

Political websites creating a buzz

Some claim over one million views each month, a few still dogged by controversy

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WHEN rumours surfaced in 2012 that Workers' Party MP Yaw Shin Leong had an affair with a married colleague, it was a political blog that first went to town with the news.

Citing "several tip-offs from reliable informants", the report by TR Emeritus (TRE) helped trigger a huge political scandal that led to his expulsion from the party.

More recently, another political blog, The Real Singapore (TRS), took its turn in the spotlight - but for a different reason.

The couple behind the site, which is known for its anti-foreigner views, were charged in court this year with seven counts of sedition, after an article on the site blamed a Filipino family's police complaint for a scuffle during a Thaipusam procession.

TRE and TRS are among the growing number of alternative news sites in Singapore covering socio-political issues, illustrating not just that political discussion here is alive and kicking online, but that this discourse can have a very real impact offline as well.

Of course, this impact is not uniformly positive.

While some have got the nod, with sites like Mothership.sg landing exclusive interviews with Cabinet ministers hoping to reach out to a younger crowd, others find themselves under intense ethical and legal scrutiny.

But as a renewed buzz starts up in anticipation of the upcoming General Election, it is likely that these sites will gain more attention as people look for spaces to hear more views and air their own.

Proliferation

THERE are now more than a dozen active sites centred on socio-political issues in Singapore, buoyed by rising technology use and a keener interest in local politics after the last General Election in 2011.

These sites span the political spectrum, with some - like Five Stars and a Moon - being touted as pro-establishment sites and others striving to give the opposition greater play.

Nanyang Technological University communications professor Liew Kai Khiun says the proliferation of such sites reflects the low cost and ease of entry that digital and social media have given increasingly literate netizens.

"In an era of user-generated content, the traditional politician and journalist no longer have monopoly over political discussions," he says.

These sites have also taken on a more active role over the years, generating their own original content instead of simply putting an alternative spin on news published elsewhere.

Their effort to produce credible news is one reason these sites, once seen as the domain of amateur citizen journalists, are no longer on the fringes of political discussions.

Some sites count media veterans among their backers. Former Today editor-in-chief P. N. Balji is the consulting editor of The Independent Singapore, while Inconvenient Questions is helmed by former TV producer Viswa Sadasivan.

Others, like The Online Citizen (TOC), are equipping citizen journalists with reporting skills.

"Alternative sites are becoming more and more responsible," says political observer Zulkifli Baharudin, a former Nominated MP.

"The previous view that they're a bunch of troublemakers out to get eyeballs cannot be the view we have today. Sure, a handful those types remain, but many of these sites want to produce reliable content."

On the flip side, some sites at times put out sensationalised content that could be potentially seditious or defamatory, in their quest for higher traffic. As netizens chip in with vitriolic comments, the sites have been accused of fanning social tensions.

And they, too, may have their own agenda. TRS - helmed by Singaporean Robin Yang and his Australian girlfriend Ai Takagi - has attracted criticism over the years for its alleged anti-foreigner slant. It did not respond to e-mail messages from Insight for this article.

Still, despite the black sheep, these sites are no longer outposts of alternative viewpoints.

TRS, for example, boasts that it has over 1.2 million unique visitors a month. This refers to the number of different people accessing a site. In March this year, Mothership.sg received 1.96 million unique visitors, says its managing editor, Mr Martino Tan.

Their swelling audience reflects a maturing society that is now more invested in its political future, and is not afraid to show it, experts say.

"It reflects the political new normal - at one level, manifesting in greater political awareness as well as contestation," says Singapore Management University law don Eugene Tan. "It's a more opinionated society than before."

At another level, he says, it shows the desire of more Singaporeans to express their views on socio-political issues. And they're looking to hear more views, too.

"When people seek out alternative perspectives, it does not necessarily mean that they have little or no trust in official sources," says Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) research fellow Carol Soon. "They may do so just to fulfil their need to hear different sides of a story."

