

Social media signals not heeded during GE: Analyst

Several outcomes of the election would have been less surprising if more attention was paid to warning signals online, says data analyst

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Several outcomes of GE2020, such as the People's Action Party's (PAP's) loss of Sengkang GRC to the Workers' Party (WP) and the overall swing towards the opposition, could have been less surprising if greater attention had been paid to signals from social media data.

That is the view of Mr Chua Chin Hon, chief data analyst at AI solutions company Analytix Labs. He said the major parties - PAP, WP, Progress Singapore Party and Singapore Democratic Party - treated social media mainly as distribution channels for their messages.

This "fire-and-forget" approach towards social media will prove increasingly costly in future general elections, he added. Speaking at an online forum organised by the Institute of Policy Studies yesterday, he said there were four "missed signals" before Polling Day.

COVID-19 DE-SENSITISATION

By Nomination Day on June 30, user interaction with Covid-19 Facebook posts had plunged from its peak in April.

"The 'flight to safety' instinct, if it existed, likely dissipated along the way," he said, referring to the belief that voters would be more inclined to support incumbents in a crisis.

IVAN LIM INCIDENT

Mr Ivan Lim, 42, who had been walking the ground in Jurong GRC, and was expected to be fielded in the constituency by the PAP, withdrew his candidacy after allegations were made about his conduct at work and as a national service commander.

News of his withdrawal blew up on June 27, the same day the PAP manifesto was launched. That day, Facebook posts on him from seven local media outlets had 62,730 user interactions, almost nine times more than those for the launch of the manifesto.

"Some say online users are always going to be drawn to drama and controversy," said Mr Chua.

"These are fair points. But when you have an interaction gap of this size, it should have rung some alarm bells for the PAP..."

ENTHUSIASM GAP

User interaction with Facebook posts on the PAP's key message on jobs peaked well before Polling Day, while the opposition's message - to deny the PAP a "blank cheque" - peaked just in time, Mr Chua said.

The final fillip came in the form of emotive video appeals from former and current WP chiefs Low Thia Khiang and Pritam Singh to Singaporeans to "make their vote count".

"In contrast, the PAP didn't close its campaign on a particularly strong or memorable note," he said. "It might have been even lower if not for PM's Fullerton Rally."

SENGKANG SURPRISE

In a sample of 325 posts analysed for the Sengkang contest, the WP team had about 32,700 Facebook interactions daily during the campaign, while the PAP team had around 4,200.

But, Mr Chua noted, not all who reacted to the WP's posts were necessarily Sengkang voters, or even Singaporeans - as there are no publicly available tools to parse Facebook interaction data by geographic region.

"But when the gap is this big, there is no doubt the WP team garnered far greater mindshare," he said.