

## **Campaigning in cyberspace**

PUBLISHED ON SEPTEMBER 9, 2015  
BY SANTHA OORJITAMI

“EVERYONE is saying this is the Internet election,” People’s Action Party candidate Vivian Balakrishnan told the crowd at a rally in Singapore’s Holland-Bukit Timah Group Representation Constituency on Monday night.

The Environment and Water Resources Minister noted that voters were constantly WhatsApping and updating their Facebook accounts.

Social media helped generate interest and draw crowds to rallies during the 2011 election campaign but it’s playing an even bigger role this time, with additional platforms such as WhatsApp and Instagram, and more news portals.

“You ask. They answer. We make it happen”. That’s what Inconvenient Questions, a Singaporean sociopolitical site, offers.

During this year’s hustings, it broadcast a two-and-a-half-hour debate with PAP candidate and Law and Foreign Minister K. Shanmugam, Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) candidate Paul Tambyah and Singapore People’s Party candidate Benjamin Pwee.

Inconvenient Questions is one of several online news sites which have appeared since the last polls in 2011 and are drawing in readers and viewers, especially for videos.

The Online Citizen, which predated the last campaign, has also been joined by digital news agency mothership.sg, the All Singapore Stuff news portal and The Middle Ground.

“Video is a significant factor in the campaign this year,” said personal blogger Alex Au.

In previous years, social media posted mainly text and photos, he added.

“But video has a politician speaking for himself. You can watch his body language, facial expressions and reactions. It’s a slightly different ball game,” he said.

**Publication: The Star Online**  
**Date: 9 September 2015**  
**Headline: Campaigning in cyberspace**

Au credited Singaporeans sharing videos of SDP secretary-general Chee Soon Juan for the boost in attendance at the party's rallies over the past few days.

The crowd at SDP's first rally was "so-so", he said. But since then, "Whole speeches are being shared because people found them moving or relevant or revealing of Chee."

So far, Workers' Party and SDP are sharing the social media buzz, he estimated. WP is ahead on the field rallies, "but SDP have pretty slick techies and a whole lot more content on their site."

Au added that he is careful about predicting how social media presence would translate into votes. But, he said many opposition candidates are virtual unknowns when they started the campaign. Yet within nine days, they got up to 40% of the vote share in several constituencies during the last election.

Social media exposure could be partly responsible for that. For example if a fence-sitter's Facebook wall is flooded with pro-opposition posts by friends, he explained, "A swing voter could be swung."

Elmie Nekmat, assistant professor at the National University of Singapore's Department of Communications and New Media, warned that echo chambers or echo camps can form around certain issues.

Someone who belongs to a pro-opposition network, for example, would receive more news relating to the opposition, and vice versa if that person was part of a pro-PAP group.

"They are trying to decide on an issue but may not be getting the full range of information," he said. "They might be misinformed or not fully informed. But they may think they are quite informed and that many think the same way as them."

At Singapore Management University, professor of Information Systems Lim Ee Peng has been monitoring Twitter traffic by Singaporeans during the 2011 polls and the current campaign.

Twitter was one of the top platforms in 2011, he noted, spreading information very quickly.

Prof Lim's team studied how much attention people paid to different political user accounts and how they spread that information via Twitter.

**Publication: The Star Online**  
**Date: 9 September 2015**  
**Headline: Campaigning in cyberspace**

In this year's campaign, PAP has been mentioned the most, followed by the Workers' Party. But, he stressed, it is difficult to classify whether that attention is positive or negative.

Lim has also observed that use of Instagram is picking up quickly and that there are few boundaries between the platforms. Instagram images are shared on Twitter while a Facebook posting is also referred to in a tweet.

"It's breaking the barriers and making it easier for people to find content," he noted.

And not all that content is serious, he added, even when it relates to the election.

"They add fun to serious events," he said.

Mothership.sg's section with information on rallies, for example, also lists "makan places nearby to eat with your kakis". And The Middle Ground has come up with the GE2015 Zodiac.