

General Election was not an Internet election, says IPS survey

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SINGAPORE - A survey by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), which was released yesterday, has found that the May General Election was "not an Internet election" - a conclusion which raised eyebrows among bloggers and researchers who spoke to Today. It is "simplistic" to consider the Internet in isolation, given the interconnectedness of information flow, they pointed out.

The IPS study, which polled 2,000 Singaporeans of voting age and various backgrounds, was conducted to find out how much the Internet influenced views and votes.

The findings, unveiled at an IPS forum yesterday, found that 30 per cent of the respondents relied mainly on social networking site Facebook and blogs for information on the polls. For the remaining 70 per cent, mainstream media - newspapers, television and radio - were their main source.

The survey found that the former group is younger, better educated and predominantly male. What surprised even the IPS researchers is that this pool is less politically cynical. They are also more knowledgeable and seem to understand politics better, according to IPS.

Another unexpected finding, according to IPS, is that 57.6 per cent of the respondents decided their who they were going to vote for even before the GE was called - "sobering news" for those who thought any kind of media played a critical role.

The study was led by IPS senior research fellow Tan Tarn How, who was formerly with The Straits Times, IPS deputy director Arun Mahizhan, as well as Professor Ang Peng Hwa of Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) Internet Research Centre.

Well-known blogger Alex Au, among those who questioned the findings, compared the situation to that of a meme.

"It is hard to draw a clear-cut answer from the data. Ideas can flow from one medium to another, and from person to person. It gets further replayed through others, and you can't quite pin it down," Mr Au said.

Prof Ang said that, while family and friends play a critical role in influencing each other, they could have obtained their information through new media, which could make it more influential than it was credited for.

Researchers generally agreed that, although the Internet did not play a "decisive role" this time, it was certainly significant.

Mr Janadas Devan, IPS director and an associate editor at The Straits Times, said: "It would have an effect on the margins in the closely contested areas though but I would not call it decisive. But this segment (that falls into the 30 per cent) will be a growing segment."

At the end of the day, Mr Janadas said, people will vote based on their interests, instead of media shaping their decision. "It will be the bread-and-butter issues, the social issues," he said.