



**SOCIAL MEDIA AND
ELECTIONS IN ASIA-PACIFIC**
- THE GROWING POWER OF THE YOUTH VOTE

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Social Media and Elections in Asia-Pacific

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THE DIGITAL HEARTLAND: SOCIAL MEDIA AND THE POLITICAL TRANSFORMATION IN SINGAPORE

by David Black, Arina Dafir and Philip Behnke

INTRODUCTION

As Singaporeans tuned in to watch the General Election results on the evening of 7 May 2011, there was a sense that things were somehow going to be different. But expectations quickly gave way to frustration as local TV election coverage failed to offer viewers any insight as to how the vote was progressing or to report what was happening on the ground.

In contrast, the thousands of Singaporeans following Twitter hash tag #sgelections were receiving up to the second voting information, much of it fairly accurate. Many Singaporeans also took to Twitter to express their anger at the poor media coverage, especially on *Channel News Asia*, which some labeled '*Channel News After*'. The marked contrast between TV and social media coverage came under criticism from a government appointed panel after the election.¹

The fact that social media took the lead on election night should not have come as a surprise. Throughout the 2011 election, social media played a big part in driving the campaign narrative. Social media was also arguably a key contributor to the record vote recorded against the ruling People's Action Party (PAP) which was just shy of 40%.

Since the 2011 general election, Singapore's ruling party has decisively lost two by-elections and had to face the ignominy of nearly losing the presidential election (65% of Singaporeans voted against the PAP's candidate). In all of these campaigns, social media played a significant role not only in providing a platform for candidates and parties, but also in

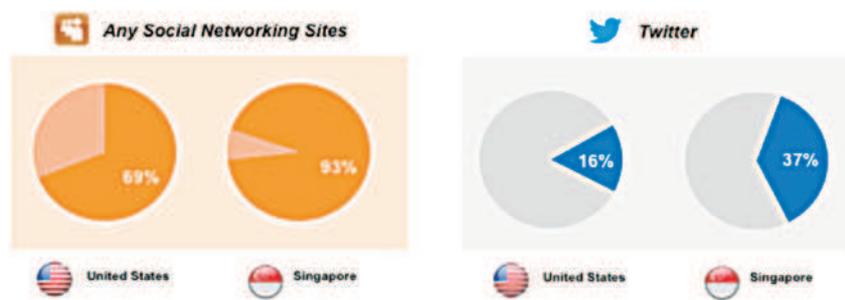
1 Programme Advisory Committee for English Programmes (2011, 9 September) "Pace Urges Broadcasters to Protect the Young from Inappropriate Content, and to Develop More Quality Local Content to Attract and Engage Viewers." [Press Release]

counter-balancing advantages the ruling party enjoys in the mainstream media. Social media has also been instrumental in driving public discourse since the election on key community issues, ranging from public transport breakdowns to the more recent controversy surrounding population policy.

THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SINGAPORE

Singapore is among one of the most technologically progressive countries in the world, with more than 80% of Singaporeans enjoying Internet access. Unsurprisingly, Singaporeans are also one of the biggest users of social media in the world, surpassing even the U.S. (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Social media usage - Singapore vs. United States²



Base: Internet Users in the US (Pew) and Singapore (Blackbox Research)

Today, nearly three in four Singaporeans have a Facebook account and they are ranked as the top Facebook users in the world in terms of time spent per session.³ Other data shows that nearly one in five (18%) Internet users in Singapore write a personal blog while nearly half say that they read blogs.⁴

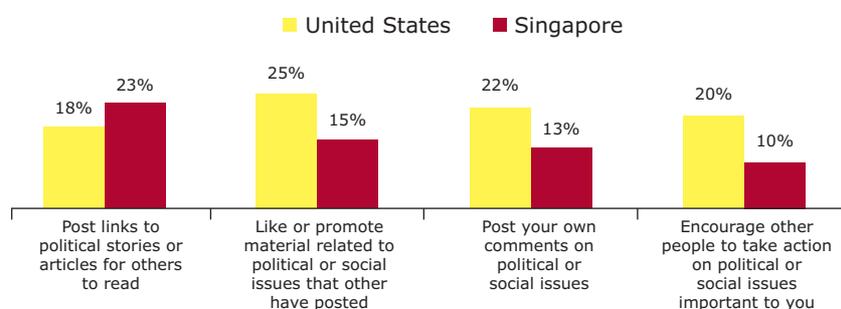
2 U.S. Figures: "Pew Internet Social Media and Political Engagement Study," 2012. SG Figures: Blackbox Research Social Media Usage Study, 2013

