Social media’s influence in S’pore politics here to stay

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In an interview with Asian Correspondent writer this month, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong reflected on governance and social media in Singapore.

On the latter, he said that people were spending more time on social media platforms like Facebook and Twitter, and he hoped to have an opportunity to talk to constituents more directly.

He added that since Singaporeans now have direct access to their elected representatives, political leaders should use social media to “interact with their constituents”.

Some 3.1 million people – or around 66 per cent of the population – in Singapore use social media, according to 2015 statistics from global social media agency We Are Social.

This is up from 10 per cent in March 2013.

When the Internet first became popular in the 1990s, Facebook, text, pictures and videos provide new avenues of engagement on Facebook, text, pictures and videos.

Second, social media strengthens empathy which is hard to do

Prime Minister Harun Hadi said it was a new way to connect with the Chinese

On Facebook, text, pictures and videos provide increased availability for the public, who are now more informed and engaged. The more people are involved, the better for democracy.

Third, there are no online devices that prohibit participation as everyone has the ability to start a discussion thread or provide feedback on issues raised by politicians on their profile pages.

The above accounts for why governments elsewhere have tapped their online power.

In 2010, the US media reported that the Congressional Research Service found that the government had spent at least US$1 billion (S’pore $1.3 billion) on social media-related services and training.

Social media has opened new avenues of engagement on Facebook, text, pictures and videos.

Opportunity zone with risks

Social media’s power lies in its ability to challenge governments and politicians.

The lack of entry barriers to social media allows users to express their opinions in a variety of ways – from “liking” and “sharing” posts to posting friendly or terse comments. Politicians have the immediate ability to communicate with each other online.

There is also the question of how ministries can translate “likes” into meaningful responses which aid in understanding the public’s sentiments concerning policies. Here, big-data analytics will prove useful.

While greater propensity makes politicians seem more approachable and in touch – when in the past they were seen as unapproachable authoritative figures – it also carries its own set of perils.

Although genuine communication should be spontaneous and transparent, the confidence of politicians on social media is sometimes perceived as being less genuine – or representative of the government’s position.

Social media has opened new avenues of engagement that were not possible via “old media”, such as the newspapers, television and traditional websites.

Social media’s impact on the long run, delayed communication or social media can help legitimise government decisions, promote a re-balancing of the ownership for shaping policies and increase citizen trust.