

## COMMENTARY

# The general election in a social media age

By Lau Geok Theng

ONE of the most talked-about candidates in the 2011 General Election was Tin Pei Ling.

When the People's Action Party (PAP) introduced its youngest candidate, she quickly became a lightning rod for criticism after videos of her television interviews and a photo of her holding a fancy bag went viral on social media.

Then-senior minister Goh Chok Tong even reportedly acknowledged that this negative publicity was a factor in the drop in votes garnered by the PAP in Marine Parade Group Representation Constituency (GRC) – from 72.9 per cent to 56.5 per cent.

Such is the power of social media.

### MULTIPLIER, ACCUMULATION, AND VELOCITY

An online comment, which could be about an impression of someone, today has a multiplier effect when shared by a friend or follower, as these comments go into another network of friends or followers, who could number in the hundreds, even thousands.

There is also the accumulation effect as more comments, information (accurate or not), or pictures are added each time the message is shared or forwarded.

And there is the velocity effect: a message can be shared in a second, with a click of the mouse or touch of the screen. The impression or emotion gets spread very quickly, like a bush fire.

An individual who is the subject of such posts could feel a sense of helplessness.

It is a lesson in not leaving anything – at all –

to chance, especially in today's social media environment. How one dresses, what one says, gestures and expressions can easily be magnified.

Although preparation is a given requirement in any election campaign, the widespread use of social media (even more so now than in 2011) means it is time for political candidates to undergo some serious coaching in public relations.

Candidates need to project their personas accurately – and, better still, highlight their positive attributes through the judicious use of social media.

While some parties may have engaged such guidance, others may still not have any, or choose to be passive. Indeed, it is easy to allow social media users to create and communicate a persona, but the consequences may be dire.

When the National Solidarity Party (NSP) introduced its candidate, Kevryn Lim, to the electorate, netizens faulted her for not being in appropriate attire and not speaking coherently. The NSP as a whole was criticised for its quality of candidates.

On the other hand, the PAP appears to have actively shaped the persona of Ms Tin this time around. Pictures circulating online recently show her pregnant, yet visiting the residents and diligently conducting her Meet-the-People sessions.

Some online comments now praise her for serving the people faithfully while noting that former NSP candidate Nicole Seah, who was compared with Ms Tin, has moved overseas.

On the other hand, Minister for Social and Family Development Tan Chuan-Jin's comments on cardboard collectors and Koh Poh

Koon's remarks on being a "son of Punggol" have drawn strong reactions, many negative.

Social media, as these incidents illustrate, propagates nuggets of truths, and it is important for candidates to carefully analyse what one wants to say, to minimise the risk of comments being taken out of context.

### HARNESSING THE POWER OF SOCIAL MEDIA

So how can a political party harness the power of social media?

First, enhance the multiplier effect.

Members of a party should cultivate a base of followers or friends on social media platforms. Some members may choose to only post announcements and comments on their platforms, which can then reach the networks of their friends and followers.

As an illustration, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong has 836,000 likes on his Facebook page and 205,000 followers on his Twitter account.

When he posts a message on his Facebook page, he reaches, at "first tier", these 836,000 Facebook subscribers.

If this message is shared by 5,000 of his subscribers and each of these subscribers has an average of 200 friends, the message may potentially have reached 1,000,000 people at "second tier", assuming there is no overlap of friends.

A political party can also influence the accumulation effect. Some members of a political party can actively participate in conversations on social media platforms.

They can introduce supportive or additional information in discussion threads that are positively oriented towards the party, and so con-

tribute to the accumulation effect, while introducing contrary evidence or dissimilar information in the negative threads, and hence slow down the accumulation of negatives.

For instance, the educational qualifications of the NSP's Ms Lim – who has a master's degree and can speak five languages – are less well known. Such information could add to the accumulation effect in discussions that are positive for the party.

Following such conversations on social media, however, is a complex exercise. Parties need a good social media team that can keep track of the various comments and perceptions being shared online.

The team could either choose to track these itself, or engage social media research companies like Brandtology to undertake such work.

The intelligence gathered will help a party identify the different discussion topics and threads, and help it harness the multiplier effect and influence the accumulation effect.

Importantly, parties should not forget the velocity effect. Developments can be fast-moving. Before making an announcement or introducing a candidate, parties may want to put in place mechanisms to monitor the reactions of social media users and influence their conversations surrounding such reactions.

In other words, prepare – perhaps even more so than before. It is like having a fire alarm so that if a fire does break out, it will be put out quickly and not get out of hand.

Judging by recent political developments in Singapore, parties need to have the alarm installed now, not later.

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