3 Lee, Willis (2012, 14 February). "Experian Hitwise Says Singaporeans are Facebook, Apple, and Groupon Lovers." Tech In Asia. Retrieved from <http://www.techinasia.com/singapore-loves-facebook-apple-groupon/>

4 "Blackbox Research Social Media Usage Study, April," 2013.

But Singaporeans favor social media more for casual usage rather than to engage in political activity. While two thirds use social media to stay in touch with friends/family and almost half use it to follow celebrities and entertainment topics, only one in five (19%) use it to follow a political party/figure. Singaporeans are also somewhat shy about engaging in political activity online, preferring to share political content rather than express their own beliefs. Figure 2 below shows a comparison between social media political engagement in Singapore compared to the U.S.

Figure 2: Political engagement on social media - U.S. vs. Singapore⁵



Despite this, many political observers have noted that the political landscape in Singapore has transformed in recent years and social media is viewed as having played a big part in this. Online socio-political bloggers provided alternative political commentary with a singular, often characteristic, voice. Even within such a small domain, there is a wide spectrum of commentary style, with some adopting a more satirical tone (e.g. Mr. Brown, profiled as “one of the nation’s first socio-political bloggers”⁶), while others are often blatantly critical of the political establishment (e.g. Alex Au of Yawning Bread who has been threatened

5 U.S. Figures: “Pew Internet Social Media and Political Engagement Study,” 2012. SG Figures: “Blackbox Research Social Media Usage Study,” 2013.

6 Leow, Diane (2012, 26 June) “Meet Mr. Brown, Singapore’s Blogfather.” Meld Magazine. Retrieved from www.meldmagazine.com.au/2012/06/meet-mr-brown-singapores-blogfather/

with legal action twice in the last two years).⁷ More recently, other socio-political websites *The Online Citizen* and *Temasek Review Emeritus* have also become more prominent.

GENERAL ELECTION 2011: EVALUATING THE ROLE PLAYED BY SOCIAL MEDIA

Many point to the 2011 general election as a defining moment for social media in Singapore, presenting the first real opportunity to gauge its impact on Singapore's political landscape. Even before the country went to the polls, the 2011 general election generated international buzz. The loosening of political campaigning rules on new media coupled with an energized opposition resulted in the most intense electoral battle for a generation.

As polling day drew nearer, political commentators speculated how the fervor of online debate, much of which appeared critical of the ruling party, would translate into actual votes. As it turned out, the Opposition yielded their best ever showing, with the PAP losing six out of 87 contested parliamentary seats. More tellingly, the PAP won only 60.1% of the overall vote (down from 66.6% in 2006 and 75.3% in 2001). Still, others noted that the results did not quite match the fervor of anti-PAP hostility witnessed on social media. How much had social media *really* impacted voters?

In the immediate aftermath of the 2011 elections, commentators clamored to answer this question. The broader consensus was that something was different this time; a switch had been flicked and Singapore had changed forever.

However, the only post-election study of note to be released publicly appeared to pour cold water on all the excitement. The study conducted by the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS), a think-tank within the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy at the National University of Singapore, raised eyebrows when it concluded that GE 2011 election was not an "Internet election".

The study found that only 41.1% of respondents relied on online sources for election news, compared to 86.3% who followed election news

7 Koh, Hui Theng (2012, Jul 15). "Will careless blogs 'spoil market?'" The New Paper. Retrieved from <http://www.asiaone.com/print/News/Latest%2BNews/Science%2Band%2BTech/Story/A1Story20120714-359089.html>

via traditional offline sources. The IPS study also concluded that social media rated much lower on key metrics such as importance and trust when compared to mainstream media. Its influence, Tan Tarn How, senior research fellow at IPS concluded, was “not as much as people thought”.⁸

But this interpretation is short sighted and maybe misses the point. The study itself highlights the difference in behavior between voter groups and the much bigger impact social media exerted amongst younger voters. Indeed, another IPS researcher later noted that there was a 60% jump in social media activity in Singapore between March-April 2011 and this, in all likelihood, was driven by the election.⁹

Other political analysts were also quick to disagree, noting that social media’s influence on the elections carried more in the way of ‘soft power’, highlighting the more far-ranging transformational effects that social media campaign coverage had on Singapore politics as a whole.