Most of these sites say they were started to accommodate these voices. TRS calls itself a platform for Singaporeans to "express themselves freely and without any form of censorship".

The Independent Singapore, meanwhile, positions itself as a middle ground between the mainstream media and the online world, which is generally seen as more critical of the Government.

Survival

AS MORE alternative news sites jostle for eyeballs, some observers wonder what they stand to gain.

The couple behind TRS had "bragged to their families" about the money they made off the site, according to a media report. This raised the question of how profitable such sites can be.

"We should not forget that in the Internet world, revenues (from advertising) are driven by eyeballs, which in turn are driven by sensational articles, often anonymous. Readers should keep in mind the commercial considerations behind some sites," says Professor Tan Cheng Han, chairman of the Media Literacy Council.

TRS, Insight has learnt, asks up to \$20,000 for a month of advertising space, while others offer more conservative rates. Another source tells Insight that TOC charges up to about \$5,000 a month for ad space.

Some sites also tap middlemen like Google AdSense, offering them space to display ads in return for a fee, which might be calculated based on the number of page views, explains Dr Adrian Yeow, a senior lecturer at SIM University.

Data analytics tools offer estimates of the revenue websites can pull in, but the range is massive. CuteStat estimates that a site like TRS can earn \$983 a day, but Site Price places the figure at \$299.

Experts, however, say it is unlikely that these sites are set up primarily for profit.

"Given the cost of hosting these sites, employing some full-time writers or editors or moderators, I seriously doubt they are surviving on these models," says Dr Yeow, noting that the sites "have a constant need to source for additional funds".

Money goes into buying server space and paying for maintenance. In most cases, writers are paid no or nominal fees.

Many of the sites have struggled to stay afloat and have had to be creative in finding funding.

TRE nearly shut in 2011 due to uncertainty over funding, but gained enough financial support, apparently from readers, to survive. A donation drive, along with the sale of souvenirs on its online stores, raised over US\$30,000 (about S\$40,000).

It now has a page on its site with information on how people can donate, and offers membership privileges, including access to articles 30 days or older.

Membership fees start at about \$10 a month and go up to \$999 for lifetime membership.

Mothership.sg is backed by a social enterprise, Project Fisher-men, and last year said it had enough seed funding to last a year-and-a-half. Its managing editor Mr Tan tells Insight the site now sustains its operations by offering digital advertising space and advertorial services.

Last year, it partnered social enterprise Weekender Group to share content across print, digital and social media platforms.

TOC, which last year appealed for public donations to supplement its "extremely low" funds, recently turned to crowdfunding to pay for its coverage of the next General Election.

It has raised over \$40,000 to defray administrative costs and train citizen journalists, among other things.

Impact

WHILE keeping these sites running still seems an uphill task, it has become difficult to imagine the political sphere without them.

"They help people get a better sense of what's going on - what policies are in place, how they perceive issues and personalities," says Mr Zulkifli. "They've become a fact of life. They're not going away."

They also give a louder voice, particularly to people who do not agree with the dominant political players, says Prof Eugene Tan. "It's safety in numbers - that they are not alone and have like-minded people," he explains.

Experts say these sites also have had an impact on how political issues are discussed, and help signal to politicians and the Government the more dicey issues, like foreign labour.

Dr Liew feels they serve to amplify how people feel about real issues on the ground. This is why hot-potato issues like immigration and the Central Provident Fund make up the bulk of vitriolic content on these sites - and need to be responded to swiftly by the authorities.

If nothing else, the sites have prompted a more active online presence by politicians, who realise the need to engage with netizens themselves, adds Dr Liew.

But the real question is how much sway these sites and their commentaries will have on voting results in the next GE.

For now, experts say their impact is likely to be limited. Prof Eugene Tan cites their "echo chamber effect" of drawing only like-minded people.

In other words, these sites are likely to crystallise decisions that have already been made, based on prior experiences and perceptions with local and national issues, adds Dr Liew.

