

AJF 2012: The search is on

The fourth round of the Asia Journalism Fellowship is scheduled to run from 27 February to 18 May 2012. The fully sponsored sabbatical programme is open for applications until 14 October. Asia-based journalists with at least five years of experience are eligible to apply. Full details are available at <http://www.ajf.sg/application>.

Singapore elections see flowering of social media

By BHAVAN JAIPRAGAS

Social media has featured as a prominent actor in Singapore this year as the city-state's staid political landscape was jolted to life by hotly contested parliamentary and presidential elections held within a span of four months.

The liberalisation of online campaigning laws and the extensive penetration of the Internet meant that voters, candidates, citizen journalists, experts and mainstream media alike used platforms such as Facebook and Twitter to air their views and share the latest news.

In a country where the mainstream media is widely seen as favouring stability and the status quo, media observers noted that social media helped to create a more equitable political playing field for alternative parties and candidates.

In May's parliamentary election, the opposition claimed a record six out of 87 seats and brought the ruling People's Action Party's share of the popular vote down to 60.1 percent. In the August presidential election, the government's preferred candidate, Tony Tan, won but with just 35.2 percent of the valid votes in a four-horse race.

Although these were not the first elections where the internet was used, Facebook and Twitter made their inaugural appearances. According to AFP, there are some three million ▶



P N Balji with 2011 Fellows.

Farewell Balji!

It's time to bid farewell to P. N. Balji, who has completed three terms as Director of the Asia Journalism Fellowship. The veteran former editor was the face of the programme since its launch in 2009.

NTU journalism professor Cherian George will step in as Director for the 2012 programme. Associate Professor George was involved in setting up the programme with Temasek Foundation and has been its administrative head from the start. He is a former Straits Times journalist and continues to be active in journalism. Read his full profile at <http://www.cheriangearge.net/biocontact.html>.

"We're extremely grateful to Balji for lending AJF his stature, experience and wisdom," George said. "He used his newsman's instincts to make Singapore interesting for our visiting journalists, many of whom are used to more newsy environments!"

Most importantly, Balji made the visitors feel at home within the Fellowship, George said. "Through his well-chosen questions and comments, he had a knack for stimulating discussion and self-reflection among the Fellows. He's an ambassador for the profession and for Singapore."

Balji remains contactable at balji@ajf.sg.

► Facebook users in the country, which has a population of over five million people. Close to a million are also said to be users of popular micro-blogging site Twitter. Mobile internet devices such as smartphones were also prevalent.

Singaporeans' use of social media as a tool for active citizenry is by no means unique.

The ongoing political upheaval in the Maghreb was partly sparked off by a Google executive who used Twitter to organise the protests that eventually brought down the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt in February.

Social media also played a key role in attracting more than 50,000 Malaysians to participate in a street protest in July, calling for widespread electoral reform in the country.

The role of social media in political change around the world however should not be overstated, according to American media guru Dan Gillmor.

Gillmor, who was in Singapore as a guest of the Asian Journalism Fellowship in March, spoke to the local media fraternity on social media use in journalism.

While recent events may suggest that the impact of social media is substantive, political change comes from people who utilise it as a tool, rather than from it being a change agent itself, said Gillmor, who was a technology reporter and columnist during the Silicon-Valley dot-com boom.

Gillmor also urged journalists to use social media as a platform to collaborate and interact with their audiences.

Lamenting that journalists have tended to act as if they were "oracles who were experts in every field", he emphasised that the future of journalism lay in



Online journalism guru Dan Gillmor gave a workshop on social media as part of the AJF 2011 programme.



A spectator uses his tablet computer to capture Tony Tan's victory speech after August's Presidential Election.

collaborative efforts with audiences who can contribute to content producing through interactive web interfaces.

Social media platforms also provide a new paradigm for transparency in journalism, said Gillmor. Acknowledging the fact that the social media allows for falsehoods to be spread online very quickly, he also noted that news organisations and bloggers could use it to ensure that "the truth catches up with the lies much faster".

Both bloggers and traditional news organisations should also utilise social media to show audiences the work that goes into news gathering, he said. "Audiences will have more trust and respect if we tell them the back story behind quality journalism," he said.

Newspapers still valued

While social media helped to raise interest in the elections, there were also concerns about the quality of the information that was being circulated. Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong called for online spaces where Singaporeans and the government can engage in more balanced, open and rational debate on issues. In his National Day Rally speech in August, he noted the prevalence of "cowboy towns" in cyberspace, circulating "ridiculous untruths".

He said there was a shortage of spaces that were "reliable, where you can have an open debate, where different views are expressed, but it's balanced, and if you go there you know that, well, to start off with you can assume that it will make some sense".

The questionable quality of online media could explain why newspapers continued to be heavily relied on during the elections. According to an Institute of Policy Studies survey of a representative sample of 2,000 Singaporean adults, more than 40 percent spent at least 20 minutes a day reading newspapers for election news during the general election.

This newsletter is our effort to keep in touch with our growing AJF network, including our Fellows and others who have been associated with our programmes in any way. If you'd like to share news and views through this newsletter – about your own career moves or about the profession or your country – please contact news@ajf.sg.

We also have a Facebook group specially for Fellows. If you're not on it yet, please contact news@ajf.sg

