

The Role of Digital Media in Singapore's General Election 2020

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The COVID-19 pandemic has changed how politics and societies operate worldwide. Stay-at-home restrictions were imposed, to varying extents, in around seventy per cent of countries globally.¹ In Singapore, the government imposed a “circuit breaker”, or a lock-down, in April 2020 to limit the spread of COVID-19. During the circuit breaker, most workplaces were closed except for those providing essential services, and schools moved to full home-based learning. The priority to manage community spread led to a slew of social-distancing measures, which remained in place even after Singapore lifted the circuit breaker on 1 June.² It was amidst this disruption that Singapore held its 13th General Election on 10 July 2020. In the run up to the election, the Elections Department (ELD) announced new campaigning guidelines for political candidates.³ Some of the changes included the limitation of walkabouts and door-to-door campaigning to groups of not more than five and a prohibition on physical election rallies and large gatherings. In view of the new restrictions, all political parties and constituents were given additional airtime on national television. In addition to the party political broadcasts, the ELD introduced the constituency political broadcasts (CPBs) to give political candidates more airtime. Also, for the first time in Singapore's election history, a political debate featuring candidates from the People's Action Party (PAP), the Workers' Party (WP), the Progress Singapore Party (PSP) and the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) was broadcast live on national television and simultaneously streamed on YouTube.

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Given the campaigning restrictions, political parties ramped up their digital outreach efforts on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. Apart from the CPBs that were aired on television, voters tuned in to e-rallies and candidate speeches via the official social media accounts of political parties. Because of the shift of political campaigning to the online space, in the lead-up to Polling Day on 10 July the 2020 election was much hyped as an “Internet election”.

This chapter will examine the role of digital media during the election, with a focus on citizen engagement. Our observations indicate that the COVID-19 restrictions did not stymie the engagement of voters with the election. Social media and instant messaging (IM) platforms were verdant grounds for citizen-generated content, which ranged from information-packed voting resources to satire-laden memes. The level of citizen engagement online during this election challenged assumptions about political apathy among citizens and highlighted the potential for greater political and civic engagement in the future.

Media Use during Elections

Since the advent of information and communication technologies, many scholars have studied the relationship between citizen engagement and digital media. Social media has introduced new ways of engagement because it decentralizes the production, dissemination and exchange of information.⁴ Individuals can now publicly express their opinions to an online audience despite lacking the outreach capabilities of established media organizations.⁵ In fact, studies have shown how social media use fosters social capital, civic engagement and political participation.⁶

The relationship between social media and citizen engagement holds true during election periods as well. Research conducted during the Danish parliamentary elections in 2015 revealed that social media platforms were more important than non-social media platforms in promoting campaign participation among first-time voters.⁷ In the 2019 Indian general election, digital-only news outlets were able to garner greater audience engagement compared to legacy news outlets.⁸ Social media also proved to be a leveller for politicians as well. In Israel, female politicians received more likes and shares on their social media accounts than their male counterparts over the course of the 2015 election campaign.⁹

For politically apathetic voters, social media can stimulate their political interest through online resources that present election-related information in a fun and informal manner. During the 2016 presidential election in the United States, supporters of President Trump (who generally displayed less knowledge about the

election relative to other voters) were kept interested and engaged in the election process through entertainment media platforms such as YouTube.¹⁰

In Singapore, blogs covering political news—such as *mrbrown* and *Yawning Bread*—gained traction among citizens back in the 2006 general election.¹¹ Their popularity had dwindled by the following election in 2011, when they had to compete with newer platforms like social networking sites and online discussion forums.¹² By the next general election in 2015, the online websites of Singapore's traditional mass media outfits and social networking sites had overtaken blogs to be the two most popular digital media platforms for election-related information.¹³ In a study conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) in 2015, social media users were found to exhibit greater interest and offline political participation—measured by self-reported actions such as attendance at rallies—in the election compared to non-users. They were also younger, more educated and more affluent.¹⁴

Despite a strong interest in the election, however, overall political engagement remained low during the 2015 general election. Singaporean voters used social media more to maintain and develop social relationships rather than to express their opinions about the election.¹⁵ In other words, social media use did not always result in greater political engagement as the extant literature has suggested would be the case. But the growing familiarity of voters with social media tools could spell changes for the current state of citizen engagement in Singapore. Coupled with the online shift in political campaigning, more voters may now see online engagement as low-threshold activities. As such, the 2020 election is an opportunity to understand the changes in media consumption habits and online citizen engagement in Singapore since the last election in 2015.

