Some 3.6 million people – or around 66 per cent of the population – in Singapore use social media, according to 2015 statistics from global social media research cluster of the Institute of Policy Studies, National University of Singapore.

In an interview with Asian journalists last 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 wanted to have an online presence too. While these platforms were not conducive for making speeches, there would be people on Facebook “who will not be reading speeches and this is one way to reach them”.

Like the PM, other government ministers and members of Parliament are also using Facebook to reach out to Singaporeans. On their public profiles, MPs post photos of them interacting with residents at constituency visits.

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When the Internet first became popular in the 1990s, there was much hype on how it would expand the communication repertoire of governments and politicians.

But that has now become an understatement of the century. Suddenly, social media has transformed the political landscape, reshaping the “public–private” interface, and it is here to stay.

Why is this so?

The nature of social media renounces dialogic communication which, according to communication experts Michael Kent and Maureen Taylor, happens when parties have a sustained, two-way dialogue, leading to a cooperative and communicative political culture.

As the newspapers, television and traditional web sites have lost their autonomy to start a discussion thread or provide feedback on issues raised by politicians or parties, social media has taken up this space.

On Facebook, tweets, pictures and videos provide invaluable information for the public who are now privy to not only ministers’ and MPs’ personal lives and personalities, but also their personal lives.

What is more, there are now exclamatory deniers that prohibit participation as everyone has the autonomy to start a discussion thread or provide feedback on issues raised by politicians or parties.

Politicians and the people now converse in the present about issues, rather than after decisions have been made.

The result is government–citizen and politician–voter engagement on Facebook being more timely and relevant to online users compared with other platforms, such as the online feedback portal forums and ministry websites, which put out information a little later.

In the case of Facebook, highly interactive features such as status updates, KFS feeds and the “Timeline” aid information sharing. Its “downloadability” through mobile devices creates an informal but meaningful platform for conversations between politicians and the public.

In a Pew Research Centre survey conducted in October last year, users for both United States Democratic and Republican parties said that social media helped them to form deeper connections with the candidates they support.

This means that for politicians in Singapore, comments on their Facebook posts became part of their political narratives.

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Opportunities come with risks. Social media poses two key challenges to 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 to navigate online chatter and make sense of the information and signals they are sent.

There is also the question of how politicians can translate “likes” into meaningful interactions which would prompt responses or actions, especially when their personal opinions are perceived by the public to be inappropriate for a political figure or representation of the government’s position.

Thus, it is understandable if politicians shy away from social media. However, that would miss losing a valuable opportunity for engaging with the public, which is spending more time online. Besides accepting and abdicating the needability of social media, politicians risk being perceived as outdated and less interactive.

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

In the long run, dialogic communication on social media can help legitimate government decisions and help in shaping policies and increase citizen trust.

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