Mark Cenite, an associate professor of communication and information at Nanyang Technological University, observed: “Social media has lowered the barriers of entry into political discourse everywhere... (and) the effect has been electric”.¹⁰ Bridget Welsh, a political science professor at Singapore Management University, noted: “There were spillover effects from social media raised around the country... (it) has definitely become an agenda setting device. It’s not just a numbers thing.”¹¹

HEROES AND VILLAINS: SOCIAL MEDIA REWRITES THE CAMPAIGN PLAYBOOK

Local news coverage throughout the campaign frequently focused on how many Facebook ‘likes’ and Twitter followers various politicians enjoyed.

8 Mahtani, Shibani (2011, 6 October) “Poll Questions Social Media’s Influence in Singapore Politics.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://blogs.wsj.com/searealtime/2011/10/06/poll-questions-social-medias-influence-in-singapore-politics/>

9 Soo, Nikki (2011, September) Tweet Tweet: “A Personal View of Social Media in GE 2011.” *IPS Update*.

10 Mydans, Seth. (2011, 5 May). “In Singapore, Political Campaigning Goes Viral.” *New York Times*. Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2011/05/06/world/asia/06iht-singapore06.html?_r=0

11 Mahtani, Shibani (2011, 6 October) “Poll Questions Social Media’s Influence in Singapore Politics.” *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://blogs.wsj.com/searealtime/2011/10/06/poll-questions-social-medias-influence-in-singapore-politics/>

But it was two new young female candidates who would dominate public discussion through the campaign and who, in tandem, would come to symbolize both the extent and limitations to which social media can be used as a political tool.

The undoubted star personality of the campaign was 24-year-old Nicole Seah, a National Solidarity Party (NSP) candidate running in the Marine Parade Group representation constituency (GRC), the political home of former Prime Minister, and now Emeritus Senior Minister, Goh Chok Tong.

Her candidacy sparked interest from the get go. In addition to it being the first time since 1992 that an opposition party had challenged in Marine Parade, the PAP itself had earlier selected a young female candidate as part of its Marine Parade team - Tin Pei Ling, a Young PAP stalwart and senior associate at Ernst and Young. The question immediately arose - which of these two would be the biggest hit with young voters?

Both women relied on social media, but Seah proved to be the savviest by far. Within a week, her Facebook profile had become the second most popular amongst Singapore politicians, after Lee Kuan Yew's. She made news throughout the campaign with headlines such as "Nicole Seah – the hottest sensation of GE 2011"¹², and "Nicole Seah and the social media effect".¹³

Although she was part of a losing team, Nicole Seah single-handedly changed the rules of the game during a Singapore election. For the first time, social media was used to create a profile and presence. Seah and the NSP shared all their speeches and interviews on Facebook and YouTube and she particularly captured the attention of young voters.

Speaking at an international conference in June 2012, Seah said: "In the 2011 General Election, opposition parties took to Facebook and Twitter to get around government control of campaigns. Photographers and writers documented the campaigns online, while activists created Internet memes and hash tags on Twitter to spread their views."¹⁴

12 Ng, E-Jay (2011, 1 May) "Nicole Seah — the hottest sensation of GE 2011."
Retrieved from www.sgpolitics.net/?p=6689

13 Russell, Jon, (2011, April 27) "Singapore elections: Nicole Seah and the Social Media." *The Asian Correspondent*. Retrieved from <http://asiancorrespondent.com/53134/singapore-elections-nicole-seah-and-the-social-media-effect>

14 EWC International Media Conference, Seoul, June 2012 (www.eastwestcenter.org/events/2012-international-media-conference-seoul)

In contrast, Tin Pei Ling offers up a textbook case of how social media assets can easily be mismanaged. Most famously, a Facebook photo of Tin posing with a Kate Spade bag (purchased by her husband, who at the time was working as a private secretary to the Prime Minister) became one of the most circulated images of the campaign. Tin became a lightning rod for those angry with the PAP, as she was seen to symbolize what the PAP had become to many – arrogant, out of touch and acting with a sense of entitlement.

