

Poll Questions Social Media's Influence in Singapore Politics

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The Wall Street Journal, 6 October 2011



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Above, a video clip of National Solidarity Party candidate Nicole Seah is shown on a smartphone in a photo taken May 10. Ms. Seah utilized social media including Facebook to publicize her campaign.

Plenty of media analysts rushed to describe the opposition parties' relatively strong performance in Singapore's general elections this year as a breakthrough moment for the power of social media in the city state.

But a new survey conducted by Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies, a think-tank within the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, finds that the influence of the Internet – and the alternative voices it enables – a little overrated.

According to the survey of 2,000 Singaporean voters, only 41.1 % of people read election news online. Moreover, only 30% of the respondents turned to media such as Facebook and political blogs for information on the May vote, and, of these, 90% continued to use traditional media such newspapers and television as a source of information.

"We are surprised. We had thought that the consumption of the Internet, social networking sites and party political websites would be higher," said Tan Tarn How, senior research fellow at IPS and one of the principal researchers of the study, in an interview. "Mainstream media was still the dominant media during the election."

The ruling People's Action Party won the election with 60% of the vote, but it was its slimmest victory since 1965. They lost six seats – an outcome many political activists attributed to the rising influence of websites and political blogs as an alternative to what observers say is Singapore's heavily state-influenced mainstream media. Singapore has consistently ranked low on Reporters Without Borders' Press Freedom Index, with a ranking of 136 out of 178 last year.

Mr. Tan said the use of social-networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter as a source of information during the election was significantly higher than in the last election in 2006. The readership of political blogs offering a wide range of different views, such as The Online Citizen, Yawning Bread and Temasek Review, has also grown since 2010, when IPS carried out its previous survey. Then, only 13% of respondents read political blogs compared with 21% in the latest poll.

Yet while the Internet helped raise political awareness in Singapore in the two years leading up to the election, the web's influence during the campaign itself was "not as much as a lot of people thought," Mr. Tan said.

Unsurprisingly, the 30% who tended to turn to blogs and social-media sites for their information were younger, better educated and more politically knowledgeable but also more cynical about all the information they read – including information disseminated in the "alternative press."

Some political observers felt that the survey did not measure the more important way in which politics in the city-state has changed – the impact it has had on Singapore's government which has generally enjoyed very little bottom-up pressure on its policies.



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Singapore President Tony Tan spoke to reporters outside the election department Aug 28.

"There were spillover effects from social media raised around the country," said Bridget Welsh, a professor of political science at Singapore Management University. "Things have shifted, social media has definitely become an agenda-setting device. It is not just a numbers thing."

Some bloggers, too, were hesitant to accept the conclusions of the survey, particularly those who had been and continue to be active on politically dissenting blogs. Writing in The Online Citizen, better known as TOC, a widely read political blog, Howard Lee took issue with one of the conclusions of the survey, which was that the mainstream media was more trusted than the alternative media as a source of information about the elections.

“Was the survey referring to trust in the accuracy of the information, or the perceived fairness of the information presented?” Mr. Lee wrote. “The survey did not elaborate on this, which... could have yielded very different results.”

Singapore’s television news and newspapers scored 3.45 and 3.44 respectively on the scale of trustworthiness, with 5 being “very trustworthy.” Blogs scored at 2.76, slightly below party brochures at 2.78 and Facebook and Twitter received 2.51 and 2.28, respectively.

Researchers involved in the survey contend that the mainstream media will continue to play the most major, dominant role in the media diet of Singaporeans.

“The mainstream media has made significant changes in their political coverage, moving more and more towards the center,” said Arun Mahizhnan, Deputy Director of IPS. He noted that the readership of the mainstream media – Straits Times and Channel News Asia – still dominate online readership compared to blogs and Facebook. In addition, some bloggers expressed pro-government views and were largely supportive of the ruling People’s Action Party.

“The chasm between the so-called pro-government and anti-government media will not be as big in the future,” said Mr. Mahizhnan.

Some bloggers disagreed with this conclusion, too. One of Singapore’s most recognizable political bloggers, Mr. Brown, said in an interview that while it was hard to measure whether blogs and social media did actually change minds, he did know of many people who avoided the mainstream media and wanted to cancel newspaper subscriptions because of what they perceived to be biased election coverage.

“I don’t think the perception that the mainstream media has improved in their political coverage is widely accepted,” Mr. Brown said. “If the mainstream media has improved, people won’t be flocking to sites like TOC to hear the other side.”