

GE2011: The internet election that wasn't

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Senior research fellow Tan Tarn How presenting the findings of the key study at the IPS session on Tuesday. (Yahoo! photo/Jeanette Tan)

While this year's General Election was often touted as an "Internet election", findings from a recent study show that new media may not have been as decisive a factor in the polls.

A study by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) found that 70 per cent of respondents relied on the mainstream media news coverage for election-related information during the campaign period.

Of the remaining 30 per cent, most also read traditional mainstream media, online and/or offline, alongside political blogs, such as *The Online Citizen* and *Yawning Bread*, and Facebook posts.

The study surveyed 2,000 Singaporeans representative of the country's population by phone over three months following the conclusion of the parliamentary polls in May.

Researchers also found that the time respondents spent on traditional media was significantly higher than that spent online, from 12 minutes spent listening to the radio each day to about 32 minutes spent watching television, compared to between 3 and nearly 8 minutes spent online.

Even when online, about 33 per cent of respondents said they turned to traditional media websites compared to just over 20 per cent of respondents who said they read Facebook and/or blogs.

Yet, the study's researchers -- IPS deputy director Arun Mahizhnan, senior research fellow Tan Tarn How and director of the Singapore Internet Research Centre at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) Ang Peng Hwa -- stressed that while findings showed the GE was not an "Internet election", it does not mean policymakers and politicians should ignore citizens who obtain their news from the internet.

Tan said, "I think (the internet) had an impact, and the impact leading up to the election was very deep. It changed the way people think about issues, and opened up new possibilities in communicating about them."

The study showed that readership for alternative news online is on the rise, with a growth of about four per cent between October 2010 and March 2011.

Those who read alternative sources of online news -- three in 10 of the respondents -- were also found to be younger, more educated, and were from households with higher incomes.

And while they were more likely to disagree on politics and found traditional mainstream media less trustworthy, they were also less cynical of Singapore politicians compared to the 70 per cent of the respondents who relied on the mainstream media.

"30 per cent is quite a hefty percentage," said IPS director Janadas Devan. "And it will be a growing portion. It will grow because the profile is younger and better educated; that segment will grow."

"This impression we have that the Internet is what shifted this election, I don't think that's the conclusion," noted Devan. "But whether it had an effect on the margin, I'm sure it did. It was significant, but it was not decisive."

The findings, released on Tuesday, was part of a series of 11 studies led by IPS together with a dozen researchers from several other institutions including the National University of Singapore, NTU and SIM University.