

## **Have you 'poked' your MP today?**

**More than half of the 81 PAP Members of Parliament have taken to the social networking site Facebook to complement their online presence. What has their cyber experience been like? Are they still finding their way around or have they got into their stride?**

***Zakir Hussain***

***The Straits Times***, 20 February 2010

Five years ago, Ms Penny Low became the first Member of Parliament to blog in a bid to reach out to youth.

The People's Action Party (PAP) Member of Parliament for Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC wrote about her experiences hitchhiking across Europe and the United States in her younger days.

Two years later, she was one of the first MPs to set up an account on social networking site Facebook to share her thoughts and keep in touch with friends.

This time, however, she restricted access to people she knew in person - a feature allowed for by the site, which was then relatively new in Singapore.

Not long after, a resident came up to her at a constituency event to ask why she had not accepted his request to be her friend on Facebook.

'I said it was not clear to me he was a constituent,' Ms Low tells Insight. 'From then on, I decided my Facebook would be for friends plus residents plus others.'

It is a decision many other MPs face, but once they take the plunge, they realise how much goodwill and mileage they gain by updating a growing number of residents who spend more time online.

The MPs may get a 'poke' on Facebook - the virtual equivalent of saying 'hi' - or frivolous messages, but they say going online has helped them better engage constituents.

The US-based Facebook says it could not share data on users in Singapore, but a November 2009 study by marketing company Nielsen found 42 per cent of people over 15 were on Facebook - which translates to close to two million users here.

The proportion is greater for younger users: 77 per cent of people in their 20s here are on the site, as against 55 per cent of those in their 30s and 26 per cent of those in their 40s, according to Nielsen.

Ms Low has gone on to wish residents a Happy Chinese New Year on Facebook, and post updates and links to YouTube videos on her work at social enterprise Social Innovation Park, among others.

The site's features also allow her to host grassroots volunteers' photos of her with fellow MPs and residents, and to respond directly to messages from people.

Today, more than half the PAP MPs have taken to Facebook to complement their online presence on the party's main website, the Young PAP website, personal and constituency blogs and Twitter.

This shift is part of the party's ongoing efforts to find its feet on the Internet, a playing field where its overwhelming dominance on the ground and in Parliament is actively challenged.

As political observer Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University (SMU) notes, the PAP has the smallest footprint online when compared to its presence in the print and broadcast media.

This is because unlike opposition parties which are more aggressive in using new media, it has not had to rely as much on the Internet to get its message across.

But it has realised that it cannot cede cyberspace - where it is more often portrayed negatively - to its competitors.

Mr Tan says: 'The PAP's online endeavour is designed to counter some of these distortions and negative and hostile views.'

### **Not starting from scratch**

The party is no newcomer to cyberspace. Its youth wing, Young PAP (YP), launched a website in October 1994 - the first by a political party here.

The site included the latest issue of the party's publication *Petir*, a map of the electoral divisions, several articles written by YP members, and a listing of the YP's activities.

The opposition National Solidarity Party (NSP) started its website a year later, and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) did so in 1996.

The Internet, however, was in its early stages of growth here, and existed mainly to convey information and facilitate limited discussions. Still, the various parties online were aware of its potential.

As the YP said on its website in 2000: 'Our vision is that some day the virtual community in Singapore will be as important as any physical constituency.'

The PAP launched its site a year later, with news updates, details about the party's past and membership, and audio clips, flash animation and pictures - but no bulletin board or discussion forum.

Then Minister of State for Information and the Arts David Lim, who chaired the PAP Internet Committee, said the party believes 'political discourse is probably best done face to face'.

He said cyberspace, with its traditional cloak of anonymity, lent itself to 'less meaningful and thoughtful' discussions than desired, and the PAP did not want its site to be a place 'to vent emotions or to let go certain ideas and expressions'.

Ten years on, the party website has been jazzed up with videos and updates of activities at various constituencies produced by branch activists.

At the party convention last November, bloggers posted updates on Facebook and Twitter for the first time, and participants could text their comments and questions by SMS. Videos of the various speeches were also posted online.

But the absence of discussions or public comments has not changed. That remains the case for the YP website too.

## **Enter Web 2.0**

Advancements to Internet applications, however, meant websites that leveraged on Web 2.0 technologies - those that allow readers to interact directly with one another and make it easy to produce, publish and share content with little effort - had an advantage over others.

As blogs took off here, Foreign Minister George Yeo became the first Cabinet minister to blog on the sites of two constituency activists in 2006.

Twelve new MPs born after Independence tagged themselves as the post-65ers and started group blog P65.sg to write about their constituency work and discuss topical issues with youth who may not read mainstream media.

The move came after a call by Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong to new MPs to establish themselves with voters and hold the ground ahead of the next elections, which must be held by February 2012.

Significantly, the blog allowed readers to comment, but soon fell silent as contributions slowed, with some MPs simply posting their parliamentary speeches. It was later relaunched to include a wide range of committed contributors.

But Internet-savvy party members were worried that anti-PAP voices were drowning out the party's views online.

The party began a quiet campaign to get members to go into Internet forums and blogs to rebut anti-establishment views that were rampant.

Still, it lacked an online platform to engage directly with a growing number of netizens on a personal level.

As Facebook, which started in 2004, caught on rapidly in recent years, several MPs began to dabble in it.

