The big connect: Working the social media
It enables politicians to engage voters and mobilise support quickly but will it translate into actual votes?

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It was almost midnight when the screen on his phone lit up. Somewhere in Tampines Street 45, two residents had fumbled for their mobile devices in the dark to send Tampines GRC MP Baey Yam Keng a call for help.

One Instagram post read: "498D is in darkness, lift not working."

"The whole block of 498D blackout now, tried to call town council but can't get through," another resident said in a Facebook message to Mr Baey.

Recounting the incident, which happened last year, Mr Baey notes that social media enables his constituents to track him down easily. Its immediacy means problems can be attended to quickly.

He made a few calls and the electricity outage at Block 498D was fixed in an hour.

Social media has also become another way for politicians to gauge sentiment among the electorate, especially the young and tech-savvy.

For an artful politician, social media is a personal broadcasting tool that helps to generate positive publicity round the clock.

But it takes consistency to build up a social media presence. To quote Mr Baey: "You can't say, 'Oh, General Election is coming, let me set up an Instagram account or a fan page on Facebook and sell my koyok (quack medicine).'

"If no one is following you, what's the point?"

Insight takes a look at the role of social media for politicians and how it might translate at the ballot box.

Keeping with the times

Increasingly, social networking site Facebook has become a platform of choice for MPs to keep constituents informed of the goings-on in the estate, and on policy changes.

The lead-up to this weekend's National Day and SG50 celebrations became a social networking opportunity, for example.

The Minister for the Environment and Water Resources, Dr Vivian Balakrishnan, uploaded photos of funpack distribution in Bukit Panjang earlier this month.

Chua Chu Kang GRC MP Zaqy Mohamad shared in a post that he is impressed with the SG50 decorations in his Keat Hong ward.

In recent weeks, there has been a growing buzz around the next General Election: which candidates are contesting where, and just when will the polls be held?

On Wednesday, Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong chose Facebook to announce that the current MP overseeing MacPherson ward, Ms Tin Pei Ling, will be fielded in the now-single member constituency.

And when Defence Minister Ng Eng Hen announced the retirement of Lieutenant-General Ng Chee Meng from the SAF in a July 31 Facebook post, he added tantalisingly: "There will be questions asked about LG Ng's future plans, particularly, if he is entering politics. "Given his tested leadership and proven capabilities, I would not at all be surprised, if indeed he is."

Today, virtually every politician in Singapore - 80-plus MPs and a slew of candidate hopefuls - is on one or several social media platforms, which have become an integral part of any communication strategy these days. As Nee Soon GRC MP Lim Wee Kiak puts it: "You cannot not be there at all."

And here's why: An average Singaporean spends about two hours daily on social media and entertainment websites, according to consultancy firm Frost & Sullivan.

And they are young. Industry research also shows that 59 per cent of total Singapore online users are aged 15 to 34 years.

According to Facebook, there were 3.5 million monthly active users in Singapore as at March, meaning over half of the population log in to the social networking site at least once a month.

Indeed, Dr Lim says it helps him reach out to younger constituents. "The group that is single, they are mobile and a lot of them will not come down to the grassroots events."

He adds: "There are some people who are always on social media, but you can't see them face to face." Meanwhile, fellow Nee Soon GRC MP Muhammad Faishal Ibrahim has set up a WhatsApp chat group with his volunteers to share information.

And if the politician is pounding the pavement and meeting residents, why not show it?

Cue a myriad photos of block parties and house visits. This way, the constituents can't say their elected MP is not doing any work, or to put it in Internet lingo: "Pics or it didn't happen."

With the proliferation of social media, terms have been coined to pigeon-hole the online community: followers, sharers or engagers. And the key is to convert followers into the latter two.

US-based Katie Harbath, global head of politics and government outreach at Facebook, explains: "The campaigns that do best are the ones that get their supporters to share messages, talk about candidates and engage in meaningful and authentic discussions."