Media Use during the 2020 Election

Since 2011, IPS has been surveying and analysing media and internet use during each general election in Singapore. For the 2020 election, IPS commissioned survey company YouGov to conduct an online survey of 2,018 citizens aged 21 years and above. (In Singapore, voting is compulsory for citizens above the age of 21.) The following sections present key survey findings on citizens' media use during the election.

In our analysis, we grouped the various digital platforms into two categories: mass media and social media. Essentially, mass media adhere to a source-to-audience communication model, while social media are largely driven by peer-to-peer production and sharing of content. Table 1 presents the media platforms that were included in our study.

TABLE 1
Types of Mass Media and Social Media Platforms

<i>Mass Media</i>	<i>Social Media</i>
Print newspapers (e.g., <i>Straits Times</i> , <i>Lianhe Zaobao</i> , <i>Berita Harian</i>)	Social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram)
Television	YouTube sites of individuals/groups (e.g., political parties, mrbrown, Wah!Banana, SGAG)
Radio	Instant messaging (IM) platforms (e.g., WhatsApp, Telegram, Facebook Messenger)
Online websites of Singapore traditional mass media (e.g., <i>Straits Times</i> , <i>TODAY</i> , <i>New Paper</i> , <i>Lianhe Zaobao</i> , <i>Yahoo! News</i> , <i>Channel NewsAsia</i>)	Online discussion forums/portals (e.g., Hardwarezone, Reddit, Quora)
Online websites of foreign traditional mass media (e.g., <i>South China Morning Post</i> , <i>New York Times</i> , BBC, CNN, <i>Guardian</i>)	
Singapore online-only news and information websites (e.g., Rice Media, Mothership, TheSmartLocal, Independent.sg, The Online Citizen, TR Emeritus)	

Information-Seeking during the Election

Generally speaking, digital platforms saw a surge in popularity in the 2020 election. Out of ten platforms, the online websites of Singapore's traditional mass media outfits (*Straits Times*, *Channel NewsAsia* and *TODAY*) were the ones most frequently used by voters to seek information about the election. Online-only news and information websites, such as *Mothership* and *Rice Media*, were ranked third, while social networking sites and IM platforms were ranked fourth and fifth respectively.

On the other hand, there was a decline in the usage of mass media platforms in their traditional forms. Print newspapers and radio were ranked seventh and ninth in terms of usage for information-seeking during the election. The only exception was television, which remained popular among voters (see Figure 1).

When it comes to seeking information on political parties and candidates, digital platforms like social networking sites and IM platforms were the top two preferred platforms. The television and radio broadcasts of political parties and candidates came in third. Email and online meeting platforms (such as Zoom) were the least used (see Figure 2).

Social Media Engagement

Though there are five main categories of social media use, we focused on the three that were most applicable in the context of the election—informational, relational and expressive.¹⁶ They are defined as follows:

FIGURE 1
Media Platforms for Information-Seeking during GE 2020

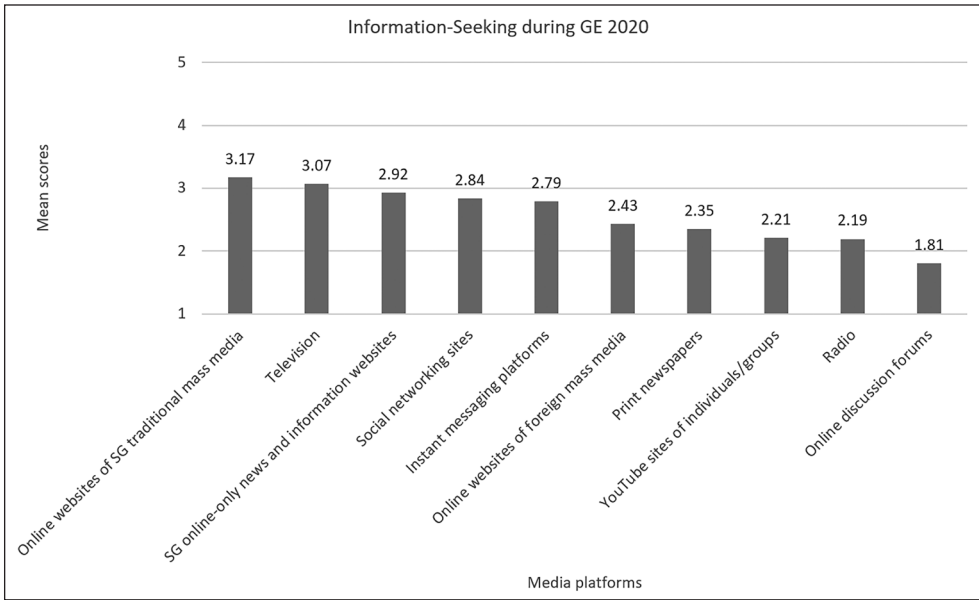
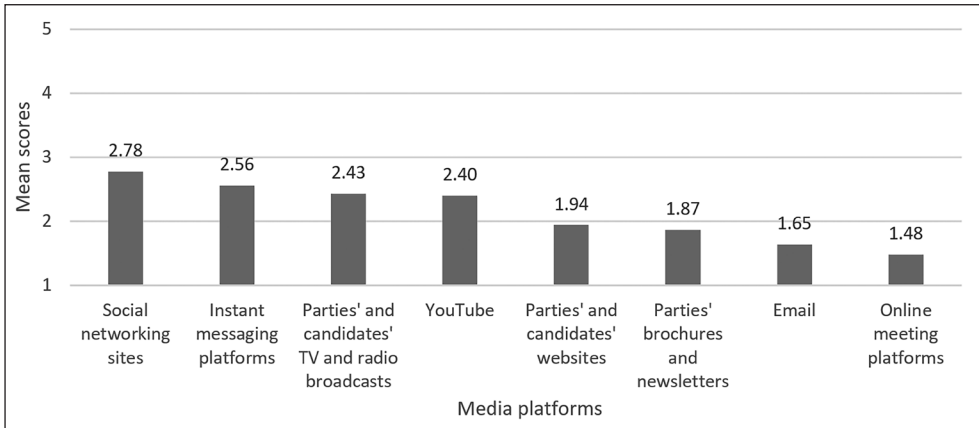


FIGURE 2
Media Platforms for Interaction with Political Parties and Candidates during GE 2020



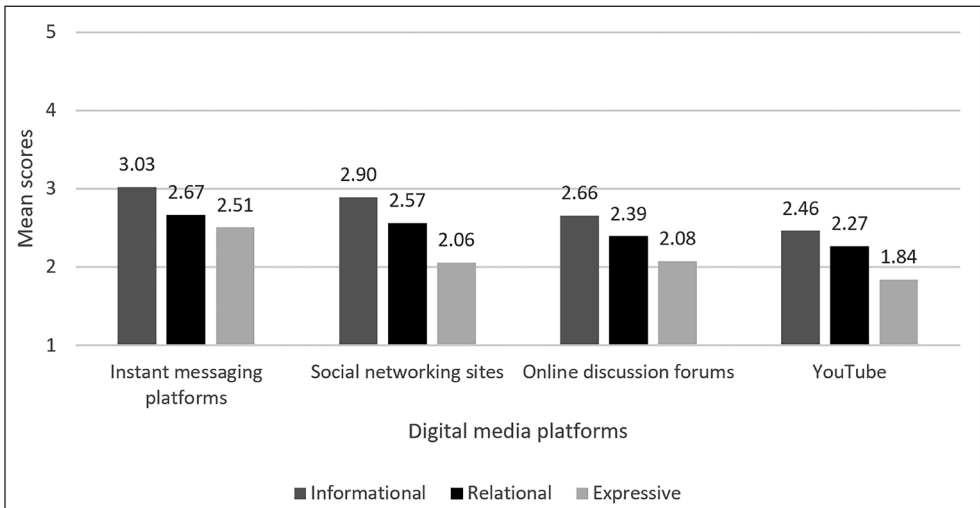
- Informational engagement: the sharing and seeking of information about the elections, such as on political parties, candidates and hot topics¹⁷
- Expressive engagement: the expression of opinions, for instance through social media posts and comments¹⁸
- Relational engagement: the development or maintenance of social connections over election-related content¹⁹

Our survey measured overall social media engagement across four types of digital platforms: IM platforms, social networking sites, online discussion forums and YouTube. As shown in Figure 3, social media engagement was highest on IM platforms, given that the mean scores for the three types of social media engagement were higher than those for the other digital platforms. IM platforms were followed by social networking sites, online discussion forums and YouTube. Among the three types of social media engagement surveyed, informational engagement was the most common across all platforms, followed by relational and expressive engagement. In other words, voters used these platforms mostly to seek information on the election rather than to express their election-related opinions or to develop social connections.

