkang team garnered far greater mindshare," he said.

He concluded that while the political parties are getting better at producing social media content, most of them are still "scratching the surface" of what modern electoral campaigns do in terms of data analysis and the use of social media targeting.

Having multiple backup plans or alternatives is key, he added.

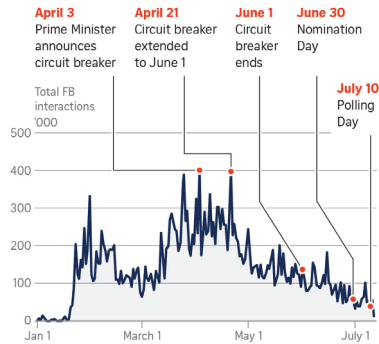
"One can see within hours, within a day, whether one's message on social media is tracking.

"When something doesn't work, parties need to pivot quickly. This year, we didn't see many parties doing so when they noticed that their messages weren't working."

## Missed signals

### 1 COVID-19 DESENSITISATION

Despite the large number of Facebook (FB) posts, there were signs that the parties missed broader signals on social media.



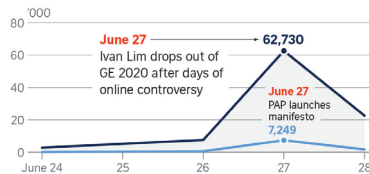
- User interaction with Covid-19 FB posts had fallen very sharply from peaks in April by Nomination Day.
- "Flight to safety" instinct, if it existed, most likely dissipated along the way.

### 2 IVAN LIM INCIDENT

The controversy over the former People's Action Party (PAP) candidate was the first major sign that the party's core message on jobs may not have resonated with voters in a big way.

FB interaction for:

Ivan Lim-related posts\*      PAP manifesto-related posts



NOTE: \*Ivan Lim-related FB posts by the seven media outlets on June 27 had 8.65 times more total interaction than those for the launch of the PAP manifesto.

### 3 THE 'ENTHUSIASM GAP'

User interaction with FB posts related to PAP's jobs-focused messages peaked well before Polling Day, while that for the opposition – to deny the PAP "a blank cheque" – peaked just in time.

FB interaction for posts containing:

Key opposition messages      Key PAP messages

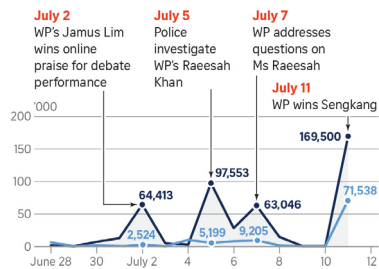


### 4 THE 'SENGKANG SURPRISE'

Signs pointed to a gap in mindshare between the PAP and WP teams.

FB interaction:

WP      PAP



Source: ANALYTIX LABS STRAITS TIMES GRAPHICS