Seah's popularity has held up since the 2011 election and she is widely regarded as an emerging political figure and someone who is in it for the long haul. As of April 2013, Nicole Seah enjoyed 105,000 followers on Facebook compared to 10,100 for Tin Pei Ling. Regardless of that, Tin Pei Ling failed to shake the tag of someone who was put into the position simply because of her youth, and by a party trying desperately to project a sense of renewal and contemporary relevance.

IMPACT ON MAINSTREAM MEDIA

The Seah/Tin head to head also led to the mainstream media changing tack and shifting its coverage in response to popular interest in the two personalities. It became obvious through the campaign that local media was very much tuned in what was going on in social media and shaped its coverage accordingly.

The mainstream media also found itself under much greater scrutiny than in previous elections. Its coverage of election rallies, for example, failed to fully represent the true nature of these events. Other issues such as the rising cost of living and housing policy were also topics of debate in social media. As one commentator has noted, online and social media sources may not always have been first in "actually transmitting new information, but rather in facilitating the search for corroborating facts and information and also signifying that there can be an alternative (or alternatives)."¹⁵

The rise of social media in GE 2011 did not pass unnoticed by the political elites. A month after the election, the 'Tony Tan for President' campaign invited a number of popular bloggers and social media commentators

15 Lee, Terence (2011, September) "Recalibrating Government Communication in Singapore: A Post-Election Analysis." *Asia Research Centre*

to the announcement of his candidacy, to sit alongside mainstream journalists. This signaled a real change and was something no one could have even envisaged a year before. As one of Singapore's shrewdest media commentators noted at the time: "Online media were obviously influential, and sections of the establishment may have decided that they have no choice but to do business with them."¹⁶

With the continued rise of social media and alternative online news websites in Singapore, the mainstream media now finds itself playing catch up. In 2012, Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) launched a new website called "Singapolitics," which aims to "widen the conversation" and serve as "a platform for discussion about national issues of the day."¹⁷ The site regularly features commentators from outside the press, purportedly to "represent various points of view" and is edited by the deputy chief editor of the *Straits Times*, signaling a real shift in SPH's priorities and strategies in contending with the new social and political landscape.

SINGAPORE POST 2011: THE NEW NORMAL

If there remain questions about the precise role played by social media in the 2011 election results, there is no denying of its growing relevance in Singapore's civic society today. This is clearly illustrated in several high-profile incidents that have played out on social media in the last two years. More often than not, the Government has been taken by surprise and sometimes struggled to respond quickly and decisively to the noise arising from social media. Some examples:

SMRT Train Breakdowns (2011-2012)

The SMRT train breakdowns appeared to be the first real "national crisis" to be played out on social media. On 13 December, 2011 Singapore's rail network was hit by one of the worst breakdowns in its history at evening

16 George, Cherian (2011, 23 June) "Tony Tan Engages The Blogs: New Era in Relations with Alternative Media?" Retrieved from <http://journalism.sg/2011/06/23/tony-tan-engages-the-blogs-new-era-in-relations-with-alternative-media/>

17 Retrieved from <http://www.singapolitics.sg/content/about-us>

peak-hour, affecting about 127, 000 commuters.¹⁸ In the next few days, multiple breakdowns continued to plague the country's rail network.

Images of commuters packed in overcrowded MRT stations and of a train window smashed out by stranded commuters, circulated on social media and fuelled public anger towards SMRT and the Transport Ministry. Local social media sentiment analysts JamiQ recorded an estimated 2500% increase in online chatter on SMRT services.¹⁹

Population Paper/ Immigration Policy [2013]

After the train breakdowns, key election issues continued to attract discussion on social media, including the cost of living, wages and housing prices. Until recently, however, sceptics of social media's influence on Singapore's political landscape pointed to the lack of any real galvanizing action. Many cautioned against placing too much importance on the role of so called "keyboard warriors" on wider Singapore society.

