

No Wild Wild Web, but what don't we already know about media "objectivity"?

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THE Institute of Policy Studies released the results of a study on 11 February on the "rationality" of blogs as the comment on political issues, which concluded empirically that earlier fears of a "Wild Wild West" – where the Internet was perceived by politicians to be a place where political commentators "shoot off the hip" and moderated speech was scarce – was unfounded.

Instead, the study, titled "Assessing the Rationality of Political Online Space" and led by IPS research fellow Dr Carol Soon, indicated that the more political content that a particular blog has, the more likely it was to be "objective" – in that the blog posts considered an alternative view.

"To us, that is quite counter-intuitive," said Dr Soon, "because it goes against popular assumptions that political issues are emotional and that people tend to be very emotional when they blog about things such as LGBT (issues) or something that is very close to your heart."

The study also noted that more than half of the blog posts studies tend to be less "emotional" – in that they do not rant or use expletives.

In addition, the study identified that bloggers who mentioned the government tend to be "anti-government" while those who mentioned the opposition parties tend to be "pro-opposition".

The IPS study focused on public issues that occurred in the period between June and July 2014 – which included "PenguinGate", PM Lee Hsien Loong's defamation suit against Roy Ngerng, conflict between LGBT and religious communities, the Central Provident Fund, immigration, employment, housing, and public transport – although blog posts studies extended beyond posts made during those months.

But would focusing on these topics, most of which have a heavy policy rather than political slant, skew the results of the survey, given that the anguish generated from these issues would lead to strong sentiments against the government, who is often viewed as the executer of policies? Possible, but not conclusively so, said the researchers.

Dr Soon pointed out that for issues like the religious-LGBT conflicts that arouse from Pink Dot, the majority of bloggers did not specifically mention "government" in related posts, although there could be some bloggers who advocate the repeal of Section 377A, and these would have been more critical of the government.

Referring to data concerning partisanship, senior research fellow Mr Tan Tarn How added, "39% of blog posts does not mention government at all, even though the posts are political (in nature). In other words, the government is not mentioned even when they are talking about social-political issues (such as) employment and living standards."

The research team was also mindful to point out that the existence of such objective political content does not necessarily mean they have a stronger influence on readers, as a lot still depends on the number of readers of specific blogs and readers' interpretation of the content.

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To be perfectly honest, this would not be the first time that IPS has published a study to indicate something that some – particularly those who operate in the circle being studied – do not already know.

In an earlier study, when IPS decided that there was no “ghettoising” of the online community because those who go online for election information just as readily read traditional news sources, many of us would have rolled more than a few eyeballs. The painfully obvious could have been equally applied to this latest verdict: The wild child that many believed was the Internet, simply wasn't as wild as made out to be. Well, no surprises there.

But what is of greater interest is how this study seemed to have gone along a particular train of thought that annoyingly persists in adhering to some “old world views” that bear little resemblance to what we are already experiencing today, online or offline.

For a start, that “rationality”, “objectivity” and the lack of “emotionality” should be taken as important considerations when evaluating the slant of political content online is a highly problematic approach.

Indeed, Mr Tan suggested that the criteria used to evaluate the online space might not really be suitable.

“Why should the online space be rationale? That is an extremely valid question, as scholars have said that the Internet is a completely different species of thing from traditional media and to require of it the same kind of criteria that you would require of offline traditional media is, in a way, to not understand what new media is.”

Nevertheless, Mr Tan acknowledged that there are demands in Singapore for such parity, hence the standards used in the evaluation. If so, then the more pertinent questions to ask would be, who are making these demands, and why?

The desire for online media to be more “objective” and “measured” can often be read in statements by both traditional media owners and the political elite, who seem adamant on making clear that the “quality” of online media can never match the “high standards” of traditional media. And if I were to hazard a guess, reasons for doing so would range from protecting interests to easy management of dissent.

“Objectivity” is often taken to be a benchmark, where the ability to offer “both sides of the story” is designated as the highest form of journalistic quality because it presents non-partisanship. However, well-documented criticism of this position have pointed out that it is fundamentally impossible for a journalist, online or offline, to be impartial to a story or news-maker.

Instead, being “objective” has just as readily been viewed as an easy way out for journalists – that is, telling both sides of the story is taken as a quick fix for putting a story together, often at the expense of proper evaluation and analysis. This passive production of news also encourages the passive consumption of news, neither which does credit to a thinking society.

As such, two possible positions evolve. The first is to bear the same test to traditional media, which the IPS research team has expressed an interest to embark on, should funding permit. However, I would offer that such an exercise should be less about determining if traditional media is “better” at non-partisanship than online media, but whether such standards are feasible or even ideal to begin with.

The second position is to take a long hard look at the political support for “objective” and “balanced” reporting and ask if such blinkered views might actually be disregarding the diversity offered by online media, at the expense of sound policy-making. The nature of online media lends itself to as close a grassroots encounter as possible, from the comforts of a desk. How our politicians and public service take this feedback to the next level is entirely up to them, but we can only hope that they do more than just brush it off as irrelevant ranting, as they did previously, and paid a hefty price for it at the polls.

But what is clear from both positions is that it is pointless, makes no sense and could be potentially detrimental to good decision making if we were to continuing believing in some mythical “objectivity” in our media, online or offline. Wishing it so won’t make online media – from the virulent vocalisers to the calm contemplators – go away. We are here to stay, so get used to it. In fact, make the most of it.