Widely cited by many as a good example of a social media-savvy politician here is Prime Minister Lee Hsien Long. He posts videos and photos, be it the glorious sunset in a suburban Singapore neighbourhood, a warm handshake with foreign dignitaries or a "wefie" with a group of beaming Singaporeans. Such content makes the PM accessible to anyone online.

The number of people who liked his Facebook page has ballooned to over 826,000 from 138,000 in 2013. Mr Lee also has about 201,000 followers on Twitter and 117,000 followers on Instagram.

Politicians are also trying out new functions, such as Facebook Q&A and Facebook Mentions.

Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean uses Facebook Mentions, an app that lets verified public figures see posts that mention their name and provides tools to help them manage their social media interaction.

Facebook Q&A - where users set up a live chat on their page and answer questions directly from their audience - has also become popular after PM Lee tried it in January.

His posts from that session drew more than 166,000 clicks, likes, comments and shares.

Several MPs and ministers have since tried it and Mr Baey, in particular, holds a Facebook live chat every first Sunday of the month.

Giving the opposition a voice

Opposition parties have also been building their presence online. Before the announcement of the new electoral boundaries, it was the smaller Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) that seemed most active online, posting on its Facebook page every other day.

But now that election fever is here, opposition politicians and parties are posting updates regularly, up to several times a day, sharing photos of their outreach activities, and even where they would be contesting.

Last week, the Workers' Party (WP) posted photos of its walkabouts in single member constituency Fengshan and East Coast group representation constituency, and declared the party will definitely contest there as it is "so heartened by the warm welcome" it had received.

Meanwhile, SDP chief Chee Soon Juan started a blog last month with the first post titled "Politics Worthy of Our Nation". In it, Dr Chee said: "There is the social media which has enabled me to relate my side of the story and to fight back."

On Thursday, the SDP uploaded a satirical video as a call for donation and volunteers that went viral.

The minute-long YouTube clip promotes a fictitious brand of detergent, Pappy Washing Powder, effective in removing stains. These stains, however, are not a blotch of curry, but words like "transparency", "accountability" and "democracy".

"If you want everything removed and you want everything whiter than white, try Pappy Washing Powder," the video urges, tongue firmly in cheek.

SDP tells Insight that it intends to adopt new platforms and apps as the GE draws near.

The party will use social media to reach out to voters and "as a means to interact with them and encouraging them to be part of our campaign". It adds: "The effort to bring democratic change to Singapore must be from the ground up and social media is the ideal tool to do this."

Perhaps more importantly, social media allows opposition politicians to engage large segments of voters and mobilise support quickly.

SingFirst chief and former presidential candidate Tan Jee Say notes: "The key benefit is that the public gets to know about us, what we stand for, what we want to do for the people, our activities".

Associate Professor Alan Chong of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, at Nanyang Technological University, says: "It can be a source of validation, meaning to report on things which the mainstream media have left out. In a sense, you are amplifying your importance as an opposition party."

Winning the popularity vote?

Being an online media darling, however, does not guarantee an election victory. Social media helps to create a following but whether it translates into an actual emotional following and, finally, a cross beside the party logo on the ballot paper is another matter.

Netizens whom Insight spoke to agree. Tanjong Pagar GRC resident Angeline Tay, 39, says: "We need to see who can deliver positive outcomes for the country. And not everything on social media is real. It is more for entertainment."

One young voter, Ms W. Q. Teo, 22, who lives in Ang Mo Kio GRC, is excited at the prospect of potentially being able to cast a vote in the next election: "It will be interesting to see what the different parties have to say, but social media will not affect the way I vote."

For some, it provides for alternative views. East Coast GRC resident Angel Peng, 38, says: "Usually, I will try to read articles from the mainstream media and other alternative platforms before I make a decision."

While face-to-face interactions remain critical in constituency work, Dr Carol Soon, a research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, says: "Inactivity on social media is unlikely to break a campaign.

However, there will be a cost as people are increasingly turning to accessing information in highly interactive formats and on the go."

