Govt to boost social media usage

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SINGAPORE: Singapore's government agencies are set to get more structured training in the use of social media.

This comes as Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said the government "can do better" in harnessing cyberspace to "explain issues, shape opinions and rally support".

Still, experts say this new engagement should be handled cautiously.

At the recent National Day Rally, PM Lee had said the government as a whole, needs to be more active and adept in engaging Singaporeans online.

Observers say this is a serious call, with leaders noting that online chatter cannot be ignored.

Those Channel NewsAsia spoke with agree that more can be done.

They cite the lack of uniformity, with some government agencies such as the National Development Ministry, faring better than others.

At this point, a lot of the engagement online is done ad-hoc, according to the comfort level of the minister or Member of Parliament (MP).

Experts are saying there should be more sustained engagement but this would require more resources to be pumped in.

This would include having dedicated new media teams taking care of a ministry's website, revamped with social media platforms.

Nanyang Technological University's Singapore Internet Research Centre director Ang Peng Hwa said: "You need, basically, two people just to maintain one site, and typically, the respondents come (online, sometime after dinner).

Professor Ang added netizens who post live feeds on the eve of a holiday might expect a response in 24 hours.

He said this could mean staff would have to work during public holidays as a result.

"So it's not trivial," he said.

Still, experts are advocating a cautious approach to new media engagement, starting with their own turf -- revamping websites to include social media tools like Facebook, Twitter and even online forums.

The key, they say, is in interactivity and engagement.

Rather than a one-size-fits-all approach, observers say each ministry should look into how social media platforms could be deployed for their own purposes.

Keeping this informal, with a hint of "personality", they say, would also go some way in ensuring the engagement is kept real and sincere.

Observers added the government also needs to look at engaging communities in non-mainstream

websites, such as independent socio-political websites and blogs.

MP for Tampines Group Representation Constituency Baey Yam Keng said: "I think, sometimes, (there's) a lot of judgement (involved); you may get it wrong, you may get it right, so I think maybe that's where the government needs to take a bit of risk.

"But I think the public also needs to give space to the government to try out and maybe, make mistakes along the way. It may not be a total cowboy town but I think there needs to be a little bit of chaos and untidiness because otherwise, it's too clean, too structured -- then it may not work".

Mr Baey is also deputy chairman for the Information, Communication and the Arts Government Parliamentary Committee (GPC).

Meanwhile, Prof Ang warns of an over reliance on Facebook.

"Facebook is not owned by any Singapore entity; it's an entirely foreign entity and putting in the resources online in this foreign entity, it could shut off Singapore," he said.

"Of course, it's in their commercial interest to have more Singaporeans but there's no reason to say that as a commercial company, it's beyond the control of even governments to say, 'I don't want Singaporeans to have it - you can shut it off.' It's a governance issue that has not been talked about.

"So when you put something like a government machinery onto a commercial site that is not in control of any Singaporeans, then there are some issues there," he said.

The Information, Communications and the Arts Ministry is spearheading the government's new media efforts.

The ministry told Channel NewsAsia it is working with the Civil Service College to come up with a more structured social media training programme for civil servants.

This means a more systematic way of identifying new media competencies needed by public officers, and providing suitable courses.

MICA added this will translate to a "tiered system of training that involves basic, intermediate and more advance courses for various job grades."

The ministry launched on 2 August the Government Social Media Directory portal, a one-stop shop for the public sector social media initiatives.

"This portal provides an easy reference point for the public to know the various initiatives and engage the government," a spokesperson from the ministry said.

"We hope to expand the list of sites on the directory further. Social media complement the usual communication efforts such as press releases, and reach out directly to the public and allow for two-way engagement.

"MICA had provided guidelines to ministries on a coherent online strategy, rules of engagement and implementation.

"MICA recognises the value and power of social media and encourages all ministries to consider using social technologies."

-CNA/wk