

## **Online debate now more balanced, calm: Study**

**Contrary to perceptions of it being the Wild Wild West when it comes to political commentary and discussion, the online space has become more balanced over the years, with more voices on either side of debates on issues, research findings by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) showed.**

***Ng Jing Yng***

***TODAY***, 12 February 2015

CONTRARY to perceptions of it being the Wild Wild West when it comes to political commentary and discussion, the online space has become more balanced over the years, with more voices on either side of debates on issues, research findings by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) showed.

Contrasted with past studies that looked at blogs and online corrosive speech against foreigners, a study of nearly 200 blogs during a two-month period last year that saw several hotly debated incidents found that the tone used in more than half of the blogs is mostly calm, while seven in 10 of them would present the perspective of more than one side on an issue.

But blogs with high political content were found to be more anti-Government during the period of the study, which was conducted by IPS researchers Tan Tarn How and Carol Soon.

They surveyed 197 blogs and 1,000 posts between June and July last year, which saw controversial events like the National Library Board's proposed pulping of a children's title and the WearWhite and Pink Dot debate. They aimed to study the rationality of the online political comments based on three factors: journalistic objectivity, emotionality and partisanship.

Looking at websites ranging from The Online Citizen to personal blogs with at least one political post during these two months, the researchers found that about seven in 10 blogs presented more than one point of view when making political commentaries — suggesting objectivity. Posts that contained words such as “despite” or “however” were assessed to have alternative opinions.

Emotionality was judged by whether expletives were used or posts were written in caps. More than half of the blogs were rated as somewhat or very calm in their tone.

As for partisanship, those who made mention of the Government in their posts tended to take an anti-government stance. More than half of these carried high political content.

In contrast, however, across all blogs that frequently touched on political issues, more than half made no mention of the Opposition. Those who did were largely split between being pro-opposition and being neutral. A minority (7.6 per cent) took an anti-opposition position.

Commenting on the study's findings, Dr Soon noted that it showed the Internet to be “not a Wild Wild West ... (and) not as irrational as we thought it to be”.

There is now a greater variety of voices on the Internet — including pro-government bloggers and politicians — instead of being dominated by anti-government content, the researchers said.

They also found that highly-political blogs were more objective, said Dr Soon, adding that this is “counter-intuitive as it goes against the assumption that people tend to be emotional” in politically-charged blogs.

Highlighting the prevalence of multiple viewpoints being presented in the political blogs surveyed, she said this suggested “recognition that balanced arguments are required to sway minds and change opinions”.

Other findings of their study showed that bloggers who chose to remain anonymous were not necessarily less objective and there is no relationship between emotionality and partisanship.

Nanyang Technological University’s Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information professor Ang Peng Hwa noted that the study showed that online content can be credible although the findings did not examine where readers are spending their time online.