

Netizens say bring it on Health Minister's blog gets high praise, but other ministries not yet ready to follow suit

Leong Wee Keat

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SINGAPORE - His initial worry about blogging and replying to Facebook posts was that it would take too much time. Three months after venturing online to talk policy, Health Minister Khaw Boon Wan's concerns have diminished.

"Typically, I spend less than 20 minutes per day," he said, adding he was "pleasantly surprised by the experience".

"I'm discovering its many uses, helping me in my work, in reaching out to Singaporeans in a direct and personal manner," said Mr Khaw in an email interview with MediaCorp.

The online platform has become an informal channel for him and the Ministry of Health (MOH) to convey his thoughts and discuss the MOH's priorities next year. "I can share ideas which are on my mind, even before they become policies," said Mr Khaw.

The MOH blog casts the spotlight on the Government's cyberspace journey and what may lie ahead. While new media has been used previously, for purposes such as party recruitment or personal sharing with the electorate, this latest new media push has centred on healthcare issues and policies.

But despite the positive experience - and the 1,530 MOH Facebook users so far - it looks like Mr Khaw and MOH could remain the lone ministry voices in the blogosphere in the near future.

Ministries don't rule out blog option

A MediaCorp check with six Government ministries found the majority have little intention to follow in MOH's footsteps just yet.

The Education Ministry, for example, "has no plans to start a corporate blog". "We are exploring various online platforms to engage the public," added a spokesperson.

The National Development Ministry, which is "reviewing" its online outreach and engagement efforts, also does "not have plans to blog currently". But a spokesman added: "We do not rule out the possibility of doing so in future."

With most ministries keeping their plans close to the chest - and their options open - the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts did say blogs are "suitable for communicating certain Government policies" to a new, media-savvy population.

"Nonetheless, we would still use mainstream media as the main platform for communicating Government policies and national issues due to their wider reach," said a spokesperson.

Media and internet policy researcher Tan Tarn How, of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), offered some reasons why Government agencies would be reluctant to venture online.

These include the fear of losing control of the conversation, the unfamiliarity of not talking down to citizens, an unwillingness to admit to mistakes when they happen, a reluctance of being scrutinised publicly and an unwillingness to be open with views and information.

When contacted, Minister for Community Development, Youth and Sports Vivian Balakrishnan said "the use of new media is to be encouraged", but he is also "mindful of its limits

"Policy formulation requires access to information, time for deep analysis and rational dialogue based on trust and goodwill amongst diverse stakeholders," he told MediaCorp.

'Honest, open, fast with information'

Citizens and media analysts rate Mr Khaw's blog and MOH's Facebook page highly - not just for his "honest", "open" and "conversational" style, but also the information disseminated.

Earlier this month, a general practitioner posted on the Facebook page asking for more information about H1N1 vaccine for children, after the Ministry had posted a press release on the page.

Instead of receiving the information via the usual circular "one to two days later", the doctor received a response on Facebook "within hours".

At times, retiree Raymond Lo - who provided feedback on elderly dental policies - feels there is room for improvement. "The replies are standardised and just to pacify you," said the 70-year-old. "Whether they'll think about it is another question."

But National University of Singapore communications and new media lecturer Gui Kai Chong feels blogging could show "how policy-making is a complex process involving dilemmas, balancing acts, and difficult choices" - hence, an effective way to get the public's understanding.

The more communication, the better

When it comes to news announcements, for example H1N1 vaccination for babies, Mr Khaw feels it "works better" when an appropriate blog elaborates on the thinking and the concerns behind the formal press statement.

"Of course, a press conference can do the same, but I cannot be giving press interviews several times a week ... but I can blog every other day, or even daily," he said.

"Health is such a complex subject and affects everyone and is of great interest to all" that he advocates more, not less, communication - be it through mainstream or new media.

Netizens whom MediaCorp spoke to suggested that the Finance and Environment Ministries, as well as statutory boards such as the Immigration and Checkpoints Authority, could also start online engagement channels.

But Mr Gui warned that new media may not work well for every Minister or Ministry. "This practice (blogging) may not be suitable for all the Ministers, perhaps because of the sensitive or strategic nature of their portfolio, their personal image and style, or other factors," he added.

But as social media continues to be more widely used, IPS' Mr Tan said these tools will become "as important as, or more important than traditional means of communication". "Furthermore, in a crisis, these tools may become invaluable," he added.