

Bouncing back through social media

PAP candidate Tin Pei Ling, flamed online during GE2011 has made social media work for her

Jennifer Dhanaraj

The New Paper, 3 September 2015

FORMER Marine Parade MP Tin Pei Ling was vilified on social media soon after she was introduced as a new candidate in the 2011 General Election.

But she has become popular with her constituents in the MacPherson ward in Marine Parade GRC.

Ironically, this came about mainly due to her use of social media.

There was an online backlash against the youngest People's Action Party (PAP) candidate in 2011 after a photo of her posing with a Kate Spade box went viral. Things got worse when she said her biggest regret was not taking her parents to Universal Studios Singapore.

But after she was elected, Ms Tin often posted photos and updates about her grassroots activities and issues that she spoke about in Parliament.

Singapore Management University Associate Professor Eugene Tan said: "By posting updates on the ground and sharing her thoughts online, she has used social media as a virtual extension of herself.

"And by taking ownership of her image online, she has further supplemented her connection with voters on the ground.

"Authenticity is key here. Had they felt a disconnection from her online persona and how she is on the ground, she wouldn't be as popular."

Ms Tin, who is contesting in a three-way fight in MacPherson SMC, which was carved out of Marine Parade, is not the only politician engaging voters on social media.

Almost every politician now has a presence on social media.

Dr Ang Peng Hwa, director of the Singapore Internet Research Centre at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), said: "No political party can afford to ignore social media."

This is a stark contrast to the 2011 General Election, when the ruling PAP was the least active on Facebook, according to an Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) study on the impact of new media in that election.

The Reform Party and National Solidarity Party were the most active.

Complements

Social and Family Development Minister Tan Chuan-Jin told The New Paper: "I see social media as another medium for engagement. It complements rather than replaces existing modes of interaction."

Mr Tan posts updates on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram regularly. Some posts are personal and refer to his family life.

In a recent Facebook post, Mr Tan wrote: "Long day. Managed to catch the kids before they sleep. Had little chats with them in their rooms before they turned in for the day. Amidst the helter-skelter of the elections, this is a little oasis of calm."

He also often posts fun photos with cats and, yes, food as well. (We now know that his favourite orh luak, or oyster omelette, is in Chinatown.)

Workers' Party candidate Daniel Goh, who has also been active on Facebook, was lauded by many for his heartfelt and authentic posts.

The sociology professor at the National University of Singapore was thrust into the spotlight after an e-mail alleging that he had an affair with a former student was sent to the media.

Mr Goh "categorically refuted these baseless allegations" to the media as well as on social media. He also shared updates and his thoughts on the situation.

Prof Tan said: "Goh took proper ownership and responded in a timely manner to an issue that he knew voters would be concerned about.

"He definitely wasn't economical in trying to reach out to voters and his authenticity came through. His posts were also crafted in a way that was engaging."

But experts said that being on social media may not be enough for politicians to reach out to voters.

Dr Ang said: "People are migrating to closed chat groups through services such as WhatsApp and WeChat and it is harder to reach them through social media.

"The closed groups are like friends having a conversation and then you, a stranger, butt in saying: 'Vote for my party.' Unless you get invited in, it is impossible to have a genuine, engaging conversation."

Dr Carol Soon, a senior research fellow at IPS, wrote last month in a commentary on the IPS website: "Post the 2011 GE, the proliferation of smartphones and Instant Messaging applications like WhatsApp have boosted the sharing of political news, pictures and videos. Hence we anticipate a greater volume of information exchange and discussion among users for the coming election."

But whether the politicians can penetrate these closed groups to reach out to gain new supporters remains to be seen.

As Dr Ang told TNP: "I think the political parties will have to be even more creative."

Talk politics online

Other than the mainstream media, these websites also discuss local politics.

Mothership.sg

One of the more popular sites offering GE 2015 coverage with light-hearted and easy-to-digest content. Former civil servants are among its editors.

Hits: 1.2 million unique visitors a month

The Middle Ground

One of its founders is former The Straits Times journalist Bertha Henson. The Middle Ground has lengthy, opinionated articles. Its well-researched articles include one that analysed how often each MP spoke in Parliament.

Hits: 300,000 views a month

Inconvenient Questions

Founded by former Nominated MP Viswa Sadasivan, it has video discussion panels featuring political analysts including Associate Professor Eugene Tan of SMU School of Law.

Hits: 4,000 views in July

The Online Citizen

A prominent source for alternative news in Singapore during the last elections, The Online Citizen stays up-to-date in its coverage of GE 2015, leaning towards being pro-opposition.

Hits: 570,000 views in July

Must Share News

This sociopolitical site is more of an aggregator of content. But it carries interesting items like The Blur Sotong's Guide to Reform Party.

Hits: 330,000 views in July

New Nation

This is Singapore's answer to satire site The Onion. It was founded by Mr Belmont Lay, who is now the founding editor of Mothership.SG.

Hits: 360,000 views in July

Six-six news

This relatively new site has had high-profile exclusive interviews such as with ministers Tan Chuan-Jin and K. Shanmugam.

Hits: 6,000 views in July

Temasek Review Emeritus

Temasek Review Emeritus, which is critical of the Government, mainly covers opposition developments. In 2012, it was revealed that IT company director Richard Wan is one of its five editors.