

Internet 'did not have decisive effect on GE', says study **Study finds mainstream media still most people's choice for election news**

Rachel Chang

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The three academics who spearheaded the wide-ranging study (from left) IPS deputy director Arun Mahizhnan with senior research fellow Tan Tarn How, and director of the Singapore Internet Research Centre at Nanyang Technological University Ang Peng Hwa. They emphasised that the Internet had a significant 'soft' impact on voters; for example, it established a sense of community among the like-minded. -- ST PHOTOS: LIM SIN THAI

The Internet did not play a decisive role in the May general election (GE), according to a survey by the Institute of Policy Studies.

Just three out of 10 voters used Facebook or online blogs for election information during the GE period.

But this proportion does not include websites of mainstream media outlets such as The Straits Times or Channel NewsAsia.

When included, the ratio rose to four out of 10 voters, said the IPS researchers yesterday. They polled 2,000 Singaporeans aged 21 and older for the survey on the impact of new media on the GE. It was conducted from May to July.

Mainstream media in the form of print newspapers, television and radio was still most people's choice for election news.

Only about one-quarter said they did not read the newspapers at all during the GE period, and two out of 10 said they did not watch TV for election-related news.

Of the 30 per cent who read alternative online media - which are websites and blogs not affiliated with mainstream media - around 95 per cent of them also read, watched and listened to mainstream media.

'So, they're not in a ghetto,' said senior research fellow Tan Tarn How, one of three academics who spearheaded the wide-ranging study.

The other two were IPS deputy director Arun Mahizhnan and director of the Singapore Internet Research Centre at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Ang Peng Hwa.

The study also found that people put more trust in mainstream media, and spent more time on print newspapers and TV than on the Net.

On average, they read print newspapers for about 25 minutes and watched TV for 32 minutes a day on election news.

On the other hand, they spent around eight minutes on Facebook and six minutes reading alternative online media.

These findings aside, the researchers emphasised that the Internet had a significant 'soft' impact on voters.

This was manifested in ways like establishing a sense of community among the like-minded, as well as providing sources of political satire and irreverence.

Mr Tan said this changed electoral experience was evident in the way Singaporeans felt more 'empowered, energised and engaged' in the May GE.

At a full-day conference yesterday to present the findings, some among the audience suggested that the survey did not capture the far-ranging Internet effect sufficiently.

Dr Michael Heng, senior commissioning editor of publishing company World Scientific, said alternative new media caused mainstream media to adjust how it covered political news generally.

Mr Tan concurred, noting that mainstream media in the 2006 GE did not run wide-angle pictures showing the size of the crowd at a Workers' Party rally until the pictures made their rounds online. This year, mainstream media ran such pictures from the start of the campaign, he noted.

The IPS study also found that videos and e-mail which went 'viral' during the GE, like a Young PAP video of People's Action Party candidate Tin Pei Ling saying 'I don't know what to say' and images of opposition candidates' faces 'photoshopped' onto action movie posters, were seen by only a minority.

Around 30 per cent had seen the video and 34 per cent, the movie poster images.

At another session of the conference, NTU professor Cherian George, referring to popular political blogs, said that measuring 'penetration', in terms of audience size, may be beside the point.

'If there are ideas worth sharing, they will be shared in all sorts of ways,' he said. 'Even if people don't know where they're from.'

