

7 ways social media fooled political experts in GE2015

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IN THE second forum conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) about social media use during the General Election (GE) last year, five experts said that the survey outcomes were not what they expected.

The second forum, titled “A symposium on Media and Internet use during the General Election 2015”, follows from [the one held in November last year](#) which came to the conclusion that GE2015 was not the social media election that it was touted to be.

Attended by about 50 people, yesterday’s forum was held at the Oei Tiong Ham building in the National University of Singapore’s Bukit Timah Campus. The experts who spoke at the forum were:

1. Dr Natalie Pang (Assistant Professor, NTU’s Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information)
2. Dr Debbie Goh (Assistant Professor, NTU’s Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information)
3. Dr Elmie Nekmat (Assistant Professor, NUS’s Department of Communications and New Media)
4. Dr Zhang Weiyu (Associate Professor, NUS’s Department of Communications and New Media)
5. Dr Lim Ee-Peng (Director, SMU’s Living Analytics Research Centre)

Although the experts variously concluded that social media did not have a substantial effect on the GE, some had surprising results to show from the survey of 2,000 Singaporean citizens which was conducted from Sept 15 to Sept 25 last year.

Here are the seven results which puzzled the experts:

1. Sharing stuff on social media did not lead to more knowledge about the GE.

In fact, survey results collected by Dr Debbie Goh suggested that an excessive use of personalised communication via social media – that is, sharing and producing political content based on personal interests and values – had a negative influence on the knowledge of some groups of voters. In the survey which studied how communicating on social media affected the voters’ knowledge of the GE, the assistant professor at Nanyang Technological University’s Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information measured participants’ political knowledge by posing them a series of questions.

These questions ranged from factual ones, such as ‘which party was a particular candidate from’, to ones that tested their legal understanding of the voting process. While participants scored highly on factual questions, one particular question asking which political party used the slogan

“Your Voice in Parliament” only saw 30 per cent of the participants answering correctly – the worst score attained.

In a demographic breakdown of the results, Dr Goh found that above average users of personalised communication who were Indian, had secondary school education or less, earned a high income or earned a low income had mean knowledge scores that were drastically lower than those from the same groups who had a lower than average use of personalised communication. So sharing or producing political content only enhanced the knowledge of certain groups of people.

The conclusion? According to Dr Goh, the online chatter was “not to engage in a complex discussion of the GE”, but to partake in the “carnival atmosphere” created by it.

2. More female swing voters switched sides to vote for the Opposition while more men switched to vote for the People’s Action Party (PAP).

In Dr Zhang Weiyu’s follow-up study to the voting pattern of late decision-makers presented last year, the associate professor at the National University of Singapore’s department of communications and new media studied the voting patterns of swing voters and discovered that 70.5 per cent of the swing voters who switched their votes to the Opposition instead of the PAP were female. On the other hand, 69.2 per cent of the swing voters who switched from voting for the Opposition to the PAP were male.

3. Among swing voters, those who attended a particular party’s rally tended to vote for the other party instead.

This particular result left Dr Zhang scratching her head. Even though she found that on the whole, swing voters participated in rallies more as compared to non-swing voters, the results showed that 84 per cent of the swing voters who had switched to voting for the Opposition had actually attended a PAP rally, while only 21 per cent of them had attended a Workers’ Party (WP) rally. Likewise, 79 per cent of swing voters who switched their votes to the PAP instead of the Opposition had actually attended a WP rally, compared to 37 per cent who had attended a PAP rally. The conclusion: Swing voters participated more in the rallies held by the party from which they swung.

4. The more knowledge participants think they have about on political issues, the more they voted for the Opposition.

In Dr Elmie Nekmat’s study on multiple social media opinion platforms and their role in influencing voting patterns, the assistant professor from the National University of Singapore’s Department of Communications and New Media concluded that social media, particularly in the case of open social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, had no influence on voting patterns. In fact, one’s own personal opinion held the most sway over his choice of vote. However, he found that the more knowledge a participant thought he had on three political issues, housing, transport and population, the likelier the participant will vote for the Opposition. When asked, the assistant professor could not provide a definitive answer to why this is so.

5. The more a voter thought his or her vote would make a difference, the more he or she tended to vote for the incumbent PAP.

In the same study, it was found that those who felt that their vote had an impact on the overall results of the GE tended to keep the status quo and vote for the incumbent PAP.

6. Voters were influenced by closed social media groups more than they were by open social media groups.

In the same study on social media opinion platforms, the results showed that the voting patterns of an individual were likelier to be influenced by closed social media platforms such as Whatsapp and Viber rather than open platforms which tended to be more critical of political issues. While personal opinion held the most influence on voting patterns, the opinions gained from closed social media platforms ranked second in influence. On the other hand, opinions from open social media platforms were “not influential” on voting patterns across the three political issues raised.

7. Participants used social media to relate to other users more than for expression or information seeking.

Even though participants were least affected by open social media platforms, apparently, more of them used social networking sites to learn about the views of other Singaporeans rather than use it to express their own opinions and or even to seek information. The study conducted by Dr Natalie Pang from the Nanyang Technological University’s Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information split the use of social media into three main categories relevant to the GE: expressive – which is to use social media to articulate your own opinion, informational – which is to seek and share information, and relational – which is to initiate, maintain and strengthen your relationship with others through finding out what they think.

She found that the last had the “greater intensity of use” across participants of most ages, all educational levels, and both genders. In fact, when surveyed, most participants said they used social media to find out fellow Singaporeans’ views, as compared to friends or colleagues’ views.