

## About a third of socio-political websites in Singapore no longer active

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When he started the political website Inconvenient Questions in January 2015, media industry veteran Viswa Sadasivan wanted “robust, informed and honest” discussions of issues that are “more centre-right or centre-left”.

The 58-year-old former Nominated Member of Parliament (NMP) felt that political discourse should not be limited to just the mainstream media, which is perceived “as pro-establishment”, or popular online sites which gravitate towards the “far left”.

His news site focused more on churning out panel discussions – such as a dialogue on free speech featuring Law Minister K Shanmugam – as well as one-on-one camera interviews with politicians and academics.

However, 16 months after its inception, Inconvenient Questions had to close down -- due to a lack of funding.

Mr Viswa's news site is not the only socio-political site to cease operations. Six-Six News, which started in June 2015 and published political commentaries among others, shut down in April last year.

As of August this year, a study by local think tank Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that 35 per cent of about 240 blogs and socio-political sites, mostly set up in the run-up to, and after, the 2015 General Election, have gone inactive. This means that those sites have not been updated at all with new articles this year.

The key reasons for the shrinking numbers include the lack of funding or time to continue operations, said IPS research assistant Siti Nadzirah Samsudin.

As Mr Viswa, who runs a media consultancy firm, put it: “It was a huge strain on my energy and resources to manage Inconvenient Questions well in a hands-on manner without earning income and running my commercially driven company.”

Apart from funding constraints, Ms Nadzirah also attributed the drop in the number of active socio-political websites to bloggers moving their activities to social networking sites --- such as Facebook, which is increasingly becoming “the arena for political debate and expression” and allowing them to market their content better, she added.

### Adding to political discourse

Still, there are bright spots within the political blogging scene. Earlier this year, three new blogs - Consensus SG, Observer+ and The Flip Side -- were launched.

Consensus SG' co-founder, recent Oxford University law graduate Rio Hoe, told TODAY that the blog was started primarily to focus on issues including education, gay and women's rights, as well as economic inequality.

However, given the close ties between policies and politics, some political commentary is "often unavoidable", he added, as evident by a number of articles published on the recent reserved Presidential Election.

"I think that high quality political discourse is necessary for us to build a progressive and inclusive society, and more can be done to improve our current state of affairs," said Mr Hoe, 25, who is currently based in Britain.

Media experts said that while the mainstream media provide factual reports and analysis of current affairs, political news sites and blogs play a different role in contributing to local political discourse.

Most of them tend to provide alternative viewpoints through commentaries and give voices to marginalised groups, said Dr Felix Tan from SIM Global Education.

General manager of Asia at Fremantlemedia International, Mr Ganesh Rajaram, said that online socio-political blogs also have the ability to generate more instant conversations and reach out to youth who do not, or choose not to, subscribe to mainstream media.

"In a way, this leads to less apathy," said Mr Ganesh, who is also an NMP.

However, he pointed out that there are some negative aspects to online blogs. Unlike the mainstream media, which has to adhere to tenets of journalism such as accuracy and objectivity, political blogs do not have to follow these rules.

"I'm not saying all of them, but for some, the notion of fair and accurate journalism is thrown out of the window. There are sites which tend to sensationalise... and create firestorm when in reality, their articles are not based on facts," Mr Ganesh added.

While both experts and bloggers agreed that having more political blogs bodes well for local political discourse, it is also essential to have sites that are of quality.

### **Quality, not quantity**

Mr Viswa said that if quality "lags behind quantity too much and for too long", it could result in frustration and exasperation. He added this could "breed disengagement".

But like a pyramid system, there is bound to be a mediocre base, said Professor Ang Peng Hwa from the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at the Nanyang Technological University.

"There will be rubbish... I don't know of a situation where it's all high quality without the base," he added.

The key to healthy discourse lies not just with content producers but consumers as well, said Mr Hoe.

“Readers need to be critical and discerning. They must differentiate between different media outlets and actively prioritise reliable, high-quality content over headline-grabbing, low-quality writing,” he added.

Apart from grappling with high operational costs, political blogs also have other challenges, such as widening their reach in order to exist in the long run, said bloggers and experts.

To do so, it is also important to create a strong identity that sets a site different from others, said former newspaper editor Bertha Henson, 53.

In establishing The Middle Ground, her focus is to produce articles on local current affairs through satirical writing, which is generally a hit with readers.

But increasing readership continues to be a challenge as majority of Singaporeans “do not like reading political blogs”, she added.

“They are more interested in lifestyle-type of articles. It’s easier for political blogs to draw the eyeballs of certain types of people, but not mass eyeballs,” said Ms Henson.

Echoing her sentiment, Prof Ang said that readership is typically high during election seasons and then “it falls off”.

Mr Hoe, noting that Consensus SG is currently operating at a loss, said that his full-time career as a lawyer will “put a strain” on his ability to write for his blog on a regular basis, “something which is important for the success of any blog”.

For Mr Viswa, apart from having strong financial backing, those serious about starting political blogs should also have a core team that has the requisite understanding of the socio-political landscape, which is “not exactly a walk in the park”.

“It has to be a cause or mission close to your heart that would give you the stamina and thick skin needed to keep it going, as it often feels like a thankless job,” he added.