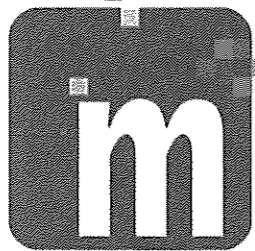


MPs have embraced social media as a new way to connect with citizens and constituents, but how effective are they in their online outreach efforts? **TESSA WONG** takes a look.

audience reach

MPs
GOING
CYBER



MR CHEN Show Mao has earned the title of Singapore's leading Facebook MP with flying colours in the wake of Singapore's watershed elections last year.

In a new four-month study, Mr Chen blitzed the parliamentary field in terms of both "buzz" and audience reach in his use of social media.

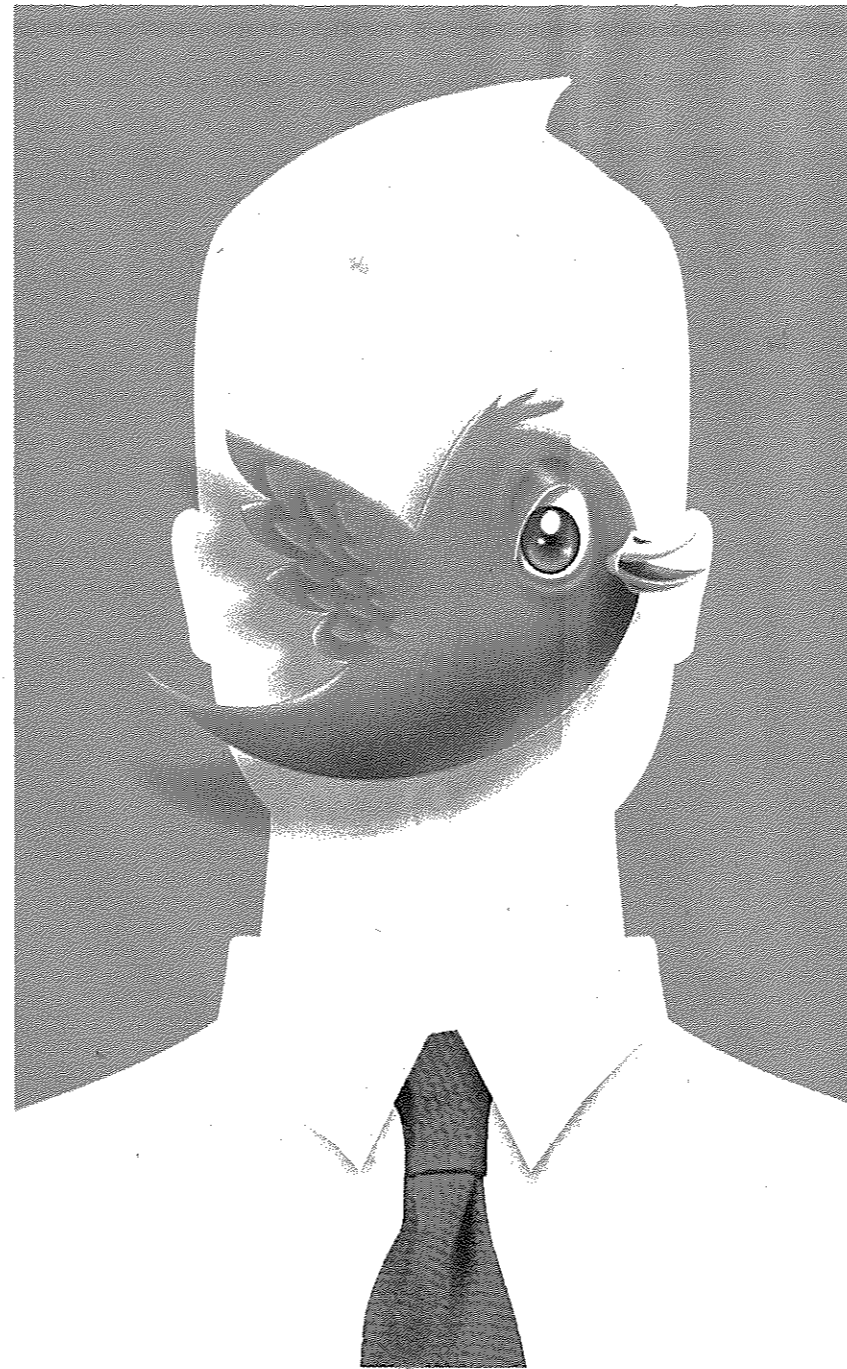
And yet Mr Chen, 50, a newly elected Workers' Party (WP) MP for Aljunied GRC - the most-watched constituency in the general election - hardly fits the stereotype.

He is no twenty- or thirty-something.

