

Will GE 2011 be the Social Media Election?

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In the 2006 General Election, many tech-savvy voters turned to blogs for information and alternative viewpoints, leading some to term it Singapore's first Internet election.

This time, there will be Facebook, Twitter, Foursquare and a host of other social media platforms which voters can use to seek an even wider range of views and news on the general election.

The change has led some politicians and analysts to predict that social media will play a major role in the upcoming elections, even influencing votes in a significant way.

Blogger Lee Kin Mun, 42, better known as Mr Brown, said: 'There will still be blogs that you will visit for specific views. But this time, the chatter and conversation will be happening on Facebook and Twitter. It's the next phase, as people now can have real-time conversations with each other.'

There are already signs of what can happen. On Tuesday, when political website The Online Citizen posted on Facebook a Straits Times report on the People's Action Party's new potential candidates, it drew more than 40 comments in three hours.

Mr Benjamin Lee, 41, who blogs as Mr Miyagi, said the use of social media during the elections could go beyond just sharing comments, pictures, videos and links.

People could track on Twitter what others are saying about the elections, or even a particular political rally or political party, through hashtags. These are keywords appended to tweets.

Geotagging tools such as Foursquare and Facebook Places, which let people announce where they are, could see people at a rally discuss online with each other the goings-on as the event progresses.

New-media expert Marko Skoric, from Nanyang Technological University, said that while social media may not have a large impact on swing votes, it could be significant in a close race.

'As citizens increasingly use social media to gauge public opinion on certain issues or personalities and their popularity, it is possible that a strong social media buzz may create an impression that a particular candidate is leading,' he said, and indicated that it could influence people to vote for that candidate.

However, National Solidarity Party secretary-general Goh Meng Seng foresees social media having a large impact on swing votes. He said: 'I think the swing voters have increased from 30 per cent to 50 per cent. And a significant portion of this group are wired voters.'

Official data and social media analysts Socialbakers.com and Sysomos company show that Singapore has 2.35 million Facebook and 1.76 million Twitter users. Both new media were introduced here in 2006, after the most recent GE.

Half of Facebook users check their accounts at least once a day, according to a recent study led by Dr Skoric.

In addition, about half of the 7.3 million mobile phone subscriptions are for smartphones, which let users check their social media feeds while on the go.

But Dr Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, said that whether social media will have an impact on voting will depend on several factors.

These are: whether notable issues or incidents arise in the run-up to the elections; whether there are social media users who can provide the relevant political context; and whether they have a large following to send the information to.

Another factor is the mainstream media's coverage. 'If they don't adequately cover such issues, this may drive people to seek the information from other sources,' she added.