

HELLO? 'What's on your mind?' / HEY YO! We see, we tweet, you read

That's what Facebook asks users in the status update. And that's also what candidates have asked netizens, who made their 'likes' of Nicole Seah and 'dislikes' of Tin Pei Ling (above) clear

Tay Shi'an,
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WHEN she was introduced as a People's Action Party (PAP) candidate in March, Ms Tin Pei Ling told reporters that she hoped to use social media to reach out to younger voters.

But instead of being a tool to engage voters, social media became a conduit used by netizens to attack Ms Tin for her seemingly light-weight nature as a candidate.

Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong, who helms the Marine Parade GRC team that Ms Tin is a part of, said yesterday that the negative image of her online was "a factor" that might have dragged down the PAP's vote share in the GRC.

And even though Ms Tin has been elected as an MP for Marine Parade GRC, the online attacks continue. (See report on facing page.)

On the other hand, social media helped raise the profile of her rival, Miss Nicole Seah of the National Solidarity Party (NSP), to such a level that she became the most "liked" Singapore politician on Facebook, with more than 93,000 "likes" as of press time, surpassing even Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew.

Though she ended up losing, such was the power of the Internet during this GE that it created a new playing field where an unknown politician could get prominence equal to that of a veteran.

New media also gave Singaporeans, especially the young, unprecedented opportunity to feel involved and be engaged in politics.

And it hasn't gone unnoticed by other media agencies across the world. The New York Times published (online, of course) a report titled "In Singapore, Political Campaigning Goes Viral". Other reports appeared as well, on Time magazine's website as well as The Guardian in the UK.

For the PAP, cyberspace opened up a whole dimension where the so-called "climate of fear" in real life was firmly demolished.

Cyberspace is "characterised by and replete with a strong anti-PAP presence," said political observer Eugene Tan of the Singapore Management University.

Reversal

Instead of being afraid to criticise the PAP, netizens fiercely and openly blasted the ruling party. While some were anonymous posts on websites, many used their own Facebook accounts, where they could be identified.

Ironically, it was the pro-PAP netizens who remained silent, fearing the flames if they spoke up.

To show that the ruling party was "connected" to the younger generation, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong took the plunge and hosted a live chat on Facebook, though not without this greeting message: "Please don't flame me, I'm a newbie :-)"

He was flooded with more than 5,000 comments during the one-hour Facebook session. He admitted later that the deluge "overwhelmed" him and was "probably a little bit more intense than you can deal adequately with throughout".

PM Lee also said, during the post-polling press conference held yesterday that "the social media has also had an impact in this election, much bigger than in previous elections".

Dr Tan said that if even PM Lee is doing it, "it tells us that new media is the new ground that parties and candidates have to walk, virtually".

He noted that PAP had to embrace new media this GE and to use it "aggressively", much more so than in 2006.

It rolled out webpages for all 27 constituencies, had a Twitter account, and almost all its politicians had Facebook profiles and pages. Most constituencies also had their own YouTube channel.

Unfortunately, while some candidates took to the Internet like ducks to water, others produced headscratching gaffes – Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong's Facebook joke about Ms Tin being "traumatised", for instance.

Ms Tin is also the subject of a complaint by the NSP after a moderator of her Facebook account accidentally posted a snide comment about NSP's Miss Seah using Ms Tin's account on Cooling-off Day.

Mr Arun Mahizhnan, deputy director of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), noted that the PAP has long held the advantage when it comes to traditional media.

Even playing field

He said: "With the new media, PAP is in a relatively even playing field. It is a difficult position it has not been in since the 1960s.

"Since it has lost the practice of media battles it used to have – and win handsomely – its gaffes are rather startling when revealed by the new media."

In contrast, he said, opposition parties finally found a medium that they could use to carry their voices and ideas.

He said: "For the first time in Singapore's electoral history, we are seeing candidates – especially opposition candidates – owning the media instead of media owning them."

He singled out the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) as probably doing the best job in raising the profile of candidates like Dr Vincent Wijesingha and of itself as a viable political party.

SDP used its website and YouTube channel to deliver its manifesto and Shadow Budget. The website also had showed messages and rally speeches by its candidates, as well as professionally produced videos that projected its new softer image.

Its secretary-general, Dr Chee Soon Juan, told The New Paper that traffic to its website increased 12-fold during the election period.

