

A game-changer for the polls?

Esther Ng, Imelda Saad & Saifulbahri Ismail

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From posting updates on Facebook and Twitter to sharing photographs using Flickr and even uploading podcasts of their views — these are just some of the many digital tools which political parties, candidates and their election agents can use during the campaign at the coming General Election (GE). And similar leeway will be given to the general public.

The result, said political analysts, will be more robust and liberal campaigning, as had been expected when the Parliamentary Elections Act was amended last year.

Ahead of the polls, the subsidiary legislations of the Act were amended yesterday to detail what will be allowed, compared to the previous GE, when only party websites, chat rooms, email, SMSes and hyperlinks were on the “positive list” under Internet Election Advertising regulations.

Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow Gillian Koh told MediaCorp this could be a “game-changer”.

Said Dr Koh: “There are a lot more young people who have become voters, and they’re definitely more comfortable with new media platforms.”

Hong Kah Member of Parliament Zaquy Mohamad, who is also in charge of Young PAP new media engagement, concurred that the moves were “keeping in sync with the times”.

He said: “Many MPs have new media presence and ... many would be concerned if election campaigning online has to stop.”

Another change that applies to all: Live recordings of election activities can be uploaded online without the need for submission to the Board of Film Censors, provided the recording does not distort the meaning of the events, or contain any additions, omissions or substitutions.

Singaporeans also no longer need to declare their name and address when posting election material.

Said blogger Alex Au of Yawning Bread: “It regularises what netizens are anyway going to do. People assume that this is their right.”

All other films, however, are still required to be submitted for classification.

For accountability, political candidates will also be required to declare the platforms they intend to use for election advertising, which they must do within 12 hours after the start of the campaign period. Thereafter, any other new platforms have to be declared in advance before advertising can be published.

Offences under the Act include making false statements and wrongful claims, as well as election advertising on the eve of Polling Day, known as Cooling-off Day. The maximum penalty is generally a fine of S\$1,000 or 12 months’ jail.

National Solidarity Party secretary-general Goh Meng Seng said he welcomed the liberalisation: "We'll fully utilise all the platforms on the Internet that can bring our messages across at a very minimal cost."

The coming GE will also be the first time the Public Order Act will be enforced.

During the election period, anyone who wants to use the Speakers' Corner (picture) for demonstrations or public speaking must obtain a police permit, to ensure it does not become an alternative venue to bypass the election rally permit regime.

Dr Koh noted: "It's expensive to hold rallies. Now that we have new media platforms, we'll see whether smaller parties want to use the 'real world' site or have an effective strategy to use (their) online site."