This changed dramatically on 16 February, 2013, when a public demonstration was held against the *Population White Paper*. The paper had recently been endorsed by Parliament, despite being the subject of widespread criticism due to its forecast that the Singapore population will rise to 6.9 million by 2030, with the expectation that Singaporeans will only comprise half (55%) of the future population. Given longstanding sensitivities about 'foreign talent', the forecast was a "red rag to a bull."

Thousands of Singaporeans gathered in the biggest protest in living memory, prompting one prominent local academic to comment that "(the protest was) a big red flag and they cannot go on with business as usual with their old way of doing things; of letting it blow over. This is not an emotional hump. I won't be surprised if significant changes happen at the ballot box in 2016".²⁰

18 Mahtani, Shibani & Chun, Han Wong. (2011, 16 November) "Singapore Subway Breakdowns Raise Ire." *The Wall Street Journal*. Retrieved from <http://blogs.wsj.com/searealtime/2011/12/16/singapore-subway-breakdowns-raise-ire/>

19 JamiQ Research Report Series (Issue 1, 2012) "Analysis on Singapore Public Transit Breakdowns Crisis."

20 Adam, Shamim (2013, 18 Feb) "Singapore Protest Exposes Voter Worries About Immigration." *Bloomberg*. Retrieved from <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2013-02-16/singaporeans-protest-plan-to-increase-population-by-immigration.html>

The fact that the protest organizer used Facebook to send out event invitations and his blog (Transitioning.org) to communicate his messages is a clear signal to the Government of the galvanizing power of social media in an evolving electorate.

THE NEW NORMAL: GOVERNMENT AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Following the 2011 elections, the growing criticism that PAP ministers were “out of touch” with ordinary Singaporean, resulted in a revamp of government communications and engagement, with social media featuring prominently.

Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, in the launch of his Facebook page in 2012, noted that “governments all over the world will not be the same again” due to the changes in the way people connect through social media.²¹ Singapore government agencies were also progressively adopting a greater social media presence. These efforts were co-ordinated in late 2011 with the launch of the Government Social Media Directory.

The Government also launched its “National Conversation” in October 2012 in an effort to establish a fresh dialogue with Singaporeans in order to create “a home with hope and heart.” The initiative has a Facebook page and a YouTube channel. However, as of April 2013, the Facebook page had less than 5800 ‘likes’ and the YouTube channel only 54 subscribers, suggesting the social media portion of the “national conversation” has failed to take off.

So far it would appear that Government efforts in social media are producing mixed results. A Blackbox Research survey conducted in April 2013 showed that although 53% of all Singaporeans currently think the Government is using social media effectively, one in three people under 40 think government efforts are ineffective vs. only 19% amongst over 40s.²²

The Government’s efforts to strengthen its social media appearance are hardly surprising as the ruling party’s greatest challenge is attracting younger voters.

21 Yahoo! Newsroom (2012, 20 April) “PM Lee launches own Facebook, Twitter accounts.” *Yahoo! News*. Retrieved from <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/pm-lee-launches-own-facebook--twitter-accounts-20120420.html>

22 Blackbox Research Social Media Usage Study,” April 2013.

When the Punggol East by-election was taking place in early 2013, political observers flagged it as a bellwether for the 2016 elections, because of a disproportionately young base.²³ A survey of swinging voters conducted by Blackbox Research just after the by-election showed that 42% of swinging voters (those who had switched since 2011) were under 40-years-old and nearly one in five of them identified social media as their most important source of information about the by-election.²⁴ This finding suggests that social media may also be growing as a credible/trustworthy source of information.

PREDICTING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN SINGAPORE'S FUTURE POLITICAL LANDSCAPE

With few signs of any major shifts in the mainstream media coverage of local politics in Singapore, there is a good chance that social media will continue to fill in gaps and fulfill unmet information needs.

As to whether attempts will be made to place tighter controls on online and social media, it is uncertain how far the Singapore Government is willing to restrict political expression. The arrest in 2013 of cartoonist, Leslie Chew, on sedition charges²⁵ shows that political sensitivities are alive and well in Singapore. The Government certainly takes a dim view towards certain online agitators. The Singapore government has recently taken steps to rein in local online media. From 1 June, 2013, 'online news sites that report regularly on issues relating to Singapore and have significant reach among readers will require an individual license from the Media Development Authority (MDA).²⁶ Such sites also have to put up a performance bond of \$SGD50,000.