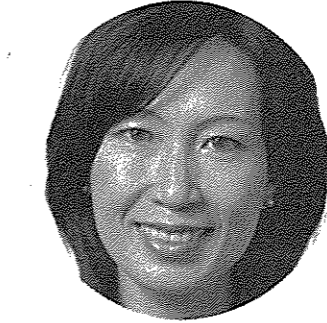
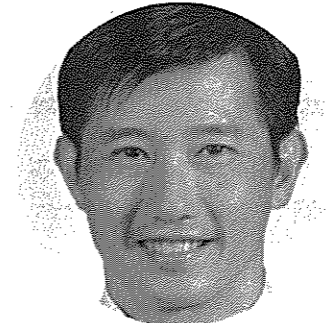
And he set up his Facebook page in April last year, just a month before he contested his first general election.

But the attention he attracts online was evident in the study, conducted between June 1 and Oct 1 last year. The study was conceptualised by Straits Times journalists Tessa Wong and Ng Tze Yong, and public relations firm Bell Pottinger (BP).

The ST-BP study counted and analysed interactions on the Facebook pages and Twitter accounts of 79 MPs who



ST illustration: Mike M Dizon



Left, from top: MPs Chen Show Mao, Teo Ser Luck and Vivian Balakrishnan are in the Top 10 list in terms of audience size. Ms Irene Ng is one of the top MPs generating social media buzz.

Quick quiz: Guess who

"Busy Monday with lots of patients... more and more patients are recognising me as the MP... like today there was even a 91-year-old who said she saw me on TV and in the newspapers."

Find out who said this on page D7

Top 10 MPs who generate the most buzz* on social media

Top 10 MPs in terms of audience size on Facebook and Twitter

What is...

* Buzz measures the amount of attention that an

sa Wong and Ng Ize Yong, and public relations firm Bell Pottinger (BP).

The ST-BP study counted and analysed interactions on the Facebook pages and Twitter accounts of 79 MPs who have active accounts. Of the 90 MPs in Parliament, 87 have some form of social media presence.

Three MPs are absent from these platforms. They are Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, former prime minister Lee Kuan Yew and Workers' Party secretary-general Low Thia Kiang.

None of the three has an official Facebook page or Twitter account. Their fans, though, have set up Facebook pages in their names which may look authentic (see story on page D7).

Their absence on social media is striking, given that they are arguably three of the most powerful and influential political leaders in Singapore, whether in government, internationally or in opposition politics.

Experts interviewed said it is understandable that top leaders choose not to engage on social media. Dr Marko Skoric of the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information offered the view that "sometimes, a veil of mystery is needed to preserve the political charisma".

Of the 87 MPs with a social media presence, eight did not have any posts during the survey period, and were therefore left out of the study.

The study measured "buzz" by counting the number of comments, shares, "likes" and retweets each MP got on his Facebook and Twitter accounts.

Mr Chen attracted a staggering 41,969 comments, shares and likes during the months under study.

His buzz score is more than treble that of Marine Parade GRC MP Tin Pei Ling. Ms Tin, 28, came in second.

One telling example of how Mr Chen's postings have great influence online came in August.

The opposition MP posted two Facebook notes on how organisers of at least two Hungry Ghost Festival dinners had retracted invitations to him.

He claimed the organisers were told by the ward's Citizens Consultative Committee (CCC) that they may no longer invite their MP to the dinners. The CCC is part of the grassroots organisation, the People's Association (PA). This sparked a public dispute between the WP and the PA, and a national debate on the PA's ties to the ruling party. It also drew hundreds of Facebook comments, likes and shares, boosting his tally. Two other WP MPs, Mr Yaw Shin Leong and Mr Pritam Singh, placed third and fourth respectively in the "buzz" rankings.

Two Cabinet ministers made it to the top 10. They are National Development Minister Khaw Boon Wan and Deputy Prime Minister Teo Chee Hean.

Mr Khaw has a keen following by using his blog, mndsingapore.wordpress.com, to make policy announcements. Each entry is posted as a link on his Facebook wall - where netizens leave feedback.

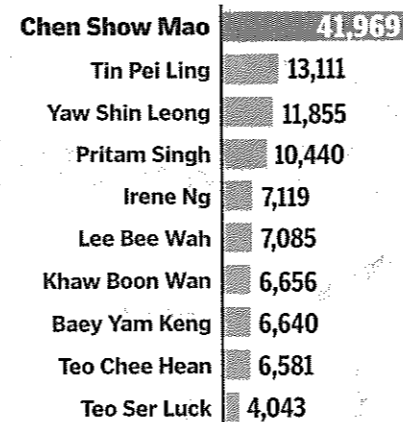
Ms Grace Fu has been white-hot in social media of late even though her surge came after the study period.

She has attracted about 1,600 comments, 1,100 shares and 260 likes on her controversial post on the ministerial salaries recommendation posted last week.

She had said that pay was not a key factor when she joined politics in 2006, and she had grounds to believe her family would not suffer a drastic change in the standard of living though she had a drop in income. She added that if the balance was tilted further in the future, "it will make it harder for anyone considering political office".