Another problem is that the sites have limited reach. Their audience consists mostly of younger Singaporeans, while the bulk of the population relies on mainstream media for political news and views.

A 2011 IPS survey of 2,000 Singaporean voters found that 90 per cent depended on traditional media for election news, while only 40 per cent of people went online and just 30 per cent of those used channels like Facebook and political blogs.

Experts expect more people to turn to alternative sites in the next GE, but IPS also found that while most perceive alternative sites as more independent-minded than mainstream media, the Internet is still considered less trustworthy.

Former Nominated MP Calvin Cheng, who has experience in the media industry and has spoken out against some alternative sites, says their diversity of views does not mean people are better informed, as some sites put out highly biased pieces.

Additionally, the anonymous nature of such sites puts some netizens on guard. While some sites are upfront about the people running them, others are not.

Prof Tan Cheng Han says this might be out of concern about lawsuits or a public backlash, but adds: "The fear factor is exaggerated and, increasingly, a convenient excuse not to be upfront about who they are and what they stand for.

"Ultimately, Singaporeans do prefer an online community that is responsible."

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From the write stuff to anything goes

THE INDEPENDENT SINGAPORE

Founded in 2013. Aims to be a middle ground between mainstream media and most alternative sites. Team includes Mr Kumaran Pillai, former chief editor at The Online Citizen, and journalism veteran Edmund Wee, formerly of The Straits Times.

Owned by local firm Protegesoft, whose director is Mr Pillai. Site carries ads, says it welcomes investors.

THE ONLINE CITIZEN (TOC)

Set up in 2006. Known for hosting offline events like debates in the run-up to the 2011 General Election.

Has crowdsourced for funds, and offers ad space. As of last year, managed by social enterprise The Opinion Collaborative, whose board includes some TOC editors.

In 2011, it was gazetted as a political association, which requires it to declare all donations.

MOTHERSHIP.SG

Mostly light-hearted, BuzzFeed-style. Has interviews with politicians like Minister Tan Chuan-Jin, mixing hard questions with the irreverent. With former civil servants among its editors, some netizens question if it is pro-government, but it manages to give fairly balanced play. Social enterprise Project Fisher-men provided seed funding. Offers ad space and advertorial services.

FIVE STARS AND A MOON

Seen as pro-establishment. Accused of being a People's Action Party (PAP) mouthpiece over the Hong Lim Park saga, as it was one of the first sites to say protesters were "heckling" - a word later used by PAP MPs commenting on the incident.

INCONVENIENT QUESTIONS

An interactive platform where people post policy questions that are answered in panel discussions. Helmed by former Nominated MP Viswa Sadasivan, who also heads communications firm Strategic Moves.

MUST SHARE NEWS

Set up last year, it says it provides "news for the social generation", and carries easy-to-digest takes on local issues. Linked to social-media marketing firm Gushcloud.

NEW NATION

Singapore's answer to popular US satirical site The Onion. Founded in 2011. One of its founders is Mr Belmont Lay, now editor at Mothership.sg.

THE REAL SINGAPORE

Started in 2012, it has a reputation of publishing articles - some from unnamed contributors - that have an anti-foreigner slant. The couple behind the site have been charged with sedition.

TR EMERITUS

Known for being critical of the Government. Founded in 2004 as Wayang Party, renamed Temasek Review, then became TR Emeritus in 2011 after a dispute with Temasek Holdings over its name.

In 2012, IT company director Richard Wan revealed he was one of its five editors - and the only one based in Singapore. Has ads and memberships, accepts donations.

RAVIPHILEMON.NET

Started in 2009. Commentaries tend to be critical of Government. Mr Ravi Philemon this year joined the Singapore People's Party, after years in the National Solidarity Party. He is a former editor of The Online Citizen.

YAWNING BREAD

Run since 1996 by activist Alex Au. Analysis-focused. This year, Au was fined for contempt of court over an article.