Typology of Citizen-Produced Online Engagement Content during the 2020 Election

Social media platforms are game changers in the field of citizen engagement because they are designed for both mass and personal interaction.²⁰ With the growing adoption of social media, traditional media channels and those in power no longer hold the monopoly over the expression of political commentaries and ideas; citizens who are social media users are able to articulate their own views about what they regard as sound governance. But not all public expressions

FIGURE 3
Informational, Relational and Expressive Engagement on Different Digital Media Platforms during GE 2020



about politics are necessarily outwardly political. In their online engagement with politics, it is more than common for social media users to adopt “identity- or entertainment-focused” tactics that do not presume or require in-depth political knowledge.²¹ Such content is generally produced across different social networking sites (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube and TikTok) to be viewed and shared by other users.

During the 2020 election, there were five main types of citizen-produced online content. We classify them into: (1) general explainers, (2) issue-specific explainers, (3) opinion expression, (4) calls for action and (5) entertainment. Table 2 provides a summary of each type of content, their characteristics, the form they adopted, the election topics that were highlighted and some examples.

Informational Explainers

The informational explainers produced in the context of the 2020 election were designed to provide important knowledge about the election. Rather than to persuade or mobilize voters for a specific party or candidate, these explainers sought to simplify important and potentially complex information as objectively as possible in order to educate voters. By summarizing the most pertinent aspects related to the election, these informational explainers helped voters, especially first-time ones, to navigate the sea of information and to shape their initial understanding of political parties, candidates and issues and of the election as a whole.

We grouped informational explainers into general and issue-specific types. General explainers dealt with the election as a whole, such as the voting process, the history of elections in Singapore and general overviews of the different political parties and candidates. In contrast, issue-specific explainers scrutinized the election through a particular lens, such as environmental issues.

General Explainers

Many general explainers were created by “influencers” who are key opinion leaders on social media. One popular general explainer—a resource guide for first-time voters that received over eight thousand likes on Instagram²²—was created by Our Grandfather Story (OGS) (@ourgrandfatherstory) and its animation arm, O+. Founded by four final-year undergraduates in 2016, OGS has developed into a production company devoted to sharing the uncovered stories of people in Singapore and Southeast Asia. During GE 2020, OGS and O+ published several

TABLE 2
Types of Online Engagement Content during GE 2020

<i>Content Type</i>	<i>General explainers</i>	<i>Issue-specific explainers</i>	<i>Opinion expression</i>	<i>Calls for action</i>	<i>Entertainment</i>
Purpose	Provide information and educate readers on the election	Express opinions and emotions about the election	Mobilize non-voting action	Make jokes about the elections	
Characteristics	Objective, informational, visual heavy	Subjective, persuasive, text heavy	Subjective, sensational, clear call to action	Funny, satirical, visual heavy	
Form	Infographics, illustrated texts, comics, blog posts, videos	Social media posts	Links to petitions or news coverage of police reports	Memes, videos, IM sticker packs, comics	
Common Topics	Voting processes, voting timelines, candidate qualities	Environmental policies, specific events during the election	Dismissal of and support for candidates (e.g., PAP's Ivan Lim, WP's Raeesah Khan)	PAP's Heng Swee Keat's "East Coast Plan" gaffe; WP's Jamus Lim's remark ("cockles of my heart") during the televised political debate	
Examples	Our Grandfather Story, Preetipls	Joel Lim, SG Climate Rally, Speak for Climate, Covering Singapore Politics, The Twain Have Met	Sudhir Vadaketh, Association for Women for Action and Research, Rachel Pang Comics	Petitions and police reports	YELO, Sneaky Sushii, memes about the "East Coast Plan"

illustrations on Facebook and Instagram, including the aforementioned resource guide, a set of guidelines for informal political discussions²³ and a summary of the social issues raised during the election.²⁴

