

When it comes to election issues... Newspapers still most trusted However, young voters turn to Internet to get lowdown on candidates

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The New Paper, 1 April 2011

They're all on the Internet.

From political parties to candidates with their own Facebook accounts.

But when it comes to the biggest influence on their vote, the young here ranked newspapers as tops.

Television was second.

Yes, the dot.com generation prefer traditional media. That's according to a survey of 1,003 Singaporeans aged 21 to 35 commissioned by The New Paper.

Voters aged 21 to 35 account for an estimated 600,000, or one in four, of the 2.35 million eligible voters this coming General Election.

In the lead up to the coming polls, 44 per cent of respondents said they will pay more attention to political stories in the newspapers.

But that's for issues. When it comes to personalities, young voters picked the Internet to get to know the candidates.

Young Singaporeans said they are more likely to follow politicians on social media like Facebook (16 per cent) and find out more about them online (16 per cent), than turn up for their rallies (13 per cent).

Nominated MP Calvin Cheng had predicted this during a speech in Parliament last month, when he spoke about the impact of the Internet and the Internet generation on the next election.

He had said: "(In the 2006 elections), there was already use of some message boards and socio-political blogs to spread information. No doubt, this election will see even more of this, and the pervasive use of Facebook and Twitter to gather support.

Turning online

"The young may not bother turning up at rallies, but you can be sure that they will turn to the Internet to gather every bit of information they can find."

About one in five said they would not bother to take part in any election-related activities. Can a decade make a difference in the way information is consumed? After all, many forms of social media didn't exist 10 years ago.

Facebook, for example, was launched only in 2004.

The survey results did suggest a difference, however.

About half of those aged 31 to 35 said they will read more political stories in newspapers (it's 39 per cent for those aged 21 to 25).

And 17 per cent of those aged 31 to 35 said they will attend rallies (it's 10 per cent for those aged 21 to 25).

But the younger respondents favour the Internet.

Among the 21-to-25-year-olds, 20 per cent said they would follow the candidates on social media, compared to 13 per cent of 31-to-35 year olds.

The youngest lot are also the most apathetic, with 24 per cent saying they would not bother to take part in any election-related activities to find out more information. It's 19 per cent for those aged 31 to 35.

But there's an even more important question – which media has the most influence on their vote?

The survey revealed that newspapers was the top choice with 32 per cent of the votes. Three in four ranked it among the Top 3 sources of information.

The Internet came in third, with about one in five saying it was the medium with the most influence on their vote. More than half placed it in their Top 3.

While newspapers remain tops, the Internet is creeping up.

In 2006 the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) asked a similar question in its Post-Election survey.

Then, the influence of the Internet ranked below newspapers, TV, rallies, door-to-door visits by candidates, radio, party literature.

IPS faculty associate and NUS sociologist Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser, who conducted the study jointly with senior research fellow Dr Gillian Koh, said: "I'm not surprised that new social media are now more prominent in the political process, and that young voters are more likely to turn to the Internet, given that they are more tech-savvy."

Agreeing, Singapore Management University (SMU) Assistant Professor Eugene Tan noted that between 2006 and 2011, the various political parties have been using new media platforms more aggressively.

Aggressive use of new media

The ease of access and 24/7 availability of information makes new media platforms a major source of information for young Singaporeans.

He said: "Also, the Internet has the image of being on the 'wild side'. This status of irreverence, independent and indifference (to mainstream media) make the new media platforms popular."

So why is the traditional media still the choice for the Internet-savvy young voter?

SMU's Asst Prof Tan said this suggests the importance of factual information, something the online platforms may be lacking in.

He said: "In that sense, young voters show maturity and discernment about editorial slant. What it points to is that the young voter is not relying on any one source of information excessively."

What can the candidates and political parties glean from the survey results?

Asst Prof Tan said: "They need to have both a real world and virtual world presence and engagement in order to reach out to as many voters as possible."

"The findings show that the traditional (mediums) like election rallies are important. Newspapers and TV show a resilience, and a disproportionate commitment to the online platforms may not be prudent."

"So the demands on political parties and electoral candidates are higher. They now have to do walkabouts not just in the real world but also in cyberspace."

But IPS' Assoc Prof Tan reminded candidates that the medium itself is not everything. The messaging is also crucial.

He said: "Strategy-wise, political parties should work on using the whole range of media, but the message, candidate and party brand matter as much, if not more, than the media used."