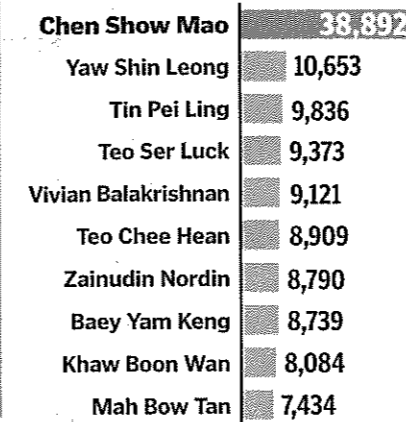
Had this post been included in the study, the Senior Minister of State for Information, Communications and the Arts and the Environment and Water Resources would

Top 10 MPs who generate the most buzz* on social media



*Buzz is calculated using comments, shares, likes and retweets

Top 10 MPs in terms of audience size on Facebook and Twitter



NOTE: Survey period from June 1 to Oct 1, 2011
Source: STRAITS TIMES-BELL POTTINGER STUDY

have been in the top 10 list for "buzz". She would have displaced Mr Teo Ser Luck at No. 10, with a total score of about 4,150.

With almost every MP now on Facebook, ST and Bell Pottinger wanted to answer these key questions:

- How wide is their reach in social media?
- How do they use social media?
- How do they engage?
- Who is the most effective and why?

We analysed only publicly posted content on the MPs' official pages. About two-thirds of MPs have both a Facebook fan page and a profile page. Two even have three pages each: Hougang MP Yaw Shin Leong and West Coast GRC MP Arthur Fong.

Some, like Emeritus Senior Minister Goh Chok Tong and Sembawang GRC MP Ellen Lee, use their constituency or party branch pages as their official pages.

The study also looked at the audience reach of MPs. This calculation was based on the number of each MP's Facebook friends and likes on their fan pages, as well as Twitter followers. Once again, Mr Chen came out tops. Again, Mr Chen's audience size is nearly four times that of the MP in the No. 2 spot - this time, it was Mr Yaw.

Of the 14 Cabinet ministers on Facebook, the public seems to be keenest to know about three: Minister for the Environment and Water Resources Vivian Balakrishnan, Mr Khaw and DPM Teo.

Former national development minister Mah Bow Tan is also in the list for audience size, at No. 10. This may be because he was in the spotlight for housing policies before handing over the portfolio to Mr Khaw after the May 7 General Election.

Asked to explain his following online, Mr Chen replied via e-mail: "Beginner's luck? ;-p". The emoticon signifies a cheeky wink.

But experts say the new Aljunied GRC MP from the Workers' Party, who is a newcomer to Facebook, has a good grasp of what works on social media.

Ms Pat Law highlighted his "unassuming character as portrayed on Facebook".

Ms Law, founder of social media influence company Goodstuf, had this to say about Mr Chen: "His Facebook notes are personal, and don't feel as though they came straight out of the publicist's printer. I particularly appreciate his effort in sharing what's necessary - outreach, information about Singapore, and not his lunch."

Yet there are also times when the amount of attention Mr Chen receives bears little relation to the effort or thought he invests in his posts. At times, the response can even reach comical proportions.

Take as an example what happened last month, when Mr Chen tested a new way to update his Facebook page via e-mail. He posted a one-word update which read "Status". Within minutes, scores of netizens "liked" the post, with one commenter lauding it as "brilliantly creative". As of press time, it had garnered 137 "likes" and 29 comments.

But not all who visit his page are fans. For instance, in June last year, when Mr Chen posted pictures of crowded MRT trains, saying he was helping Transport Minister Lui Tuck Yew "take notes", one commenter criticised him for "taking cheap swipes at others' efforts".

Asked for his strategy in using social media, Mr Chen said he was "tickled" by the query.

"I am pretty much myself," he said. "I share what I am comfortable sharing about what I am doing or thinking and what I believe in, and look forward to hearing people's views on them."

By doing so, he and other MPs "make it more normal" for people to "speak up, ask questions and be more actively engaged in politics and community life".

twong@sph.com.sg

What is...

...BUZZ? Buzz measures the amount of attention that an MP gets from netizens. It is based on the number of Facebook comments, shares, likes and retweets each MP got during the survey period.

...AUDIENCE REACH? It is the size of each MP's audience on social media, based on the number of Facebook friends and "likes" on their fan pages, as well as Twitter followers.

...A COMMENT? It is a short response left by a Facebook user to any post, photo, link or note.

...A SHARE? Facebook users can click on the "share" function available on any post. This causes that post to show up on their own Facebook walls, and in their friends' news feeds.

...A LIKE? Each post on Facebook has a "like" function, which users click on to express their approval.

...A RETWEET? A retweet is what happens when a Twitter user reposts a tweet from another user, thereby sharing it with his Twitter followers.

79 MPs who were examined for this study

11 MPs who either do not have any social media presence or were inactive during the survey period

49
MPs who have only official Facebook accounts

1
Sylvia Lim is the only MP who does not have an official Facebook presence, but has an official Twitter presence

37
MPs who have both official Facebook and Twitter accounts