Ms Low and Mr Yeo aside, pioneers include Community Development, Youth and Sports Minister Vivian Balakrishnan, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for Community Development,

Youth and Sports and Transport Teo Ser Luck, and MPs Zaqy Mohamed of Hong Kah GRC and Lim Wee Kiak of Sembawang GRC.

By comparison, opposition MPs Low Thia Kiang and Sylvia Lim of the Workers' Party (WP) and Mr Chiam See Tong of the Singapore People's Party (SPP) do not have Facebook pages of their own, but have sites managed by their supporters. However, their parties - like the NSP - rely on their websites, which are regularly updated, to get their views across.

As Dr Gillian Koh of the Institute of Policy Studies observes, the opposition is somewhat less trusting of the mainstream media and the key parties have chosen to use the Internet to record speeches in full and give their alternative points of view.

However, they do not seem to directly engage netizens much through their formal sites or blogs.

The situation is different in Facebook pages set up by the WP Youth Wing or Reform Party chief Kenneth Jeyaretnam, which post regular updates of events and photos of walkabouts and activities.

The SDP is the only opposition party that updates its website almost daily and allows readers to post comments on its main website.

### **Why Facebook caught on**

By the middle of last year, a quarter of the 81 PAP MPs had joined Facebook, following a push by party leaders to get them to explore new means of communicating with residents.

It is not hard to see the draw of the site: MPs say it is a convenient platform for telling a wide audience what they are doing in their constituencies, through status updates, photos and even videos.

The nature of Facebook also allows them to link to photos on sites like Flickr and videos on sites like YouTube - and to update their pages on the go, using a Blackberry or iPhone.

On any given day, there are photos of residents they met on house visits and constituency events or updates on what they did, saw or felt.

Tanjong Pagar GRC MP Baey Yam Keng says he was initially hesitant about posting 'routine' information as this duplicated what residents could read on notice boards around the estate.

But he decided to publish updates and photos of events and visits anyway to reach out to residents who spend more time online.

'A common perception is that we MPs are just out there once every five years, but there are many things we do that people may not be aware of. Having these on Facebook helps raise awareness,' he says.

The two-way nature of communication on Facebook also means MPs can view comments and feedback at a glance and respond quickly to several views at a time.

Early last month, Mr Baey posted an update noting he had a record 89 cases at his weekly Friday Meet-the-People Session which ended at 12.30am - possibly because of two public holidays in previous weeks.

An online friend asked whether the various MPs discussed trends or cases they encountered at such sessions with one another, to see what national concerns emerge and address them nationally.

Mr Baey replied: 'We do track the types of problems that residents come to us with for help. For Queenstown, the single major issue is financial difficulty. The data is also consolidated at the national level to provide inputs for policymaking.'

Several MPs, like Mr Teo Ser Luck of Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC and Dr Fatimah Lateef of Marine Parade GRC, also post their thoughts on cases or events.

They also raise questions to solicit views from online friends. 'We don't often go into details or have an effective discussion of issues over Facebook compared to in person, but it is a good means of getting quick feedback on what concerns a range of people,' Mr Teo says.

When 75-year-old resident Harry Ho wrote to Deputy Prime Minister Wong Kan Seng on the Bishan-Toa Payoh Facebook group set up by the GRC's MPs, he got a reply from Mr Wong two days later.

Mr Ho had referred to the tragic death of former national sportsman Tan Eng Yoon in an accident while crossing a stretch of Upper Thomson Road - the second such death in a few months - and asked if anything had been done by the Traffic Police or Land Transport Authority (LTA).

Mr Wong replied to express his condolences and say he had already asked the Traffic Police to work with the LTA to see what more could be done to improve pedestrians' safety there.

### **The challenge ahead**

Mr Zaqy, an MP for Hong Kah GRC, tells Insight that MPs are still finding their way around Facebook, but make it a point to exchange tips and ideas informally when they meet.

He is in charge of the Young PAP's new media efforts, and says a key challenge is getting activists to see that such efforts cannot just be top-down: Members must adopt and adjust based on what works, as the online environment is dynamic and can at times be hostile.

SMU's Mr Tan feels that the PAP still has an ambivalent relationship with new media: 'It realises that it must have an online presence, but it is still finding its way with regard to the quality and intensity of its online presence.'

He notes that its use of photo and video possibilities online has been static 'when the new media ethos is about dynamic engagement and a culture of irreverence'.

'It's a different world altogether and a one-size-fits-all approach to the media is not going to be effective and may actually work against the party,' he adds.

Associate Professor Cherian George of Nanyang Technological University, who researches media and politics, however, believes PAP's foray into Facebook would have indirect benefits.

'Experimenting with new media can help politicians develop skills and instincts that they haven't had much chance to in a system of one-party dominance.

'Online, they'll have to get used to being routinely contradicted, and learn to persuade without pulling rank. If they succeed, they can transfer such skills to offline politics, which is ultimately where the real action is.'

Will this online activity matter in the next General Election?

There is no doubt it will play a bigger role at the hustings compared to the 2006 elections. But this cyber effort must be seen in context.

As Mr Tan notes: 'The elections are not about who has a bigger presence online.'

At the end of the day, voters will cast their votes based on real world concerns, not online chatter. Sites like Facebook are but a means for politicians to show that they are listening and responding to these concerns.