MDA's announcement, which was made only three days prior to the new regulations coming into effect, attracted immediate criticism amongst Singapore's online community and several opposition parties. Some

23 Teo, Elgin & Lim, Leonard. (2013, Jan 12) "Younger, More Middle Class Demographic." *The Straits Times*.

24 Blackbox Research Punggol East By-Election: "What Factors Influenced Voters?" 2013 Retrieved from: <http://www.blackbox.com.sg/punggol-east-by-election/> (n=150)

25 (2013, 30 April) "Bail Extended for Cartoonist Leslie Chew." *Today*. Retrieved from <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/bail-extended-cartoonist-leslie-chew>

26 <http://www.mda.gov.sg/NewsAndEvents/PressRelease/2013/Pages/28052013.aspx>

labeled the new regulations as 'censorship pure and simple',²⁷ while others noted that the changes appeared to specifically take aim at Yahoo! Singapore which regularly attracts over a million readers to its news site and is the biggest competitor to SPH and Mediacorp with respect to local news coverage. MDA's decision was also criticized by the international non-governmental organization (NGO) Human Rights Watch²⁸.

Opponents of the new regulation have formed a group called *#FreeMyInternet* which organized a rally, reportedly attended by 1500 people on June 8.

The fact that much of the recent hot button debates have been conducted via social and new media channels rather than traditional media also suggests that Singaporeans are becoming more comfortable turning to alternative sources for news and information. About 35% of Singaporean internet users currently say that the information they read on social media plays a role in shaping their views and opinions on political and social issues. But this figure rises to over half (51%) amongst Singaporeans under 40-years-old versus 23% amongst those over 40. Men also say social media helps shaping their political views/opinions to a greater extent (41% to 29% of women).²⁹

There is also the likelihood that political parties and candidates will become more astute and increasingly versatile in their use of social media as it becomes more familiar. With restrictions on political marketing and advertising likely to remain in place in Singapore, the ruling party itself may choose to use social media platforms more aggressively in countering opposition arguments.

The use of social media as a negative campaigning tool has already been seen elsewhere. Media reporting from the national election held in neighboring Malaysia showed how quickly Governments can learn to utilize social media. Khairy Jamaluddin, leader of Barisan's youth wing

27 Tan, Heather (2013, 29 May) "Singapore Too Require News Websites to be Licensed. *AP*. Retrieved from <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/singapore-news-websites-require-licenses>

28 (2013, 7 June) Singapore: " Licensing Regime Chills News Climate." *Human Rights Watch*. <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/06/07/singapore-licensing-regime-chills-news-climate>

29 Blackbox Research Social Media Usage Study, April 2013

in Malaysia, was quoted as saying that his organization alone has 6000 volunteers working to get the Barisan message out online.³⁰

CONCLUSIONS

A number of commentators have indicated that social media proved to be a game changer at the 2011 Singapore election. There is no doubt it contributed to shifts in the political landscape that are potentially enduring. The post-election climate has been a challenging one for the ruling party. It has suffered two electoral losses and a poor result in the presidential election. Again, although social media was not a decisive factor in these results, it was successfully used by opponents to bypass mainstream media restrictions.

It remains to be seen how the ruling party in Singapore chooses to address these challenges in the future. At present, although it is trying to educate itself in the ways of social media, it is going to do it publicly with mixed results. Arguably, it is still coming to grips with the finer skills in using social media. One local commentator argues that the PAP is, maybe, still more focused on the key performance indicators (KPIs) of social media (in true Singapore style) than genuine “engagement and interaction.”

In all likelihood, however, the new breed of politicians globally are learning to use and manipulate social media in the same way that generations of politicians have done alike with other media. The challenge for the new generation of political leaders in Singapore, however, is whether they are capable of making this leap without having had much experience “in the ring” sparring with a more assertive mainstream media. Social media may prove itself to be the true training ground for successful Singapore leaders of the future.

30 Zappei, Julia. (2013, 25 Apr) “Malaysian Youth Pivotal in ‘Social Media’ Election’ *AFP*.