Digital renaissance

Social media really came to the fore in the 2011 General Election, where it played an important part in serving as a conduit for public discourse on both community and national issues.

For example, issues such as the rising cost of living and housing policy were widely debated in social media.

Its role, however, was downplayed in a subsequent study conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies, which concluded that GE2011 was not an "Internet election" as the study found that most people still opt for the mainstream media for election-related news.

Even so, social media and data analytics have been used effectively to influence voters, as US President Barack Obama did in 2012.

His campaign team hired technologists to study online habits, track voters and have them influence others to vote.

When used effectively, the Internet and social networking can help to marshal a groundswell of support for any given political party.

"Looking at the by-elections and all the way to the GE 2011, you can't help but sense that this level of mobilisation of supporters could not have been possible without some sense of strong spirit among them... Social media has certainly kept this spirit up," observes Associate Professor Chong.

In May 2013, the Media Development Authority (MDA) dropped a bombshell on the online community, declaring that websites reporting on Singapore news and with significant reach, would have to be individually licensed.

For some, it came across as an attempt by the Government to exert greater control over the Internet. MDA's announcement prompted more than 130 Singapore-based websites and bloggers to black out their sites in protest.

A group of bloggers also started the #FreeMyInternet online movement.

Recently, socio-political commentary website The Middle Ground was asked by the MDA to register under the Broadcasting (Class Licence) Notification and undertake that it does not receive foreign funding for the operation of the site.

Amid this backdrop, social media is set to play a larger role in the election this time around.

Already there has been greater sharing of videos on Facebook, which also introduced hashtag support in 2013, making it easier for users to find content.

Social media enables politicians to shoehorn their messages into the collective consciousness of the voters, especially the younger "selfie generation".

Short clips of rally speeches and the crowd's reaction as well as interviews with political candidates will no doubt find their way to innumerable Facebook feeds when the hustings begin.

Social media offers massive reach within a short time span.

But mistakes and gaffes can also spread like wildfire, prompting criticism or worse, causing reputational damage. When it happens, dealing with mistakes honestly and openly could well "turn haters into fans", says Mr Baey.

Would-be new candidates might see the need to curate their online identity, given the nature of often ruthless scrutiny on social networks.

MP Mr Zaqy quips: "It is an interesting time for politicians, in which they are not just accountable for when they step into office, but things that were said before or posted."

WP's Ms Lee Li Lian, who set up a Facebook fan page during the 2013 Punggol East by-election, tells Insight that the challenges include "getting enough content, whether they are relevant or appropriate, (and) handling trolls" - people who deliberately post offensive remarks or start arguments with the intention to upset others.

Challenges of engagement

Active social media engagement does make the politician come across as more personable, but Mr Michael Netzley, academic director at the Singapore Management University, notes that many posts are generally not designed to elicit a reply.

There is that problem of a meaningful discussion being hijacked by trolls.

Mr Netzley says it is up to the owner of the page to intervene and get the discussion back on track, noting: "Four years ago, Nicole Seah was far ahead of the game. She built a genuine community and there was really good dialogue going on."

For instance, he says, Ms Seah would constantly remind Facebook users to "refrain from bullying others" on her page.

One such post read: "Diversity means that different opinions will abound. Feel free to state your point, but refrain from calling other users names or insinuating they are moles."

Ms Seah, a National Solidarity Party (NSP) candidate in GE2011, was so popular that some dubbed NSP, the Nicole Seah Party.

She left the party last year. Although Ms Seah was immensely popular online in GE2011, her NSP team did not secure enough votes to pluck Marine Parade GRC from the PAP, garnering about 43.4 per cent of the votes.

Indeed, the GEs of 2006 and 2011 show that online campaigns must also be augmented by activities on the ground. It takes more than selfies, hashtags and status updates to woo a more informed and increasingly vocal population.

That said, getting the online engagement right could potentially be game-changingin the future where the millennial generation, especially those born after the widespread adoption of digital technology, make up a majority of the electorate.