Another online personality who created general explainers to educate social media users about the election was Preeti Nair, who is better known through her “@preetipls” online moniker. Having started out as a YouTuber in 2016 making social commentary videos,²⁵ she now publishes her content on YouTube and Instagram. As part of her “Nobody Asked” online video series, Preeti launched a #GE2020 *Special* featuring interviews with prominent opposition candidates like Dr Paul Tambyah and Dr Chee Soon Juan of the Singapore Democratic Party (SDP) and Mr Jose Raymond of the Singapore People's Party (SPP).²⁶ All three videos received over a thousand likes on Instagram, with the interview with Dr Chee Soon Juan receiving over three thousand likes on Instagram and close to a hundred thousand views on YouTube.²⁷

Her collaboration with the political parties set Preeti and her online content apart from most other content creators such as OGS, which tended to provide a third-person perspective in their narratives. Nevertheless, both content creators have managed to cultivate large followings since 2016, which can be attributed to the viral success of their explainers.

Issue-Specific Explainers

Unlike their general counterparts, issue-specific explainers focused on particular social causes, thus attracting a niche following interested in the cause in question. Most of the content creators of issue-specific explainers were individuals who have long advocated for their respective concerns on social media. In the context of the 2020 election, the issue-specific explainers generally covered topics pertaining to gender, race, LGBTQ+ rights, mental health and the environment. One notable content creator in this area was public relations professional Joel Lim (@limxjoel), whose Instagram posts and stories during the election analysed party campaigns and key events, such as the “10 million population” controversy. This incident occurred in the aftermath of the televised political debate on 1 July 2020, in which Dr Chee Soon Juan, the secretary-general of the SDP, insisted that Deputy Prime Minister Heng Swee Keat (who was not present at the debate) had raised the possibility of expanding Singapore's residential population to ten million. In his post, Lim threaded together snippets of Chee's claims with news articles to offer viewers a blow-by-blow account of the controversy.²⁸ Even after the election, Lim continued to publish content about politics, most recently interviewing new

and existing members of Parliament as part of his “Political Prude” series on Instagram TV.

Likewise, environmental advocates engaged in the production of election-related content by drawing attention to sustainability issues. For example, environmental groups SG Climate Rally (@sgclimaterally) and Speak For Climate (@speakforclimate) developed a “climate scorecard” that evaluated and scored the different political parties on their respective positions on various climate issues.²⁹ Apart from sharing the results on their website, they also curated visually appealing images of the scorecard on their Facebook and Instagram pages. In enhancing the shareability of the climate scorecard, the groups were able to garner 1,800 likes across their social media channels by 26 July.³⁰

Although issue-specific explainers held less public appeal—in terms of social media engagement statistics—than general explainers, they helped to raise awareness about specific topics that their creators deemed were important and worthy of attention by Singaporean society. Besides the youths who are social media veterans like Joel Lim, SG Climate Rally and Speak for Climate, the election also saw the emergence of new Instagram accounts such as Covering Singapore Politics (@singa.politics) and The Twain Have Met (@thetwainhavemet). Launched in the midst of the hustings, these two Instagram accounts focused on political issues in Singapore, but they have yet to gain as much traction as their more established counterparts on social media. Their appearance, however, signified a greater willingness among Singaporean youths to engage with politics.

Opinion Expression

This category consisted of individuals or collectives who sought to express their opinions and emotions about the election. Prominent individuals in this category include Sudhir Thomas Vadaketh, a writer and former editor at the *Economist*. Over the course of the election campaign, he produced a four-part election series on Facebook and YouTube. In a clear indication of its popularity, his first video on reasons to vote for the opposition was viewed over 85,000 times on YouTube³¹ and liked and shared approximately 4,000 times on Facebook.³² Vadaketh has been writing about the need for political diversity in Singapore, even prior to the election. Like OGS and Preetipls, his stature as a long-time critic contributed to the virality of his political expressions during the election.

