

Divisive politics silences majority online

40% of US Internet users polled feel 'worn out' by amount of political content on social media



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TRUMP AND CLINTON - ENOUGH ALREADY!

The presidential election in the United States has been even more divisive and bad-tempered than usual and Americans, it seems, are sick of it.

According to the Pew Research Centre, almost 40 per cent of more than 4,500 adult Internet users polled felt "worn out by the amount of political content they encounter on social media".

This is almost twice as many – 20 per cent – as those who like seeing posts and discussions on political debates on their feeds.

The study, released on Tuesday, also showed that more than half described their online interactions with those they disagree with politically as stressful and frustrating.

This has led to an unusual apathy on platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, on which many are choosing to keep silent instead of engaging in political discourse. Four out of five polled said they even tried to ignore politically-charged posts by their friends that ran counter to their own views.

This wariness is due, in part, to the nature of social media, where those with the loudest voices, largest followings and strongest opinions tend to draw the most number of eyeballs.

Instead of encouraging dialogue, the participatory power of social



media, in which anyone is free to comment and make baseless accusations, has led to increasingly polarised views and silos.

No one knows this better than social activist Wael Ghonim, whose Facebook posts helped fuel the Arab Spring in Egypt in 2011.

In an interview with website The WorldPost, he labelled these activities as a mobocracy, where the mob, rather than the government, wields the power.

All you need is the Internet to set a society free, he had thought. But it turned out otherwise.

"Trump is a living example of the damage the mobocratic algorithms of social media can do to the democratic process," he said. "He effectively used social media to bypass both the political establishment and the mainstream press. Would he have been able to do this 20 years ago? I highly doubt it."

He cited a tweet sent out in 2012 where Mr Trump said: "I love Twitter... it's like owning your own newspaper – without the losses."

Mr Ghonim said: "today's social media currency is based on the numbers of followers, likes and shares. You are rewarded for broadcasting your opinion much more than engaging in conversations". He added that

"people will be as shallow as platforms allow them to be".

Mr Ghonim believes that social media platforms are able to tweak their algorithms to allow their users to see more reasonable counter-views, rather than an echo-chamber of like-minded opinions. That might not be the case now, as platforms typically try to grow their user base by allowing its users to see what they like to see – in many cases, opinions similar to their own.

The good news, at least for those tired of the US race, is that the furore will very likely die down dramatically after the election on Nov 8.

VINE IS DEAD, FOR NOW

The six-second video format was the rage when it launched a few years ago, spurring Twitter – equally loving brevity with its 140-character limit – to buy it in 2012 for US\$30 million (about S\$42 million).

For a while, Vine seemed like it might be the golden goose.

It became the platform that launched the careers of comedian King Bach, singer Shawn Mendes and Internet personality Lele Pons. (See the full list here: <http://str.sg/4YAb>)

The good news for Internet users sick of the ugliness brought out by the presidential campaign is that things will likely cool down dramatically after election day on Nov 8 – less than two weeks from now. PHOTO: REUTERS

hearing the announcement, Vine founder Rus Yusupov, who had been laid off by Twitter a year ago, immediately tweeted: "Don't sell your company!" The hashtag #RIPVine also began trending.

The news prompted one adult entertainment company to make a joke bid, saying that "six seconds is more than enough time for most people to enjoy themselves".

The hope for many Vine users is that their six-second videos are still available on the website. Perhaps the service will make a comeback, albeit in a more profitable form.

YOUR 'FRIENDLY' BUS UNCLE

It's grumpy and speaks Singlish. But at least it tells you what bus you can take to get to your desired location and how long you'll need to wait.

The latest automated chatbot, a program that simulates human behaviour, has come to life on a Facebook page called Bus Uncle.

All a user needs to do is to send a message to the page to get real-time updates. The information is drawn from the Land Transport Authority.

Typical replies include "Ah?", "Where are you? Which street lah, bus stop lah, or send me location also can", and "3 mins pack up your Sheng Siong bags".

The bot was made by 24-year-old Abhilash Murthy, who found other bus apps and methods too troublesome to use. "I had to scroll through a list of bus numbers, find my bus station, tap on it, make a few clicks, and only then could I get that information I wanted. I wanted information that was concise, accurate and junk-free," he said.

His goal, explained the former Singapore Management University student, was to reveal to commuters the "next frontier in technology: Bots".

"Everybody knows what an app is, and what a website is, but very few know what bots are, and what they are capable of," he added.

He didn't go it alone, though.

A friend helped him with the design, while the witty replies came from his girlfriend. "Commuting in Singapore is usually very repetitive and mundane, so I hoped to make it more interesting and improve the general happiness of commuters," he said.

So far, the reviews have been largely positive, and Mr Murthy noted that his servers have crashed several times due to the amount of queries coming in.

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