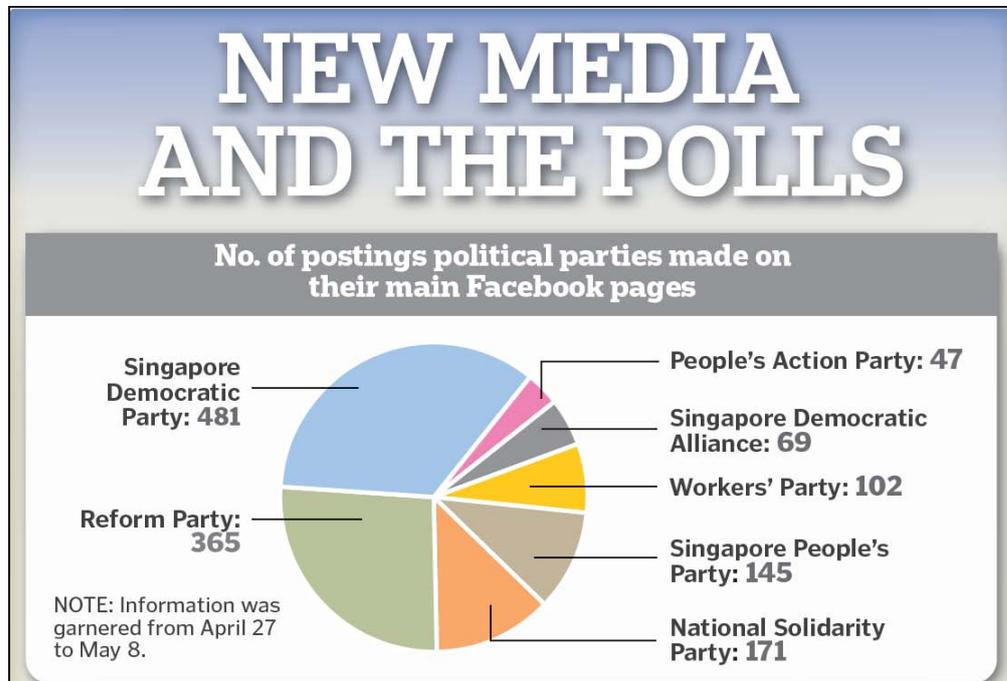
In fact, another study found that new media did play a part in 'agenda-setting' for the national conversation.

From February to May, three academics - Dr Paul Wu and Associate Professor Randolph Tan from SIM University and Dr Carol Soon of the National University of Singapore - archived and mined some 890,000 posts covering 48 topics such as 'cost of living', 'income inequality' and 'First-World Parliament', as well as the names of political parties and GRCs.

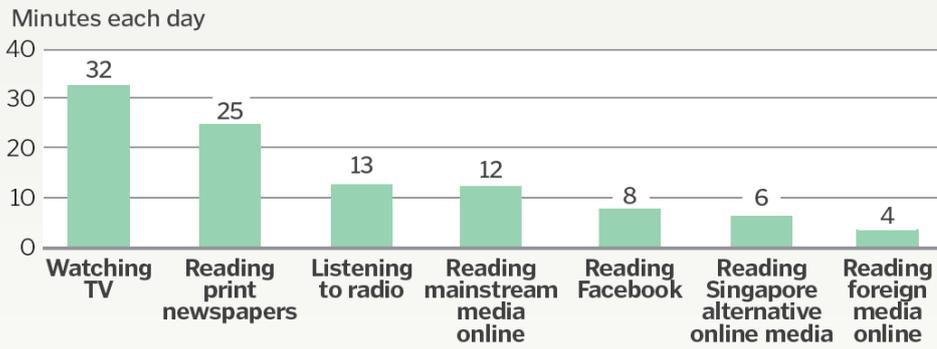
These were from both alternative new media websites and the websites of mainstream media.

They found a significant correlation between the topics discussed in both realms. And when there was a surge in the number of times a topic was posted online, this could be seen across all media simultaneously, mainstream or alternative.

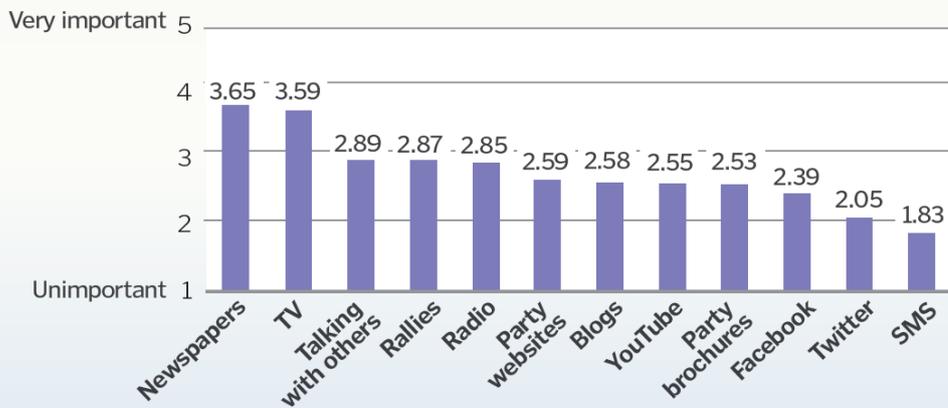
'They are all influencing each other,' concluded Dr Wu.



Time spent each day on election news



Importance of each source of information



Source: IPS survey

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