The Association for Women for Action and Research (AWARE), a civil society organization with an established track record of research and advocacy work pertaining to women’s issues, also intervened in the election with a statement

expressing its disapproval of a specific incident that involved the PAP. In response to Chee's insistence about the "10 million population controversy", the PAP released a press statement to refute Chee's claims.³³ The press statement included, however, a careless analogy to domestic violence, drawing flak from the public and AWARE. The organization expressed its concern over the flippant invocation of domestic violence in the PAP's press statement and stated that it could perpetuate victim-blaming. AWARE's statement resonated with a large number of people online, gaining over 1,000 likes and 500 shares on Facebook,³⁴ over 300 likes and retweets on Twitter,³⁵ and close to 4,000 likes on Instagram.³⁶

Opinion expression also includes the expression of emotion. Known for its comics on gender and mental health issues, Rachel Pang Comics (*@rachelpangcomics*) gained traction on Instagram for its simple, hand-drawn comic panels expressing feelings from the perspective of a first-time voter. In response to a police report made against WP candidate Raeesah Khan for allegedly inciting racial and religious tensions on her Facebook account, Rachel Pang Comics drew a comic expressing anger and hopes about the state of racial relations in Singapore. The comic received over 7,000 likes. Unlike informational explainers, Rachel Pang Comics did not aim to present information, but instead described emotions. Such content may not be as information heavy as those produced by Sudhir Vadaketh or AWARE, but are nevertheless legitimate and crucial forms of self-expressions by voters on social media.

Calls for Action

The 2020 election was marked by an unprecedented number of petitions initiated and shared by citizens as well as police reports filed against both political candidates and citizens. The circulation of both petitions and police reports went beyond mere education or expression; they were designed to mobilize voters to participate at greater levels of commitment.³⁷ Political participation can be divided into three main levels of participation: spectator activities, which require the least amount of effort; transitional activities, which require more effort than spectator activities; and gladiator activities, which require the most amount of effort. As the level of effort required for each type of political participation increases, the number of participants decreases.³⁸ Compared to informational explainers and opinion expressions, calls for action belong to a category of online engagement that seeks to translate online sentiment into more tangible outcomes in reality, such as relief from police scrutiny or the withdrawal of a candidate from the election. In other words, calls for action are the manifestations of opinions on social media.

A number of petitions relating to WP candidate Raeesah Khan were circulated online after two police reports were lodged against her, five days before Polling Day, for her old Facebook posts (dating back to 2018) that allegedly promoted enmity between different racial groups.³⁹ Following the news, the PAP released a statement that questioned Khan's worthiness as a political candidate and called for the WP to conduct a thorough investigation into her social media posts. Overnight, supporters of Ms Khan rallied together to create and disseminate multiple petitions. One particular petition requested for police investigations to be postponed until after the election,⁴⁰ while another demanded an apology from the PAP for its own inaction towards what the petitioners felt were racially insensitive remarks made by PAP politicians in the past.⁴¹ In Singapore, where physical demonstrations are subject to strict regulations, the circulation of petitions and police reports were two political actions that voters could participate in to make their voices heard.

In another case, a pre-election petition caused the last-minute withdrawal of a potential PAP candidate, Ivan Lim. Upon Lim's public introduction as a candidate for the ruling party, allegations of his arrogant and elitist behaviour surfaced and went viral on social media, with witnesses willing to come forward publicly to back their allegations. This was followed by a petition calling for his removal as a PAP candidate, which was widely circulated on Facebook and received over 4,000 reactions and 500 shares.⁴² The petition garnered 22,899 signatures within a few days. The strong backlash prompted Lim to announce the withdrawal of his candidacy three days prior to Nomination Day. While the outcomes for Khan and Lim were different, the collective action among social media users indicate similar levels of higher-order political participation, surpassing that of informational explainers and expressions of opinion.

Entertainment

The fifth type of citizen engagement refers to online content produced to entertain people and make light of the election through satirical anecdotes. Unlike other types of engagement, such content was neither informational nor persuasive. The tone used in the communication of such content was often personal, informal and irreverent. As a result, entertainment-related content was considered as one of the most accessible and relatable forms of engagement during the election. During the 2020 election, entertainment-type engagement came mainly in either image or video formats, notably as meme graphics, IM sticker packs and TikTok clips (which included "reaction" videos where users responded to previous TikTok

uploads). Entertainment-related content tend to be visually intensive and attractive, although stylistic differences persisted depending on the origin of the content.

Social media “influencers” and well-known content creators typically follow the distinctive style of production and aesthetics that have established their brand or career. For example, meme creators developed election-related memes, while YouTube content creators (known as “YouTubers”) produced election-related videos on the platform. Prominent content creators in this subcategory include YEOLO and Sneaky Sushii, both local YouTubers known for their straightforward and satirical reaction videos to current affairs and popular culture. YEOLO's video titled “Reacting to General Election TikToks of Singapore” garnered over 93,000 views on YouTube,⁴³ while Sneaky Sushii's video titled “Watching Singaporean Politicians FAIL” reached nearly 200,000 views.⁴⁴ Both videos had higher engagement rates than those of informational explainers, opinion expressions and calls for action.

