

Traditional media still influential during Presidential Election

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Analyst Gillian Koh said this could be because traditional media is still far more accessible than having to access the Internet for news and opinion.

Mainstream newspapers and television are still the leading communication channels, with the Internet coming in behind when shaping voters' decisions during the 27 August presidential election.

This was revealed in a post-election study conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) which showed that 87 per cent of respondents found newspapers important in influencing their decisions.

Local free-to-air television came in second with 80 per cent while the Internet ranked in third with 67 per cent of Singaporeans saying it is important.

Results from this study, which was presented at an IPS forum on Tuesday, came from 2,025 Singaporeans polled over the course of 2 weeks, from 20 September to 5 October.

"Many people talked about the Internet, but I think ultimately, I supposed the mainstream media provided a platform for reflective analysis," said Eugene Tan, assistant professor in law at the Singapore Management University.

Highlighting the downside of new media, Tan said that there are only one or two credible sites, with many others simply being "echo-chambers".

"I think this is where the new media needs to work on, if they want to be able to exert a larger influence," added Tan, who was also part of a four-member panel at the forum.

The findings were also similar to a post-general election survey presented in July

which showed that the Internet fell behind traditional media when influencing voters' decisions.

While many dubbed the two elections this year as an "Internet election", analysts said this might have been overplayed.

IPS senior research fellow Gillian Koh said that Singaporeans are accustomed to the traditional channels because they are thought to be "credible, trustworthy, and especially for the official picture of what is happening".

In addition, these sources are still far more accessible especially to the older generation, than having to access the Internet and knowing where to look for news and opinion.

"The oldest population groups would tend to feel cut-off from that space (Internet) as they are less comfortable with having to go on a computer and surf," she said.

Despite acknowledging the rise of new media, Goh Sin Teck, editor of the Chinese daily Lianhe Zaobao argued that this does not signal the diminishing role of mainstream media, as it is also moving into the online space through social media channels such as Facebook.

He noted that the sales of major newspapers have actually gone up during the last two elections, adding that more readers were relying on the mainstream media for election-related news.

Mainstream media less important to younger S'poreans

But while newspapers and television hold a relatively higher influence, the current study also concluded that it is less important to Singaporeans within the 21 to 29 and 30 to 39 age groups, those in the service class and for new or first-time voters.

These groups instead, viewed the Internet as a more important channel for news.

On the other hand, those who favoured newspapers and television tend to be Singaporeans within 40 to 54-years-old, from the intermediate class and with a secondary level education.

Noting that the younger generation is more comfortable with the online media, Koh added that the medium also gives them a sense of "empowerment". This means that people online, not only receive news and views but can also help to distribute and create their own opinions and share them.

"This is also not to mention the fact that sometimes the material that is online and in alternative media platforms can be very creative and provocative, and it feels like peer-to-peer exchange.

"The younger people would be especially attracted to this sort of empowerment that they can experience," she said.

As part of the survey, respondents who found that the Internet played an important role were also asked to name up to three online channels which they deemed significant in their decision to vote.

Facebook topped the list with 46 per cent, while Yahoo! came in second with 37 per cent and Google in third place with 20 per cent. However, socio-political blogs such as The Online Citizen and Temasek Review were not mentioned by respondents in the survey.