The Internet also proved to be a critical fundraiser. One example: The five independents who failed in their bid to contest Tanjong Pagar GRC managed to raise \$68,542 from online well-wishers.

Perhaps the most powerful in GE2011 were the online videos.

Thanks to traditional media creating new media platforms, like Singapore Press Holdings' RazorTV and MediaCorp's ge.sg and YouTube, netizens had access to high quality videos where they could see and hear – repeatedly – the candidates' full speeches and interviews, some 10 minutes or longer, and share them freely with friends.

Those who could not travel to rally sites could watch them live on the Internet, through websites like ge.sg and inSing.com, to get a feel of the atmosphere.

Even the introduction sessions of candidates were made available on these sites, so every single word and expression could be repeatedly scrutinised.

Good speakers who look good, like Miss Seah and, to some extent, Workers' Party's Pritam Singh, went viral.

They garnered fans with their impassioned rally speeches and interviews, which, in a newspaper or a 10-second TV news soundbite, might have lost some of its kick.

This was invaluable exposure for some new candidates, but a painful blow for others.

The PAP's Ms Tin was one casualty, with the video of her "biggest regret/Universal Studios" gaffe.

The Reform Party's Lim Zi Rui, 24, was also given the dubious honour by Yahoo News for giving one of the two worst rally speeches during the campaign, when he discussed hall allocation problems at the Nanyang Technological University (NTU), where he is a final-year undergraduate.

Even seasoned politicians weren't spared.

One of the worst rally speeches was from PAP's Mr Teo Ser Luck, Senior Parliamentary Secretary for the Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports, and Transport. He had tried to rouse the crowd by repeatedly shouting the names of his team mates in Pasir Ris-Punggol GRC team on April 28.

The video was replicated and ridiculed on several websites. On two YouTube sources alone, it garnered almost 120,000 views and many unkind remarks.

But to Dr Mark Cenite, from the Nanyang Technological University's Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, the action in this election was not so much on the political parties or candidates' websites.

"The real revolution was the buzz that happened on Facebook and Twitter," he said.

"People saw their friends supporting the opposition or the PAP...They responded, thumbs up or thumbs down, by clicking 'like' or making a short comment.

"They all got sucked into the dialogue. The result was an amazing expansion of the discourse...It's hard to be cynical about the developments that are happening. Singapore is becoming a democracy. It's thrilling to witness."

To IPS' Mr Mahizhnan, one of the "most gratifying dividends" from new media in this GE is the "flowering of political humour beyond the bak chor mee of mr brown in 2006".

One example is YouTube video "Darth Vader PAP supporter", a hilarious Star Wars spoof on the Tanjong Pagar GRC walkover which has gathered almost 160,000 views.

Said Mr Mahizhnan: "The number of humorous messages being circulated in the cyberspace is a sign of our political maturity. Many a truth lies in the light-hearted musings of concerned citizens and they are no less instructive than hard truths."

Polarised views

SMU's Dr Tan said it is hard to tell how much online popularity – or unpopularity – translated into votes.

Mr Mahizhnan said that while a lot of new media advocates would call this GE an "Internet election", he felt that "the groundswell seen in this election period is unprecedented...and is the primary cause of change and not the Internet. But the Internet helped communicate that 'cry from the heart' to each other and reaffirm that those who felt anger and frustration were not alone or abnormal."

But SMU's Dr Tan cautioned that new media tends to be very polarised.

He said: "Too often, there are many 'echo chambers' in new media – voters go to their favourite websites, blogs, Facebook pages to seek affirmation of their views and ideas.

"All too often, it's about chasing away views and people who don't share the same views and ideas. The herd instinct is very strong in new media. This is not good."

He added that while there is a lot of information available, much of it is unverified, inaccurate, unreliable, even blatantly wrong.

He said: "If on new media, we cannot separate meaning from data, and truth from falsehood, then new media ironically is about non-communication."

– Additional reporting by Tam Su-Ferne

POPULAR IN PERSON?: Ms Tin Pei Ling thanking residents during the PAP team's victory walkabout in Marine Parade GRC yesterday. GETTING ONLINE: (Far left) NSP candidate Nicole Seah logging onto the Internet at home. She updates her Facebook status several times a day. (Left) PM Lee Hsien Loong hosted a live chat on Facebook, where he had 5,000 comments in one hour.

IN TOUCH: Workers' Party supporters on their smartphones at Hougang stadium on Saturday night. Many tweeted and updated their Facebook status throughout election day.