Another group of entertainment-related content creators consists of those who made their appearance during the election. Unlike influencers whose content are partly determined by their existing personal brands, this second group was more spontaneous in their content and style, often drawing inspiration from key moments in the election cycle. One moment that generated much entertainment-related content was the “East Coast Plan” verbal slips by DPM Heng during his Nomination Day speech. Many memes were generated based on this gaffe, the most famous of which was a mock cue card created by a Reddit user.⁴⁵ Apart from serving as a source of more memes for local entertainment content producers like SGAG (Singapore's version of 9GAG), the mock cue card was also sold as stickers by another Reddit user who donated the proceeds to charity.⁴⁶ The same meme subsequently found its way on to IM platforms WhatsApp and Telegram as election-related sticker packs. The East Coast Plan incident reflected a serendipitous moment of solidarity among netizens who found collective humour during the election.

Though entertainment-type content, as a form of low-threshold political participation that requires comparatively less effort in its production and consumption, generates only a peripheral engagement with the election at best, they functioned as a low-barrier gateway that introduced local politics to those who are politically apathetic and would otherwise not be interested in politics or the election.

Conclusion

The level and range of citizen engagement online that was witnessed during the recent election in Singapore bodes well for the development of a young democratic

system. For instance, those who produced and shared general and issue-specific explainers demonstrated their desire for an informed electorate that is well-versed in the issues critical to the governance of Singapore. Others who mobilized fellow Singaporeans to take a stand on specific issues clearly believed that citizens should play an active role in shaping local politics and the political culture.

After Polling Day, senior members of the PAP said that the outcome of the election, which saw the PAP lose its second group representative constituency to the WP, necessitated a reflection by the ruling party on its approach to difficult and sensitive issues.⁴⁷ They also acknowledged that younger Singaporeans may have a stronger appetite than the older generation to discuss issues such as race.

Two potential pitfalls, however, may diminish the ability of citizens to fully leverage digital media for informational, expressive and relational purposes. The first pitfall pertains to the unintended negative consequences of being “woke”. The term “woke” was originally used by African-Americans during their fight against racial injustice, prejudice and inequality in the 1940s.⁴⁸ Today the term is broadly associated with a wide range of issues such as class, gender, sexuality, religion, education and nationality. In Singapore, “woke culture” has been associated with youths who are technologically savvy and are bold enough to discuss sensitive issues.⁴⁹ Youth activism in Singapore has gained momentum with advancements in digital media. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram provide a space for youths from diverse backgrounds to initiate candid discussions, share knowledge and organize movements on sensitive topics relating to race, religion, gender, sexuality and politics.

Some practices of “wokeness”, however, are engendering a “cancel culture” where people take to social media to call out their targets, particularly public figures and organizations whose behaviour and practices are considered objectionable or offensive. The techniques used to “cancel” someone may include online petitions, open letters and Twitter hashtag campaigns.⁵⁰ But “cancel culture” could lead to cyber bullying, mob mentality and group shaming. For instance, in the case of one-time PAP candidate Ivan Lim, the petition demanding his removal from the election had continued to attract public criticism and hate speech against him even after the petition had closed.⁵¹ A long-term repercussion of cancel culture is the creation of an environment of fear in which people over-censor themselves to avoid being targeted by an online mob.

The second pitfall stems from the threat of misinformation and disinformation that is faced by many countries. In 2019, the Singapore government passed the Protection from Online Falsehoods and Manipulation Act (POFMA). Some notable features of the regulation that set it apart from measures introduced in

other jurisdictions include the provisions that enable the government to issue correction directions to online perpetrators of falsehoods. In such instances, the falsehood must be a false statement of fact that has been or is being communicated in Singapore through the internet, and it must be in the public interest to issue the direction.⁵² But because such directions can only be issued against content appearing on online public platforms such as Facebook, the efficacy of POFMA is severely limited on IM platforms where encrypted conversations occur in closed groups. Hence, as citizens increasingly turn to social media for civic engagement, it is more important to develop and hone their digital literacy.

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